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Foundation



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Building Connections for the Common Good: Dialogue and Trust in the Pursuit of Peace

Yr Athro / Professor

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Canolfan Morlan Centre

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A boiler, a kitchen, a toilet, a roof. A legendary animal carving, an angel mural, a stained-glass windowpane. Knowledge and understanding. Poetry. A connection. A new understanding in old communities. A new community among residents. A safe space to grow. A talk about life. An appreciation of God.

In this eclectic mixture of phrases, I am, of course, talking about what you, and this lecture, are all about. The *Morlan Centre for Faith and Culture's* mission is “to provide an open space for everyone in the community where Christian values – such as peace and justice – can be shared through culture in its broadest sense”. The *James Pantyfedwen Foundation* supports religion, education, and culture in Wales by providing grants for church buildings, postgraduate students, and Eisteddfodau. The two missions integrate in the yearly *Morlan-Pantyfedwen* lecture, which this year I have the honor to address, here, in my beloved Aberystwyth.

There are no words to express my feelings at being invited to address this lecture. I am humbled and grateful at this opportunity to break spiritual bread with you. There is nothing more I can say except a heartfelt “thank you”.

I am also deeply appreciative at the opportunity to return to Aberystwyth. It was here that I found my true vocation, and here that I started

to grow my trust in God. Simply put, without Aberystwyth, I would not be me. Wales is a different matter. I really did not understand Wales when I studied in this city. I think the city was predisposed to like me, simply because when I was asked where I came from, I would say “Argentina” and immediately the rugged locals would beam and exclaim “Patagonia!” reverting to Welsh, which was -and am afraid still is- an unknown language to me. I did not fight it and, instead of trying to explain that I was not from Patagonia, I learnt to just say “Cymru Am Byth” and everyone seemed happy, to my great relief. I am glad to say that I have decided now to build my final home in Patagonia; that is, when God sees fit to let me grow earthly roots again.

I suspect that the other reason people seemed to like me in Aberystwyth is because I always used a walking stick even though it was not a fashionable item for a twentysomething student to use. My walking stick was beautiful: it was a knob stick chestnut staff and, when I was not carrying it, I would carry my sturdy stick umbrella instead. When I finished my degree here, I took a last hike over the hills and hid well my staff in the thick of the Penglais woods, in the hope it would take root there and be the part of me that remained in the place I loved. It is still here.

At Aberystwyth I did my master’s in strategic studies. Although I chose the degree more out of curiosity than passion, I found my true vocation in

this profession, and I have worked in the field of enhancing human security ever since. It was here that I also understood that God was giving me both an opportunity, as well as a purpose, in the pursuit of this career.

In learning about war -and experiencing it firsthand soon afterwards- I understood the value of peace. I focused on the limitation of arms, disarmament, and the management of arms because, although arms in themselves do not produce wars, they sustain them and -when illegally trafficked- lead to immense suffering. Stopping the proliferation of weapons became an object where I found a constructive approach to the mitigation of violence. For decades I pursued first the nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and then the management of firearms and small arms so that they would only circulate under responsible ownership. I worked hard towards this objective residing in Europe, Africa, and North America while doing so. I had countless adventures, some successes, and many failures, but I always say that to do disarmament you must have faith because the chances are high that you will not see the results of your labor in your lifetime.

Undertaking advocacy and policy formulation to control arms, I learnt to work from the bottom up. The ultimate place where disarmament must take hold is in the mind. Weapons should not be valued for their economics nor their firepower. If they are considered assets, they will always have a

hold on the human conduct. Disarmament starts in the mind: one must strive to find ways in which to find common ground and prevent or resolve conflicts through peaceful means. It really is about empowering the hidden forces that we all possess in larger or smaller measure. Cooperation is better than deterrence and better than consensus. Knowledge and experience give us choices, but we must keep in mind that hope always defeats experience. God gives us tools with which to work for the common good. It is all a matter of putting things in perspective, finding new ways to approach old problems, working at differences, having patience and a sense of humor, and using the tools God has provided. I did not understand then that decades of work on disarmament issues, as a practitioner in the field and as an academic in the university, would act as a preparation for me to be able to engage in the protection of children later in life.

One definition of strategy is the practical adaptation of existing means to serve the political objective. One definition of deterrence is to convince a party to conflict -using its own value system- that it is in its best interests not to pursue a course of action rather than continue with it. I have had to apply both definitions during my decades of work in the field of arms management and arms control and in negotiating for the protection of children. Seeking

win-win situations for parties to conflict so that communities could again live in peace, became an obsession.

I found that, by explaining available practical options for increasing personal and community safety and security, people were better able to take informed decisions. Many times, I opted for regional versus national constructs for trust building purposes, seeking to find common answers to common fears among different societies, cultures, and peoples. I would then bring one regional body to talk to another one to share experiences: what worked? what did not? In sharing their experiences, members of a regional community could find commonalities they did not even know they had. The focus for me was on the similarities between peoples' wants, fears, and hopes. Commonalities emerge even when focusing on issues such as respect for differences and diversity.

Finding connections is a formula that we must value more in our day to day lives. With newfound connections, a new understanding in old communities emerges and new communities are formed. Between them, we find the safe space to talk, share and grow. One of the most useful tools I found to build connections was to talk of God as much as possible. Once in the Middle East, pushing a government to agree to an action plan to control armed violence to better protect civilian populations, I stood before a

ministerial committee who did not want to discuss anything with anyone from the United Nations. They had no trust. I told them that I could not care less about the organization I worked for or for my boss in that organization. I said that my only boss is God and I know that when I die, I will have to answer to him, and he will ask me: 'what did you do during your lifetime on earth?' And I wanted to be able to reply 'I was useful. I helped others help themselves'. On that premise, they took a secret vote and elected to sign the action plan with me because they believed I was a God-fearing woman whom they could trust.

A connection. A new understanding in old communities. A new community among residents. A safe space to grow. This is what the *Morlan Centre for Faith and Culture* strives to do, and I wish I had learned and practiced this earlier in my career.

Some eight years ago, I found myself in charge of a strange docket at the United Nations. I am the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. My office tries to end and prevent the use and abuse of children in, for, and by, armed conflict worldwide. Children are the most vulnerable during conflict: they are recruited as child soldiers, used and abused, raped, abducted, and killed. Their schools and clinics are destroyed, and they are denied access to the most basic

humanitarian needs. These grave violations of children rights are compounded if the children are girls or if they are disabled.

When I was asked to take on this new role, so far removed from my expertise, I was confused and tried to turn it away. “I am not an expert on children, nor am I a human rights activist or lawyer”, I told the powers that be at the organization I work for, and they said “indeed, that is true, but you are an expert in war and we need to understand conflict to see in which way we can prevent and reduce the impact of conflict on children”. And thus, I became champion of children only because I understood war, and I only understood war because I had tried so hard to find ways in which to persuade governments and communities to stop violence and give peace a chance.

In the new job entrusted to me, the dynamics were very difficult. On the one hand, I had to lead on the monitoring and reporting on violations against children at times of war so that there would be identification of parties perpetrating these abuses and these would be pushed for accountability purposes. On the other hand, I had to engage directly with these same parties to conflict to persuade them to change their behavior, stop abusing children and, if children were held by them, to let them go. Most of my working life now is in the field, where I meet with armed forces and armed groups as well as with violent communities in attempts to convince them to

sign joint action plans with me to prevent the abuse of children and better protect them from the fallout of armed violence.

Putting to good use the experience I had in formulating common strategies for the control of armed violence, I attempted to understand the value system of those committing these violations against children and then, using only transparency in truth, persuaded them to do the right thing for their children and those of others. I think that God made me learn the hard way, in my prior work, so that I would learn to be wiser when assisting the fate of the children of war. A definition of wisdom is the sum of knowledge, experience, and good judgement. I hope I am closer to wisdom today.

When one engages in negotiations it is imperative that one starts with an open slate and no prejudgment; one must listen before talking; and one cannot promise what one cannot deliver. It is not about judging; it is about helping. It is not about the past, it is about the future. It is a trust building exercise and it must be grounded on common values such as truth, solidarity, and compassion.

Building trust is the construction of the safe space from where one can dialogue without fear. Once trust is obtained, one must not betray it but rather use trust as a tool for the building of larger platforms for negotiated solutions to violent problems. In constructing a safe and comfortable environment to

debate and interact, one is teaching through practice, assisting in the development of community and in finding common ground, both of which are pre-requisites in the pursuit of peace.

A boiler, a kitchen, a toilet, a roof... this is what the *James Pantyfedwen Foundation* does for churches in Wales. How many kitchens, heating and flooring have been added to churches by the Foundation so that the community can -once again- meet in safety to discuss life choices and God-given opportunities? Such actions restore the safe space where the community can meet, resolve their differences, talk about God, and build its own future in peace. It is the same formula I use in negotiating with parties to conflict: building the safe space where we can build peace.

Sometimes space is all that is needed to be able to persuade parties to conflict to release children from their ranks, 100,000 over the last eight years, to be precise. But release alone is not enough to generate the space for prevention and protection of children in situations of armed conflict. Once a child is rescued, we need to build space between the returning child and its old community, to assist in the reintegration process. This is difficult because new connections must be developed. Sometimes the child has no one to return to. At other times, the child is blamed by the community over the fact that he or she was abused while associated to armed forces or

groups. The restoration of trust and dignity in a child is as important as taking a child out of danger.

I want to share with you the voices of children used and abused by armed conflict. I will let three girls I met in different countries explain to you their situation, as they explained it to me. A girl in Colombia, abducted and recruited as soldier when she was eight years old, was liberated at 16. She was taken to a reintegration center where she was taught how to sew so that she could make an honest living upon a return to her community. She had not been allowed to be schooled while she was recruited so she had missed most of her middle and high school education. I asked her what she wanted to do now, and she said: “I want to study. I want to go to university. I want to become an oceanographer, but I am being taught how to sew because no one believes in giving me a chance anymore. Why am I being made a victim again and denied the dreams other children are allowed to pursue?” and my eyes were opened to what it means to be doubly victimized.

I met another girl in the Central African Republic, who had been abducted, raped, and recruited and who was a mother of a baby born of rape. She was now fifteen years old, and her community would not have her back because she was not pure. She was taken to a CARITAS reintegration Centre and taught how to bake bread. She was content, or so it seemed until

I asked her: “What do you want?” And she replied, “I would like someone to buy my bread”. I need to say here that I was very angry, so I took her bread and placed it in front of the president of that country, indicating that it was a gift for him from the rescued children. He did not know why I was doing that so I explained, “Sir, I went to your city’s big markets and I note that these supermarkets buy their bread from a commercial bakery in the neighboring state; surely you can ask that a percentage of all products sold here be those of your own young people, who have suffered through no fault of their own, and who want a chance to grow together with their country”.

The last voice I will have you hear is of a seventeen-year-old girl in South Sudan. She had been abducted and trained as a soldier for seven years. She had been rescued through the efforts of United Nations mediators between the government and the armed group and was in a reintegration center run by UNICEF. She told me that she was grateful at having been rescued. She was also grateful at having been taught how to make a dress because that had allowed her to start a healing process with her family who thought she was now useless. Her grandmother, she said, inspected her first results at sewing and approved of her skill. I asked her if she was content and she told me that grateful as she was, she wanted an education because she could barely read and write, and she wanted to learn law at a university.

I asked her if she wanted to be a lawyer, provided she could return to high school and go to university. She told me “No. My intention is to become president of this country but for that I need an education and I must know the law”. I was very startled at her response. Sometimes you confuse the situation. I was in a palm hut in the middle of the mud in a forest, talking to a girl who had no shoes but fire in her eyes. I was so impressed that I continued my discussion and asked her: “I will see what can be done; meanwhile, is there anything else you need now?” I will never forget her answer. “Yes”, she rushed to say “I was one of four. We were four girls taken. I was the only one rescued. I need you to help the other three to get out.” I left her feeling very humble. She had shown more spirit and solidarity than any of the care givers I had talked to up to then.

As I learned from the children I met in the field, I become hopeful. These children are not the remains of broken would-be adults. They are confident, they know what they want, they have solidarity, and they want to contribute. All of them, without distinction of race or gender or religion, told me they wanted an education, more than they wanted food or shelter. Education is important. Perhaps education is the only safe space for a child both in peace and in times of armed conflict. I therefore also admire the *James Pantyfedwen Foundation* for helping the students out with the costs

of postgraduate studies in Wales. We must learn to value and protect education more. We must consider education as a strategic asset of the state and the most important right of a child.

It is now time for us to talk about God.

During my disarmament years I managed to convince a commissioner of police in charge of a regional police organization in Africa, to seriously implement his obligations towards stopping the flow of illegal weapons across borders. I was sitting next to him at dinner, and he had been very difficult in all the discussions on the practical problems in enforcing the law across the borders of warring states. Over dinner, I asked him to watch his space. He was alarmed and thought I was referring to the space between his chair and mine in a cramped table. He asked me if he was too close to my plate. I laughed and told him, "No. I was referring to the space you were given by God when you were born. When we are born God provides us with one square meter of earth. That is the space we occupy during our lifetime. All that is beneath our square meter of earth, all the way to the center of the world, is what we will need to eat and drink during our lifetime. The air above our meter, all the way to space, contains the air we will need during our earthly journey. When we die, we will have to stand before God, and he will ask us 'Life is precious. To be alive is a privilege. I chose you over other

souls that had equal right to live. What did you do with the square meter of earth I gave you? Tell me why I was right in bringing life to you and not to another". He thought about my little story, and he became very serious. He then said he now understood better his obligation, not because he was a policeman in the line of duty but because this was the right thing to do. The next day he stopped blocking implementation possibilities and offered many ways in which this could be done within existing means.

Advocating for the life of children it was easier to act. Once, I was negotiating with an armed criminal gang in sub-Saharan Africa who specialized in abducting and forcibly recruiting and using children for criminal activities, I managed to convince the leader, who was a young man himself, to stop recruiting children. This was not easy. Every time I tried to engage in dialogue, he would indicate that he was a religious person, and his religion was a minority religion in that country. I could not get through to him with normal language so I took a decision and said: "Since you are so religious, you must know the answer to my question. Which is the most important attribute of God?" He was very surprised, and he did not know how to answer. I then told him, "The most important attribute of God is compassion, and it is the only attribute He bestowed on us at birth so that, through compassion, we could converse with Him. I am asking you to release the children and stop

recruiting them, not because it is wrong nor a crime, but because you can, and should, show compassion for the children of this town”, and he agreed.

At times, my colleagues do not understand how I can negotiate in difficult situations with people that they would rather not meet in the first place. For me it is easy to explain that if one is truthful, transparent, and unbiased, there is no reason to fear dialogue. And, for me, to be truthful is also to bring God to the middle of the equation. We should not fear the truth. Without truth, there can be no real love or real hope, and, without these, there is no Faith.

As I explained before, the need to value education as a fundamental right of children, a strategic asset of the state, and the foundation for informed debate in societies at peace, also generates multiple ways to channel God into our lives. Wisdom, I repeat, is the sum of knowledge, experience, and good judgement. We need to start through the improvement of our knowledge. But knowledge is not complete without beauty.

This brings me back to the mission of the *James Pantyfedwen Foundation* in its support of poetry, education and religion including the recovery of lost art when undertaking church restoration and improvement in Wales, as was the case in the church of St Lewis and St Xavier in Usk, when a painted panel of angels playing musical instruments was found in the reredos at the back of the altar during restoration work.

Sometimes art and culture are perceived to be an aggregate to the basic needs of life, but they are not. When we do our everyday work, we must keep an eye out to discover beauty in all its forms. The reward always comes with the finding. There is now not only a dry wall at St Lewis and St Xavier but also musical angels to delight the eye. Perhaps a child will see this newly found panel and will be curious, aspiring to a career in music which, in time, will be a delight to all of us. We need beauty and God has surrounded us with beauty, given us the eye for beauty, and installed in us the aspiration of recreating beauty, through art.

We need to open our eyes to beauty and our hearts to the true value of everyday things. The *Pantymfedwen Foundation* restored the south side façade of St. Cybi's Church in Holyhead and saved millennial carvings from disappearance. The restoration saved a carving of a mythical beast, called an amphisbaena, a beast with a head at the end of its tail. We might consider this restoration as only historical in value but, if we open our hearts, we understand its true value to the community across the ages. It is in knowing that, in antiquity, the powers associated with this strange beast included the ability to assure a safe pregnancy, at a time when childbirth was often fatal, that we understand the importance of restoring this carving at St. Cybi. It is a reminder of what was important to the community in the past, while hoping

that a strong church will lead to a strong community in the future, without need of mythical creatures.

Faith, hope, charity, compassion, truth, are not religious concepts or philosophical themes. They are *practical tools* that are there to help us on the voyage of our lives. The same is true of love and beauty. We just need to seek these tools inside us and in others, find them and use them. Once you start using these God given tools, we can no longer deny the existence of God.

Sometime ago, I wrote a poem that is entitled "Proof" and it says:

God exists:

Both in the abstract and in the concrete, in feeling and in form.

The concrete part of God –His Form- is the universe itself.

The abstract part of God –His Feeling- is the capacity we have of understanding the universe and the wonder of it all

God is infinite:

Infinite compassion, justice, charity, mercy and understanding.

In his infinite capacity he is infinitely whole,

So, *God is complete.*

Proof of this is that there is nothing small or big enough not connected to the inside and outside of itself and,

In being connected, cancels itself out until it is whole.

We sometimes call this Beauty.

God is all encompassing:

The connection of all things to each other in our universe.

The relationship we have with all around us and each other.

The connection in both concrete and abstract form

Is proof of the everlasting touch of God.

God is interactive:

God is present in what we call friendship, faith, sympathy,

Loyalty... all of which require two active participants sharing

a same bond: unlike beauty, it is not a connection of self with self,

But of self with others and when this interaction between two

Acquires exact proportion, it is called Love.

All that is the universe as well as

Beauty and love are not just proof of

God's existence, they are also God's results.

Although I am not Welsh, I realize that being Welsh is subjective, and it was always part of me, either through the strange interactions that helped to forge my life, or the intrinsic values that helped me level up in life, including through art, poetry, and my love of mountains. My first mentor was Robert

Graves, who was the son of Alfred Perceval Graves, elected as a Welsh bard at the 1902 Bangor National Eisteddfod and who is buried at Harlech in Gwynedd. His son, Robert, wrote to me a letter to Peru when I was fourteen years old. His advice, which I took, changed my life but also gave me the strength to live fully. He told me to keep my fears and my insecurities at bay through a formula of life: "Shield your heart, keep up your spirits, defend yourself with the force of your soul, and strive to recover the lost power and dignity of women".

Although Robert Graves owed his livelihood to his books and novels, he considered himself a poet above all else. His letters to me and to my mother were full of poetry. I could not live without poetry today. Poetry has the capacity to say in a few words what people of all cultures feel at any given time in life. It is a universal language, as is music. Which is why the *Pantfedwen Foundation's* support for the Eisteddfodau is also a good example of bringing us closer to God, through music and poetry.

My work, just like the work of the *Morlan Centre* and the *James Pantfedwen Foundation*, is simple and practical. In our own way, what you and I strive to do every day, is nothing more, and nothing less, than creating a safe space for us to thrive as human beings in harmonious and peaceful

communities. We are either rebuilding connections or building new connections where none existed before.

A boiler, a kitchen, a toilet, a roof. A legendary animal carving, an angel mural, a stained-glass windowpane. Knowledge and understanding. Poetry. A connection. A new understanding in old communities. A new community among residents. A safe space to grow. A talk about life. An appreciation of God.

We are all connected through simple things, safe spaces, fears, wants and hopes. We need to identify these connections and sew, for ourselves and for others, a common protective wrap of understanding and of peace. In doing so, we need to use strong materials: the best thread to use in binding us together, is the unbreakable strand of God.

All that is the universe as well as

Beauty and love are not just proof of

God's existence, they are also God's results.

I thank you.