

Laudatory speech for Mary Montague
Category: Public Engagement
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Very honoured guests,
highly regarded, dear Mary Montague,

Peace building, or put rather less elegantly in
German: Frieden zu bauen oder zu machen, seems
for us today – and this must be said – a difficult, if
not impossible task. The escalation of the crises we
have witnessed over the past two years not only in
the Ukraine, but also in the Near and Far East, as

well as the four years of civil war and war by proxy in Syria and the millions of people who are meanwhile fleeing from war and devastation, but also from poverty and marginalizationthe monstrous dimension of political violence, not just in the form of international terrorism – as seen recently in Paris – all of these examples raise the question as to the ability to create peace among the very different societies living on this planet.

You may well ask: Is that not going a bit too far considering that we wish to present the Bremen Peace Award this evening to **Mary Montague**, an activist, mediator, teacher, negotiator in secret, a “grassroots community worker”, a peace builder from Belfast? Was it not the case up in Northern Ireland with the *Good Friday Agreement* Easter 1998, almost 18 years ago, that an agreement was signed which should create peace between the conflicting parties, between the generally Catholic Republicans and the generally Protestant Loyalists, between the Irish and the British, who had been enemies for centuries? And was that not a comparably small conflict on the European periphery which did not really seem to be part of our world?

Sometimes we forget too quickly. *N’oubliez jamais*, let us never forget: Our generation, that of Mary and many of those present here this evening, also grew up with the shocking news from Northern Ireland, bombings and street fighting in Londonderry and Belfast: In 1984, at the party conference of the Tories in Brighton, the Prime Minister, Margret Thatcher – not only detested in Northern Ireland – just managed to survive an IRA attack; three years previously, ten young men from the Provisional IRA had died on hunger strike in the *Maze Prison* in Northern Ireland because they could not gain recognition as political prisoners.

This was a tragedy which led to a worldwide response on account of the human rights issues involved. Incidentally, it was a campaign which served as a role-model for the Red Army Faction in Germany (we also had “our own” terrorists) - and which ultimately brought about a turning point in the Northern Ireland conflict, a turning point away from the bullet to the ballot, as the political leader of the Irish Republican Movement, Gerry Adams, put it at the time.

It was both an exciting and yet difficult subject to teach in the English class, the *years of troubles*, as they were euphemistically entitled, meaning the years of civil war between 1969 and 1998, which cost the lives of more than three thousand Northern Irish men and women, often uninvolved civilians. “The European Christians are bashing each other’s heads in; it is an atavistic religious conflict which can never be resolved....” For two centuries, the IRA was deemed to be the worst terrorist organisation, at least in Europe, at times even worldwide. The Protestant paramilitary groups allied to the British, the UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) and the UDA (Ulster Defence Association), responsible for equally violent attacks and murders, were barely known beyond the Irish British border. The mainstream media showed a biased perspective on the conflict: the perpetrators of the worst violence were only to be found on one side. There was never any discussion about the possibility of military action or even humanitarian intervention such as a UN peacekeeping mission for Northern Ireland; after all, the conflict took place within British territory, in the backyard of the mother country of democracy; surely the state monopoly of force should normally work there?

At the end of the 1980’s, when the ice from the Cold War began to melt worldwide, the realization also began to spread in Northern Ireland that there would never be a military solution between the IRA and the approximately 20,000 British soldiers stationed in the province. Tentative and secret discussions began on a political solution to the problems of the social marginalization of the Catholic minority and on the political and constitutional main point of dispute as to whether Northern Ireland should continue to belong to Great Britain, or whether it should become part of the Republic of Ireland.

Discussion instead of shooting, a certain political recognition of the “other side” (including an entry visa to the USA for Gerry Adams), quiet consideration when stigmatising others as “terrorists” - these were some of the prerequisites for the IRA’s first cease-fire in 1994, which became more stable in 1996 and was also accepted by the loyalist paramilitary. Two further years of arduous negotiations “up there” with such recognised diplomats as the US Senator George Mitchell and “down there” with less well-known, but all the more so highly recognised personalities within their field such as **Mary Montague**, not only led to a compromise in the Belfast Agreement which allowed the Irish and/or British identity to live side by side, but

also to the fragile process of disarming the paramilitary organisations, accompanied by a fundamental reform of the police force to restructure the war-torn state monopoly of force.

However, a further nine years (!) tug of war followed – which could not exactly be described as non-violent – on how to implement the Good Friday Agreement, until at last, in May 2007, the *power-sharing*, which played a central role in the agreement, actually came into effect: a common government comprising both the strongest, but also most violent conflicting parties, the Republican Sinn Fein led by Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness and the Unionist DUP (Democratic Unionist Party) led by Ian Paisley.

Since then, many steps have been taken towards a normal way of living together in a Northern Irish society characterised by so-called *sectarianism*, meaning confessional marginalisation and hatred. According to recent polls, 20% can imagine a new “Northern Irish” identity as opposed to “British” or “Irish”. Can we see the beginning of a tentative softening of traditional narrative? However, there is still a long path to tread in coming to terms with the past and accepting the history of conflict between the now equally strong communities (*dealing with the past*), the path to a true state of reconciliation. Many observers talk of a “Cold War” in which some continue to feel, or once again feel, that they are the losers despite the peace process. This is particularly true in the case of the socially uprooted young people with no job, as in **West Belfast** where Mary comes from, or in East Belfast, where a generation ago, the shipyards of “Harland and Wolff” had at least given the Protestants good jobs, shipyards which are now closed.

During all these years of troubles and post-troubles – 44 years to date – Mary Montague has played an active role in preventing people from simply resigning and accepting the walls and trenches of the conflict and from following the tempting call of “tit for tat”, the retaliation.

In the 1970’s, Mary often got up at night when called to mediate at the so-called “interfaces”, the streets of houses in Falls Road and Shankill Road in West Belfast, where Catholic and Protestant neighbours lived separately, but in directly adjacent roads – often just a stone’s throw away from each other. Mary helped to develop the so-called “bleeper” system, initially using walkie-talkies and later mobile phones, as a kind of early warning system for the whole of Northern Ireland thus enabling crisis management within and between the communities on site. It was essential for her as a “go-between” negotiator to get as quickly as possible to the scene where the Republican or Loyalist activists clashed with the often biased police force in order to prevent the violence from escalating. Of course, this wasn’t exactly safe for the young woman and her family, who were consequently often the victims of serious intimidation and threats for body and soul. Courage, passion, compassion and a strong sense of justice always were and still remain today Mary’s constant companion and patron saint.

During the 1990's, when it was a question of getting the hardliners to agree to a cease-fire, it became clear that mediation cannot only be a great pacifist idea, but must also be a professional process, requiring psychological and pedagogic expertise as well political knowledge of the history of the conflict's protagonists. In the year 2000, shortly after the peace agreement, Mary founded the organisation TIDES in cooperation with others (www.tidestraining.org), of which she is still Operational Director. She had previously worked at the Northern Irish Quaker Cottage and the Corrymeela Community. She there developed a training programme for mediators who made use of systematic approaches from the area of practice-oriented social work. One aim is, for example, to open up new perspectives for young people who are fascinated by the paramilitary scene and the glorification of violence, by giving them a voice and an important role to play within the neighbourhood. Since then, Tides has resolved to commit itself to the tasks of communicating knowledge in this area while at the same time helping others to develop the skills in this kind of dialogue and mediation work, and also to training – capacity building in its true sense. Here it is not primarily a question of learning negotiation techniques, not simply the tools of mediation. The aim of the training programme is the strenuous path of reconciliation between rival or divided groups within the population or between individuals. Reconciliation should be understood as a process and not as a final state; the result does not necessarily have to mean mutual love and understanding, but building trust through understanding and the acceptance of differences and the viewpoint of others – this is one of the central realizations of this kind of peace work.

When the Belfast Agreement came into being in Northern Ireland, people were soon talking about an exemplary peace process: it seemed as if the international stage was offering a show case for other long-existing conflicts which seemed to be irresolvable, as for example the Israel Palestine conflict, the Indian Pakistan conflict in Kashmir or, more recently in Afghanistan, to name but a few. However, “learning lessons”, examples from the civil society, have far more credibility than when such ideas are represented by top diplomats from the western leading powers. The idea of applying experiences from Northern Ireland to comparable conflict situations also inspired the training programmes which Mary Montague has developed for mediation work in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Pakistan and in the Sudan. In this project, she worked in cooperation with the international peace organisation Mediators Beyond Borders (<http://mediatorsbeyondborders.org/>), which has a training institute in Istanbul. Mary also invited people to come and take part in learning processes in Northern Ireland, for example, to attend a women's conference in 2014 supported, among others, by Women Waging Peace, a global women's peace network associated to the John F. Kennedy School of Government in Harvard. Participants came from Turkey, Armenia, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Libya, Kenya and Nepal, for example.

Mary Montague builds bridges for human rights and non-violence in more ways than one; within her own community, between different conflicting parties and through sharing peace building experiences abroad. Without people like Mary, her compassion, patience, but also strategic thinking and drive, and considering all the problems which Northern Ireland still indeed has, the country would not be where it is today, neither as successful nor a role-model for other regions of conflict. We need people like her in many conflicts and crises today, especially in those places where dialogue and negotiation are not yet seen as worthwhile. Mary's work gives great encouragement.

In presenting the Bremen Peace Award to Mary Montague, we would like to thank you, Mary, for your exemplary work; we want to make this work a little more public and in doing so, set an example for the many peace workers at the grass roots level of our violence-shaken societies: Please continue, do not be discouraged - *Peace is possible*.



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