

Journal Letter May 2005

It's always so strange to re-read my last journal letter and then think about all the things I've been doing since I wrote it – life can seem impossibly full at times! I don't really feel like I've stopped since February but a lot of that has been due to a hectic social life as well as QUNO work! I've been having a marvellous time skiing and cycling and spending weekends in Amsterdam, Paris and London and now the weather is warming up in Geneva of course I have a list of visitors as long as my arm! I've also had some great opportunities to meet more Friends in Britain through speaking at the Quaker Peace and Social Witness Annual Conference and helping to plan the Under 19's programme for Britain Yearly Meeting this summer. It's been great to have an opportunity to talk about QUNO's work with other Quakers and to realise just how much importance people place on QUNO as a Quaker representation at the UN. Just as I berated the diplomatic community for forgetting the real reason they are sitting at the negotiating table in my last letter, so I also sometimes forget the historical and spiritual mandate behind my work. It's been nice to have the opportunity to think about why it's different to work for a Quaker organisation to working for any other organisation in Geneva.

Work has been going well. I am now up to my eyes organising the QUNO Summer School as the participants arrive just three weeks on Sunday! We've got 26 people between the ages of 20 and 28, roughly half from the UK and half from various countries all over the world and half Quaker and half non-Quaker. They're all coming to attend a two-week programme of lectures and discussions about the UN, other international institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGO's) in Geneva as well as the role of QUNO within it all. It's a bit of a juggling act organising the speakers for the programme but it's coming together and it promises to be a great two weeks. Having been a participant last year helps enormously in organising it this year!

The events that David and I organised at the end of February were a great success (though they feel like a very long time ago now!) and things are still gathering momentum for the Biennial Meeting of States (BMS) of the Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons (POA) in July. I found out recently that I am actually going to be going to New York for the meeting to help with side events and reporting etc, which I'm very excited about! In my last journal letter I told you about a really positive meeting of the Geneva Process that we had, where governments were coming up with really radical ideas about the structure the BMS could take in order to improve the effectiveness of the discussions. Unfortunately a lot of this has now been shot down and it looks like we will be using almost exactly the same format and structure that two years ago saw NGO participation confined to one three hour slot... Ah well, we'll just have to shout a bit louder from the sidelines I suppose!

Unfortunately, one recent example has shown us just how futile shouting from the sidelines can be at times. The Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty has just finished in New York. After 4 weeks of intense discussion and debate, costing I might add thousands of dollars a day, the final document that was agreed upon did nothing more than list the names of the attendees, the number and dates of the meetings they held and indicated how they would cover the financial costs... I find it terrifying that this sort of display of time wasting, procedural wrangling and pig-headed obstinacy can be employed when issues such as the halting of nuclear weapons development are at stake. In some senses the 'failures' within the small arms process are less discouraging because

there is so much happening at the field level. Many governments recognise the significance of the small arms issue and are developing their domestic gun control laws and working with NGO's to ensure a more effective policy of dealing with gun-related violence. This cannot and does not happen with the nuclear issue. The responsibility for nuclear disarmament lies solely with heads of state and it is they alone who can halt the development and proliferation of weapons. Which only makes the recent 4 weeks of 'fluff' even more infuriating.

The encouraging thing about the NPT catastrophe is that everyone you speak to in Geneva (diplomat and NGO alike) is disappointed with the outcome. Even if it can't change the result, it's nice to know that it is only a small proportion of people for whom this was a desired outcome. Similarly in the small arms issue, the vast majority of people David and I work with are keen to see progress and are willing to help achieve that progress. David and I recently held an off the record meeting with some of our key partners (government, NGO and international organisation alike) in our small arms work and we both commented how informal processes like those are the ones that keep us inspired in what can otherwise be quite a depressing line of work. When ideas flow well and people are working together, you feel you can actually achieve something. This is true for all kinds of work but it feels particularly important in the world of multilateral institutions.

This is my last journal letter before I finish at QUNO and it feels very strange to be here already. The time has flown past in a way that only time can and I know that the next two months will go even faster than I can imagine. I've naturally been starting to think about where I go after QUNO and what I want to focus on and, while I have some ideas, nothing concrete has come my way yet. I'm not feeling too worried about it though and am quite happy to trust that the right path will make itself known to me at the right time! The weekend in Amsterdam that I mentioned earlier in this letter was actually the Quaker Peace and Social Witness One-Year Workers Seminar – an absolutely amazing weekend which really gave me the space to reflect on my time at QUNO and think about my next steps. It was very comforting to hear the problems and frustrations that all the other one-year workers had experienced and inspiring to hear about the great projects they had been working on.

So the next time you hear from me I shall hopefully be embarking on the next section of my career!
Until then, love and light,

Rachel