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A WORD ON PAPA REINHARD – A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

Totally Here And Now

There are some persons who are chosen to fulfill stupendous tasks. It is if they are swept up by a gigantic wave of destiny to initiate movements, channelise human efforts in specific directions, to be path-finders in daring forays into uncharted regions of human experience and make the first dent in the clarified encrustations of dead habit and stale credos.

It is not necessary that this role of theirs should be enacted in the public eye or that their actions should explode as headlines in the media. Rarely do they make a grand entrée riding on magnificent chargers, brandishing flashing swords accompanied by fluttering pennants with trumpet fanfare in the background. They perform best in solitude, since their strength originates from deep within. They first discover within what we later experience without.

When a sculptor needs a perfect stone to give shape to his dreams, he searches in flowing streams and wind-blown mountains for those pieces which have withstood the ravages of time and from which the last vestiges of superfluity have been cleansed, leaving a hard indestructible core which will remain for all time.

So too in human affairs. Only those who have weathered the test of time, and who have been cleansed by the inexorable flow of life, with all its joys and sorrows and successes and failures, emerge with no trace to egoism or self-interest are selected for these roles. Only those whose vision transcend the trivial and the mundane and who dare to dream improbable dreams and sometimes seem to tilt at impossible windmills are chosen for the role of the pathfinders, flag bearers and trail blazers. Papa Reinhard is one of those so chosen.

This piece is about Reinhard and not about the Dialogue. But it is not easy to separate Reinhard from the Dialogue since the Dialogue is the consuming passion of his existence. I can imagine how his life must have changed to accommodate the Dialogue since my whole life style changed after the Dialogue started. I found new values, new meanings and perhaps even a new life after entering Reinhard's Fire. After the first 3 years, Reinhard took us to far away places with strange sounding names, Takamori in Japan,

Chandidasa and Ashram Gandhi in Bali. While participating in the unfolding of this drama I slowly realized its deep inner meanings and its power and the driving force. But above all I discovered Reinhard, the man.

For 14 years I watched Papa Reinhard ceaselessly and single-mindedly pursuing his ideal. I have marveled at his patience, his forbearance and his great generosity. Personal tragedies surfaced off and on in his life, but I always heard about them from others and never from him. I can only imagine how powerful must have been the trauma of Johanaz's death, the tragedy of George's institutionalization, the constant worry about Ben's health, the accident in Switzerland – which resulted in a walking impairment. Agne's troubles with her order and other minor and major tragedies that seemed to pursue him during the past decade. But he kept his head high and soared over these tragedies and one never noticed any trace of bitterness or self pity in him. On the contrary, he seemed to have achieved a quiet intense and deep inner personal bliss which glowed in everything he did. His meditation appeared to be deeper, his love engulfed us and washed away our personal differences with each other, and his impish sense of joy and the mischievous glint in his eye seemed to grow more pronounced with age.

It will perhaps take a long time for Reinhard's dream to enrich mankind. Perhaps none of us will be around when this happens. Perhaps when this happens, the world may not even remember from where it originated. The mightiest of rivers emerge from a tiny trickle on some lonely rock on a mountain. The grandest of human experiences also often have their origin in the solitary recesses of one human heart. We who were chosen to participate and act our parts in this play may never assess accurately how lucky we were to be selected by Reinhard. I never thought when he walked in through my door at "Chitravathi" on that glorious day in March 1980 that our meeting would so completely and totally alter the tone and texture of my life.

We have a word in our tradition for those mystic men who have the third eye to catch the higher nuances of messages from eternity to which lesser amongst us are oblivious. We call them Rishies. The Rishies live like ordinary men among other men. But part of their being is attuned to higher regions. The scriptures described them as those with their heads in the forest and their hands in the world. Before I met Reinhard I had only read of such persons in books but meeting him proved that such persons existed.

The message of the Rishies is transmitted to human beings in their language. They are the instruments chosen to be intermediaries between the

highest levels of consciousness and the lower levels of human understanding. Mankind will remember their message though the Rishi may often be forgotten or even often remain anonymous. Reinhard's Dream will remain, even if the world may not hear of Papa Reinhard.

The dreams of Missionaries are only indicators of future certainties. When things are ripe for change, time picks an individual and through him works out its predestined programme. But it is upto the individual chosen to determine the details, decide the time frame and direct the flow of events. So that they fulfill the purpose for which he was so designated. Reinhard was one of the chosen few. His chosen task was to lay the seed of harmony in life, shared by those whom he choose from all round the world from different religious denominations and disciplines, and to live together in harmony while practising their own faiths without any compromise. During one of our fireside discussions in old Altenhof drawing room, he told me about the long path he took starting from the mystic moment when he heard a mystic voice within himself telling him that he had been chosen for this great adventure. To Reinhard it was the voice of Christ, which delivered the message of his mission when he was having what appeared to be a near death experience. The details of the incident are unnecessary. Suffice it to say that the experience shattered his past and projected him into a future, the grandeur of which he instantly understood.

It was this message that took him round the world and gave him the strength and the sustenance to conduct 17 Dialogues all round the world. Since living together in harmony was not merely a concept, it had to be practiced and that too against the background of different cultures. Starting from Germany in 1980, Reinhard led his group to Sri Lanka, and went to Pakistan, India, Japan, the Island of Bali and back again to Germany. During this sojourn the living Dialogue was practiced to perfection and finally when we conducted the last session at Dananburg. Reinhard was ready to plant his seed in the consciousness of mankind. So that it may take route and flourish in some distant radiant future.

It was in 1980 that Reinhard Von Kirchbach, retired as Bishop of the Lutheran Church of Germany and took permission from his Church to continue his dream mission of forming a core group consisting of persons from different Religions, and to conduct an Inter-Religious Dialogue of Living Together In Harmony. Reinhard, or Pappa as I came to call him later, went to Britain to learn English and after he had mastered the language, started traveling round the World selecting partners to participate in this unique Dialogue. He came to

India and selected me as the Hindu Partner in the Dialogue. The first three Dialogues were held in Altenhof, near Kiel in North Germany. In a beautiful farm house in the middle of 2000 acres of prime farmland. There, the partners who included a Buddhist Monk from Sri Lanka, a Muslim Imam from Hamburg, who was in charge of the major mosques in Northern Europe, two Lutheran Pastors including Reinhard, a Humanist who was unattached to any church, and myself the Hindu lived together for extended periods of time, each one of us actively practicing our individual Faiths, but living together in harmony and peace. This was Reinhard's Dream, drawn from the writings of Teilhard de Chardin, a French Roman Catholic Priest, Paleontologist, Philosopher and Poet, and St. Augustine, whom Reinhard called "The Church Father".

The Dialogue took me all over the World including the length and breadth of Germany, the United Kingdom, Austria, Denmark, France, Italy, Japan, and Indonesia including the Bali Islands, Singapore, and Malaysia. In the course of the travels and the 17 years of the Dialogue, major changes took place in my psyche, including a passionate love for my motherland, which I was firmly convinced did the Almighty create the best and noblest land. The unique series of Dialogues funded by Pappa and his close friends, came to an end when Pappa Reinhard von Kirchbach died in 1998. Pappa was a saint, and a Karmayogi in our terminology. The World will perhaps some day discover the silent, sincere and dedicated contribution of Reinhard to the cause of peace and harmony among Religions, and confer on him the Nobel Prize for Peace. When Pappa died, I felt orphaned.

In one of his little poems Reinhard envisaged the great presents, which God in His infinite love and wisdom has strewn before Man, but which in his blindness Man preferred to ignore.

"Great presents are lying in front of us,
If we don't find them we will lose the Way,
When we take them up, we will be at Home!"

These presents included invaluable boons, the prospect of a harmony and peace unbounded by the man-made barriers of race, religion, creed, language and culture. These presents were to be found in God, through His grace free of prejudice and mutually exclusive dogma and doctrine; free of the preoccupations fostered by time and distance. These presents would reveal themselves by LIVING and sharing His grace together in HARMONY.

The project at Altenhof was conceived as the first infinitesimal step, which has to be taken to find these presents, to search for them in faith, starting from faith and by addressing the search to faith.

But our age old convictions about His Form, Reality and Essence are often seemingly exhaustive in themselves. Each great religion conceived of itself as the ultimate vision of the truth. But God is more than several truths. HE IS THE TRUTH.

Thus the first principles had to be formulated and it was laid down that we would be.

“Not mixed up-but indivisible and INSEPARABLE”

Reinhard then started the long journey towards making the search for these presents a practical reality. The old farmhouse at Altenhof, which had been ravaged by disuse, was slowly reconstructed to provide living accommodation for those who were to participate in this search.

Old rooms were refurnished and made habitable for the concept was not one of mere intellectual or dialectical exercises - but envisaged actual living together of different men from far off lands and strange climes.

Since the common language had to be English (for reasons dictated by history), Reinhard had to learn English. He spent about a year in England in Cambridge learning the language from the very beginning. When this hurdle had been crossed, he started an intense study of the basic tenets and core of each of the great Religions. He delved into the ancient scriptures and modern interpretations of these religions. This done, to experience the practical application of these philosophies to life, he traveled all over the East to observe first hand the practices and rituals of these religions in the lands where these faiths had found root.

Then came the crucial task of selecting the participants who were to make Reinhard's dream a living experience. He traveled to England, India, Sri Lanka and Malaysia searching for the right men who could share his dream and see the urgency of such a dialogue and the imperative need for such a search.

And when one knocks with sincerity and dedication, the door has to open. He found a Buddhist Monk, a Hindu, a Muslim and a Humanist.

And on the 1st August 1980 – the International Research in Inter-Religious Living opened at Altenhof. It was to continue for two months.

The initial guidelines set out by Reinhard were as follows:

1. This dialogue is not meant to turn into a discussion group on religious or philosophical subjects, but rather as a living approach to one another in view of the future burdened with our various and frequently opposing traditions.
2. We should neither defend our positions nor try to draw our partners into our own domain. We should however earnestly try to understand the position, the roots and the motivating forces of the other within his tradition.
3. We will not attempt to blend the diverse traditions nor will we try to find a common denominator by selecting or effecting. What is needed is a patient mutual endurance to widen and deepen traditions by living that dialogue.

Armed with these guidelines, we the delegates who had gathered from the different parts of the world took our first steps towards making REINHARD'S DREAM a reality.

Eighteen Dialogues later we look back in wonder at the way in which one man, faced with seemingly impossible odds made his dream into a reality, changing the lives of the participants and hundreds of others who inter-acted with them. The Dialogues took us to Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India (Cochin), Japan, Bali Islands, and then back to Germany. When finally we ended up in Dannenburg the Dialogue had evolved into something which Reinhard and many of us had not even contemplated in the first instance.

Evolution is a necessary aspect of growth. It is only the dead and calcified that will not evolve. Great ideas have withered and died, after the genius who conceived them ceased to exist. To be truly meaningful, an idea should evolve in terms of human realities. This of course is totally dependent on those who participate in its development and fulfillment.

I am sure that even Pappa Reinhard had no idea that the Living in Harmony Dialogue would evolve into its present stage. When we met at Altenhof in 1980, the core idea was that selected individuals from different

religious faiths, each rooted firmly in his own faith should live together for at least three months at a stretch, each actively practising his own faith, together but separate. It was tacitly agreed that no one should feel that his faith was better or more meaningful or more perfect than that of the other partners. In this blending of our lives, lived strictly in accordance with the tenets of our own faith, we were put together in the crucible of the dialogue, nothing less than our individual selves.

Reinhard's concept as he explained to me and which I could easily connect to the core of the Ithariya Upanishad was that at the end of every wave of creation consisting of evolution, sustenance and dissolution, there would be a pause, something like the silence in between two Omkars, which gains its meaning from the sound of the Om, but which in its turn gives the Pranava its ability to create. It was in this timeless mystic state of suspended animation that all the experiences of that particular wave of creation ultimately merged, to be held there and to be released into the next wave of creation. In this process, the next wave would bear all manifestations of this collective repository of experience. According to Reinhard this Living Together in Harmony Dialogue, involving the unique concept of "Together but Unmixed", would constitute the seed from which a greater harmony would evolve, infusing the texture of human life in the next wave of creation. This wave need not necessarily come after a total dissolution like for instance the Biblic Deluge or the Hindu concept of total dissolution, the Pralaya, but could happen after every wave of human consciousness based on any unit of the time.

Mankind has seen such momentous waves in its evolutionary process, they have arisen from seemingly inconspicuous origins. Human achievement is the ultimate crystallization of ideas, which develop into thoughts, which develop into actions and which give shape to reality. It was this idea bank according to Reinhard that we were forging into the process of putting our lives together. This was the fusing of Reinhard's Fire, the Altenhof Experience.

The first three Dialogues at Altenhof were sometimes incendiary and often explosive. We were still groping for meanings and finding none. We tried in effect to apply to this unique dialogue, our pre-existing concepts of inter-religious meetings, where long speeches were made by wise old theologians about their individual faiths, leaving the participants as cold and confused as when the dialogue commenced.

There are some aspects in each religion, which are totally incompatible with certain concepts in other religions. The Hindu belief in idolatory is

incompatible with the Jewish and Moslem faiths. The basis of the Christian faith that God has sent his 'only son' for the salvation of the world was of course totally unacceptable to all other faiths. The question mark of Buddha's inscrutable smile when asked about the existence of God is beyond the comprehension of the other theistic faiths, as is the implied truth that nothingness was everythingness. The participants of such inter-religious meetings often meet in a ratified atmosphere of mutual tolerance and outward harmony, tolerance indicating that one is of course right, but was nevertheless able to tolerate another person's conviction of his rightness. What resulted was often a patronizing acceptance of another's faith, by one who is convinced that his faith is the ultimate truth. The harmony arising from this approach often did not survive the valedictory meeting of these conferences and the participants often departed convinced that their faith alone provided the true answers.

Reinhard's dialogue started from the presumption that there is no necessity to be 'tolerant' to other faiths, nor even to 'try' to harmonise with them. Tolerance and harmony were automatic concomitants of the blending of our lives. Indeed, the universal needs of life are common throughout the world. The dialogue thus flourished from our laughter during breakfasts, our shared jokes, our walks through the country-side and in the depths of the silences in the night meditative sessions.

The talks given by the partners about their individual religions were only to familiarize others (or perhaps even themselves) regarding the basic truths of their religions. It was soon discovered that the fire and fury of the dialogue centre on these talk shows, and that it was in the profoundness of silence during our meditative sessions that we discovered the harmony conceived of by Reinhard.

The shifting of the dialogue to other locales was a major new step in Reinhard's dream. New partners came and old ones departed, some due to family compulsions and others perhaps due to the incapacity to withstand the demands of the dialogue. In Pakistan, Israel and Sreelanka new facets are added to the living dialogue the advantages of which I could not avail of due to various reasons which are not relevant here. It was in Japan at Takamori, "The Thatched Hermitage" of Fr. Oshida that according to me, the dialogue entered into its current meditative phase, when it enriched itself with ancient and mystic aspects of Shinto and Zen Buddhism.

According to Fr.Oshida every Japanese irrespective of his religion was basically a Shinto, with the super-imposition of Zen Buddhism and then his own religion. Introduction of Zen Meditation into the dialogue initiated by Fr. Oshida, and perfected by Hogensan and experienced as a reality in the Zendo of the Master Harata at the Bukkokuji Monastery Obama, enriched the tone and texture of Reinhard's Dream and gave it a new direction and meaning.

We met at Chitravathi on three occasions where Hinduism as practiced in modern India, ancient as the starts and as current as tomorrow became a living experience for the partners. And then in Bali, the Island of the goods, we had time to crystallize our individual spiritual experiences from this great confluence of all major religions that mankind had known. Reinhard's Dream is totally different from any other Dialogue in which I have participated. In Reinhard's words, his Dialogue is:

'a course that knowingly abandons those two objects, a course that does not avoid the contrasts, but – while keeping in mind the fundamental differences of all kinds – retains the candour of the conversation, or keeps struggling to do so. We must make common cause in finding the conditions and possibilities for this kind of Dialogue'.

The best part of the Dialogue was that the subject of discussion was never previously fixed. The discussion emerged from our shared living and hence had neither the mustiness of ancient books nor the tedium of research papers. The spontaneity of our exchanges sometime produced startling propositions often leaving us wondering as to where these simple truths had hidden themselves so long and from where they had now suddenly emerged. Tagore perhaps came closest to describing our Dialogue experience and its truths when he said that 'God's words were simple, but not of those who spoke about him'.

We rarely spoke about God. Our pre-occupations were mainly with ourselves, our interaction with each other and our involvement with spirituality, not religion.

Strangely we often found a perfect communion in silence. Even during our prayer sessions, especially our morning encounter, we very often found that the words of our prayers meant nothing and their repletion were often taken for granted, and that the wonder of those magic mornings mainly rose from the super charged interaction between the participants and no so much,

their faiths. It was as if in our separate adorations we had discovered a common sympathetic vibration, which transcended thoughts words and deeds.

Reinhard said in one of his Dialogue poems:

I beg you
to bear my presence
and that of others'
for some time.
We shall be conscious of each other
more than we shall see each other.
But we shall feel
whether we have that amount of room
for one another
in which we can stand upright
and breathe freely.

Even though your belief
must shut out mine,
don't give me up
and hold me
close to you
at the place, where you have finally
found your answer.

The danger lay in believing and acting as if an intellectual appreciation of this all encompassing concept of liberalization was the essence of the Dialogue. Intellectually these words are simple, but to live them proved extremely difficult. For this even in one's most intimate thoughts there should be no rancour against the faith of any of the other partners. Even the shadow of doubt regarding the correctness or depth of another partner's faith will pollute the purity of the living dialogue. Merely agreeing to disagree was not enough. Not merely agreeing but being firmly convinced that there is nothing to disagree about seemed to me the essence of our dialogue experience. Thus when ever the slightest hint of a doubt arose about another's faith, conflict and controversy would disrupt the harmony of living together, and not merely the proceedings of the Dialogue.

The greatest test of the living Dialogue is to be able to accept that the different truths, apparently absolute, complete and total in themselves, are not

separate from each other, and that the separateness is within ourselves and not in THE TRUTH which was perceived differently by each one of us.

Here again, intellectual conceptualisation is simple, being merely words on paper. The living experience is however different. As long as these ideas are intellectualized, they fall in the domain of other, familiar dialogue experience. It is when they are lived and experienced, often without words, that they become the dialogue of Reinhard’s Dream.

The Dialogue with other faiths is an affirmation of a partners personal faith not only in his religion but also in his conviction about the omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient entity which evokes worship from deep within himself, whether such an entity in which he believes can take other forms, if need be remain formless, and can very well, manifest itself in ways sometimes totally different from its manifestation in his own faith. The more varied the teachings and beliefs of the other faith, the firmer will a true believer believe in the greatness of his personal faith since such difference is an affirmation of the infinity of his God. As a Hindu, a vedantin, rooted firmly in Advaita I have my reservations even about using the word ‘God’ since that would be truncating and conceptualising the absolute within the straight jacket of the name. The end point of Vedantha lies in the words of Krishna to Arjuna in the battlefield of Kurukshetra. While describing the form of the Absolute the Lord says:

.....
“Arjuna, I am even that which is the seed of all beings.
For there is no creature, animate or inanimate, which
exists without me.” (ST. 39)

.....
“Arjuna, of My divine glories there is no end.
This is only a brief description of Me of the extent of
My powers”.

.....
“Every such creature as its glorious, brilliant or powerful,
know that to be a manifestation of a spark of My
effulgence.” (ST. 41 CHAPTER X BG)

This Rishis have described the absolute in many wonderful ways. Sri. Aurobindo crystallizes the essence of their sayings like this:

“The Spirit is infinite, illimitable,
eternal; and infinite, illimitable,
eternal is its stress towards

manifestation, filling endless space
with innumerable existences.”

Sri Aurobindo

Hence the deeper your faith, the easier it is to enter into a genuine dialogue with other sincere seekers from the different faiths. It is only where there is basic instability in one's faith and when faith confines itself to the verbal and not the spiritual content of the teachings of one's religion that antagonism arises against another's faith, another' religion.

It is thus easy to appreciate that such infinite faith in oneself and in others must be discovered not in words or in deeds and least of all in the thoughts. Such unity is a matter of personal experience, which defies the phenomena of ideas becoming thoughts and then fructifying into actions. All such ideas, thoughts and actions tend to be divisive. It is only in the mingling of lives saturated with such ideas, thoughts and deeds that a true dialogue emerges. This is the infinite and essential wisdom of Reinhard's Dream, the true Living Dialogue.

It is extremely difficult to really participate in such a dialogue if one fears reprisals ostracisation excommunication and/or any of the other methods of punishment of those who stray from the edicts of organized faith. Such institutions exist in all religions in the world including my own. For a true dialogue one should have the personal power and freedom to work outside any such institutionalized religious discipline. The higher one rises in one's own faith, the easier to travels from religion to spirituality. Spirituality can brook no such barriers let alone sanction any restriction on anyone's personal search for the Truth. This is another treasure that I personally discovered from the Altenhof, Takamori, Chitravathi, Bali and Wulfshagen Experiences, our sporadic forays in Reinhard's Dream.