The Peacemaking of a Radical: Margaret Laurence

by Metta Spencer

"It is my feeling that as we grow older we should become not less radical but more so," said Margaret Laurence. She died at sixty, an age barely qualifying for "senior citizenship," but (by her standards) radical beyond her years. During her final decade she had turned from fiction-writing to promoting causes through didactic lectures, essays, and even direct-mail fundraising campaigns. Animated by moral and religious urgency, she lent her prestigious name to her causes: nuclear disarmament, social justice, and environmental protection.

Such was the context of our acquaintance, limited though it was. She was a patron of *Peace* Magazine, which I edit. Someone had asked her, early in our organizational history, to dignify our masthead and stationery with her name and she'd gladly agreed. The rest of us, respectful and diffident, never asked for more. On the assumption that everyone encroached upon her time, I refrained from phoning her and almost lost out on a brief, but blessedly sane, relationship. Only when finally she called me about something (I forget what), did it become clear: she *loved* talking with other activists about peace.

By peace she had in mind broader objectives than those shared by the garden-variety peacenik of the mid-1980s. The revived disarmament movement, having sprung up to oppose the cruise missile, was a single-issue campaign focused on a single weapon system. Only gradually, after failing to stop cruise testing in Canada, did the movement tackle other weapons (e.g. Star Wars and nuclear-capable ships) or question broader military schemes, including even NATO itself. Indeed, in 1987 the transition is still incomplete, with most activists still believing their effectiveness dependent on limiting our opposition to the most frightful weapons — the nuclear ones — instead of campaigning against militarism or violence in general. Those who believe in broadening the disarmament agenda are gaining a following, but may still be a minority. The keenest debates deal with whether to include, as peace movement concerns, conventional weaponry; the hegemony of the superpowers in the Third World; the pollution of land, air, and water; patriarchy; nuclear power plants; or the claims of oppressed peoples for democracy and human rights.

But Margaret Laurence was not one to compartmentalize. Instead of urging that we ignore lesser social evils for the sake of curing a top-priority one, she viewed the entire array of problems comprehensively, and recognized their interdependence. Her feminism, for example, was not less central than her commitment to, say, the environment; instead, she assumed that women's emancipation would naturally manifest itself in the protection of life and the plainspoken defence of basic decency.

Likewise, it was clear to her that nuclear weapons and nuclear power were not separable, but that opposition to one required opposing the other. Thus from the earliest period (1980-81) when Energy Probe established itself separately from its parent organization, Pollution Probe, Margaret Laurence served on its Board. She rarely missed a meeting from then until fatal illness overtook her. Norman Rubin recounted to me her spirited participation, her increasing defiance in the face of political criticism.

Energy Probe's *raison d'être* is its opposition to Ontario Hydro's nuclear power scheme. Its Board included a number of cultural luminaries, especially a contingent of feisty senior women, such as the Very Rev. Lois Wilson and Jane Jacobs. These people had admired each other's work before they came together as a Board, and they immediately found pleasure in convening two or three times a year. Margaret Laurence caught the bus into Toronto for these occasions.

Courtesy of the University of Toronto Medical School, Energy Probe occupied campus office space opposite Ontario Hydro's opulent curvilinear building at Queen's Park. The proximity made confrontation convenient, such as began on a rainy day when Energy Probe's illustrious Board first trooped across the street, wearing damp alpaca ponchos and soggy sandals, to meet the rich, male Hydro Board across a gleaming mahogany table. No hosts could have differed more in their views from any visiting team.

The more Margaret Laurence took part in such meetings, the tougher she became. Pretty soon she was signing letters for Energy Probe's massive direct mail campaigns. One of these discussed the general dangers of nuclear power, another the tritium issue. Tritium, a poisonous by-product of reactors, must be reclaimed to protect the health of workers and neighbors. In planning for this reclamation project, Ontario Hydro discovered a bonanza: its rare tritium could be sold to the United States at prices far higher than gold. Energy Probe opposes this prospective sale, chiefly on the grounds that the tritium will either be used in U.S. bombs or to replenish civilian supplies as they are depleted by the bomb-makers. By arguing against such involvement, Margaret Laurence outraged her pro-nuclear, pro-military critics. A newpaper columnist called her naive and insufficiently grateful for

the generous military defence provided by the United States. A Peterborough neighbor, a nuclear engineer, tut-tutted that she should have come to him before rashly making her unfortunate public comment. Margaret Laurence angrily told the Board about this, noting that he wouldn't have dared deprecate a *man* that way. Such criticism made her eager to do even more next time.

On all nuclear questions, her arguments were the simple observations of a moral, feelingful perosn. She had heard what the technocrats and strategic analysts had to say but, whether or not they buttressed her position, she gave them short shrift. It wasn't a matter of whether cruise missiles would *work*, for God's sake, it was a matter of whether one could use them against enemies under any circumstances at all. A person must affirm life, must commit to the generations of the future; any opinion to the contrary was clear proof of lunacy. Her saying so let others reclaim their own good sense and discount the soul-numbing proposals of military "experts." She recalled us to ourselves, reminded us of what we had always known, restored our intention to trust and to support one another. The razzmatazz of no global thugs fooled *her*! Hers was the brisk reassertion of sanity that audiences needed — the sturdy conviction that, when it comes to nuclear weapons, there *are not* two sides.

Nor did her certitude come from opinionated habits of mind. In discussing other matters for which there *are* two sides, she was receptive to both. In the longest of my few conversations with her, we talked of censorship, a topic about which she felt awkwardly ambivalent.

She had consented to speak about pornography to a conference of judges. The prospect weighted heavily on her because she was not sure what stand to take. On the one hand, she had suffered personally at the hands of censorious neighbors, who had tried to ban some of her writing from the schools. On the other hand, she was keenly conscious of the morally corrupting influence of literature, TV, and films that demean people and accustom viewers to accepting violence as normal. We talked about the massive body of research demonstrating the effect of such viewing in stimulating more violence. This was before Rambo-mimicry had led to an epidemic of mass murders. Already, numerous researchers had demonstrated that reporting or depicting violence in newspapers, fictional television dramas, or the nightly news produces statistically significant increases in the rates of similar violent actions. Publicizing suicides or even auto fatalities increases the suicide rate. Publicizing homicides increases the homicide rate. Publicizing riots, terrorist acts, or highjackings increases the incidence of riots, terrorism, and highjackings. Even showing a prizefight on TV increases the homicide rate by about 12 percent for a week, resulting over the years in thousands of deaths. In view of these facts, it is hard to reject the idea of censorship entirely. Margaret Laurence said, at the end of our conversation, "I still don't know what I am going to say."

Her speech to the judges was published several months later (in September, 1984) in *Toronto Life*. The text showed the ambivalence with which she had struggled. She wrote:

I consider myself to be both a feminist and a strong supporter of civil liberties and free speech, but there is no way I want to be on the same team as the would-be book-banning groups who claim that no contemporary novels should be taught or read in our schools. There is no way, either, that I want to be on the same team as the pornographers.

What position can a person like myself honestly take? The whole subject is enormously complex, but I must finally come down against a censorship board, whether for the visual media or the printed word. I think that such boards tend to operate by vague and ill-defined standards. What can 'acceptable community standards' possibly mean?... Censorship boards tend to be insuffienciently accountable. I believe that in cases of obscenity, test cases have to be brought before the courts and tried openly in accordance with our federal obscenity laws. The long-term solution, of course, is to educate our children of both sexes to realize that violence against women and children, against anyone, is not acceptable, and to equalize the status of women in our society.

In this way (and unlike many other peace activists), Margaret Laurence finally attributed social evils to the underdeveloped moral sensibilities of the public, and recommended strategies of social change that would work from inside the soul and manifest itself outwardly in structural social changes. Thus, in a film made by Bonnie Klein and Terry Nash, of the National Film Board, she commented:

We lived in Vancouver and when my daughter was, I think, in Grade One, she brought home a form one day that had been passed out to all the schoolchildren saying, "In case of nuclear attack, if the child's parents cannot be found, put down the next of kin." I was so angry! Next of kin indeed! I used that episode in my novel, The Fire Dwellers *where one of Stacey's children comes home with the same form and she puts down, "next of kin: God. Address: heaven." As if anybody on this earth could be found in the case of a nuclear attack! I've been quite active in the peace movement ever since that time.*

I think it is a moral responsibility — the most important moral and spiritual and practical issue of our times. If we do not solve this one, there isn't going to be anyone around to solve any of the other issues. And at the same time, I can't divorce this issue from the whole question of starvation, disease, hardships and sufferings, that go on in so many parts of the world. For the price of one Trident nuclear submarine, malaria could be wiped off the face of the earth. That gives me pause. These two issues, the old one of needless suffering in the world, and the building of nuclear weapons, are very closely tied together.

One very great problem in the nuclear arms race is what I would call a crisis of the imagination. It seems to me that a lot of the world's leaders, particularly the leaders in the two great superpowers, don't seem to have any imagination. They can talk about megadeath, they can talk about two hundred million people being killed just like that, and it doesn't seem to enter their consciousness that these are real live human beings that they're talking about — our children, real people, who in a nuclear holocaust would die horribly.... To them, they're talking about statistics.

When I'm writing a novel, I have to try to feel the reality of my characters. I have to feel that they are as real as I am, that their joys and pains are as real as mine.... The [inability] to feel the reality of others is what enables people to become so brutalized that they are able to torture and murder their fellow human beings...

So-called ordinary people everywhere can indeed have an effect in halting the nuclear arms race. We think, "Yeah, but I'm just an ordinary person, an ordinary housewife, an ordinary whatever, and I can't do anything." It's only by joining our voices together that we can — and by knowing that none of us is ordinary. We are all unique human beings who matter, and everyone who bears witness in this way can make a difference.

It's difficult for the artist these days.

One is tempted to address the issue of nuclear weapons directly through one's (in my case) fiction. I find that hard. What I find easier and more possible is to address the issue in writing articles, talks, lectures, and so on. In that way I can address the issue directly. Artists cannot really write didactic prose in novels. I cannot write novels that preach, but what I can do is to affirm my whole life-view through the characters in my books. I think that in all my writing, a very strong kind of celebration of life itself comes through.

And so it did. Margaret Laurence's celebration of life was an instruction in the ways of peace.

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MIRIAM WADDINGTON

A Fable For Everywoman

When she was a child
she killed her mother
and married her father;
later as a young woman
she poisoned her lovers;
was it her fault they died?

Disillusioned with men
she entered a university
and gave herself to books;
gradually the books
piled up and grew tall
against the windows,
they begot children
upon her dwarfs and
hunchbacks and a single
willowy girl with blue eyes.

When she was middle-aged
her waist thickened and
her behind flattened from
sitting so much in libraries,
she began not to sleep well
and to have recurrent nightmares,
she dreamed the willowy one
was poisoning the sherry
or lurking on the balcony
among the disused summer
furniture and dying aloe
plants or else she was waiting
to meet her on the stairs
so she could push her
headlong down.

One day she went downtown
secretly to buy a bus ticket
to Vancouver but when she
got to the bus station all
the good seats were taken;
most of the time she sat beside
bushy-haired seventeen year old
girls and their pale babies
or else men in big black hats
who smelled under the armpits
squeezed in beside her while
lady policeman types overflowed
from their seats in flowered
pants which they washed out
every night in hotel rooms.

The journey to the coast
took longer than she expected
she bought a lot of sandwiches
in Winnipeg and they lasted
most of the way to Regina,
somewhere in Roger's Pass
they sold 7cent coffee
(10 cents if you took sugar)
then the bus went through
Crow's Nest Pass where all
the farmers were picketing
for lower freight rates.

Finally she got to Vancouver;
Gas Town was empty and rainy
and she hadn't really had
any adventures; what can you
expect with Jacques Cartier
dead in France and Captain
Vancouver busy charting Nootka
Sound (not that he was her
type anyway).

She took the ferry to Victoria
and found Emily Carr's boarding
house was under new management
and all her friends were dead
or living in retirement homes;
what was she to do? The best
thing was to go back to her
own city and make guarded peace
with the willowy daughter.

Then she would do her best
to become invisible for the years
that remained to her; she would
haunt the libraries and read all
their books, she would take notes
and do a lot of zeroxing, she would
eat her lunches on benches downtown
or at McDonald's where they gave
old women free coffee.

After all her travels
she would end up with this
small wisdom: how to find
warm places and free coffee.