

# Inter Pares

B U L L E T I N

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## Passages

Some of the most important events in our lives are those which mark the “passages” – the cycles and transitions – in our personal life journeys and in the history of our communities. Wherever Inter Pares works or travels we see this, and it is a precious experience when we are invited to share with colleagues and friends the celebrations in their communities that mark the anniversaries and seasons of their lives.

This communal marking of personal passage and collective transition is universal, even as the variety of forms and ceremony is wonderfully diverse. At their most profound, such transitions offer a rare moment to celebrate our being and history, to reaffirm our commitment to shared values, and our hope in a future that embodies these values more fully. Such moments are invaluable in honoring life and recapturing the dignity that comes from bearing witness to our best hopes and dreams for the world and the human community.

From this perspective, the current preoccupation with the end of one millennium and the advent of another gives us pause, not least because the “millennium” in question is marked by only one among many other, and more ancient, calendars. Our simpler and more profound cyclic celebrations of community and hope are obscured by this conjured passage that has become an “event” manufactured by the media of industrialized culture.

This said, what deeper meaning might it still hold – this incipient end of a century, and a decade of centuries? Can it be in any way an authentic passage for those of us who mark it, or for the wider world that has been defined by the global events of the past thousand years? Can it still be a moment



Colin Rowat

to celebrate the best in ourselves and our hopes for the future?

The answer to this question is not absolute. The official ceremonies will ring hollow in a world that bears the scars of the cruel 20th century. While many of us will observe the spectacle, it will not be attended or even heard by billions of people marginalized and excluded from the passage being celebrated. But we do not have to be mere spectators, consumers of an ethnocentric myth and triumphant circus. Whatever else others make of this passage, however it is exploited by our leaders and myth-makers, this transition of millennia is

still a moment that can be honoured by each of us in our families and communities in the way of people celebrating shared lives and a common vision of a better future.

The essence of this moment is that it is a time to reflect on the turbulent past, and reaffirm the transcendent values and ideals that allow us to actively promote a more humane future for ourselves, for our children, and for all the children of the new century and the millennium to come. For, if we dream it so, the opportunity of the millennium is that it can be attended to as the end of an epoch that has wrought terrible devastation, and yet be celebrated hopefully as a dawn of an era that could herald a new beginning for all of us on this beautiful and fragile planet.

The heart of this potentially transcendent moment is that both the end of the past, and the beginning of the future, begin now – in this rare “now” that is framed in the arbitrary, but still real, transition from one millennium to the next.

We are privileged at Inter Pares to live continually in the present tense of countless people in communities around the world, creating their future in the activism of their lives today. It is the privilege of working with people who have the courage to trust their own values and ideals, and share their visions and action with others to build sustainable peace and justice locally, and eventually globally.

This *Bulletin*, our last of this year and of the century, is a moment to celebrate a few such people whose lives and action embody this vision and courage. Their lives are passages to this future, and their activism represents the profound transition that is required if we are to create a just future with them.

## Sylvia Estrada-Claudio

Sylvia was a high school student when she started organizing against the Philippine dictatorship. Later, as a medical doctor, along with other doctors, students, dentists and psychologists, Sylvia formed the Medical Action Group (MAG). During the most intense periods of military repression and violence under the Philippine dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, MAG organized health missions to various parts of the country, where they treated psychological trauma, as well as physical injuries. Sylvia's experiences subsequently led her to complete a doctorate in psychology.

Sylvia and Dr. Junice Melgar, a close friend who was also a health activist in the democracy struggle, later formed *Likhaan*. A national women's health organization, *Likhaan* assists poor women to establish their own community associations and health programs, trains health workers, develops educational materials, and advocates nationally for women's rights. In 1998, Dr. Ben Molimo – a co-worker with Sylvia in MAG – joined *Likhaan*, further enhancing their human rights work. Together, Sylvia, Junice and Ben brought a wealth of experience and skills, as well as humility and humour, to the health exchange on the Thailand-Burma border.

Inter Pares has known Sylvia for many years, and we continue to support the work of *Likhaan*. We admire the energy and creativity she, Junice and Ben bring to their work with women, their critical analysis and feminist process, and their commitment to social justice.

## Cynthia Maung

For the past five years, Inter Pares has supported the work of Cynthia Maung on the Thailand-Burma border. A gentle and compassionate physician, Dr. Cynthia is renowned for her work with Burmese refugees in Thailand.

Dr. Cynthia is a refugee herself. She fled Burma in 1988 after the military government began to systematically arrest members of the democracy movement. After an eight-day walk through the jungle, she arrived at the Thailand border. She was soon ministering to the thousands of sick and wounded refugees who had fled into Thailand.

In the years since, Dr. Cynthia has become known particularly for her work with women and children who are the chief victims of war. She established clinics in the border region. She works with women's groups in refugee camps to provide training and support programs. She trains para-medics and organizes mobile health teams that travel deep into remote jungle areas to assist displaced people. She supports and counsels women who have lived through horror. For thousands of people fleeing the destruction of their homes and communities, Dr. Cynthia is a beacon of hope as well as a symbol of resistance to a brutal military dictatorship.

## Curing the Heart

*In April of 1999, staff member Karen Seabrooke participated in a unique exchange program that brought together Inter Pares' counterparts from Burma and the Philippines. As she relates below, this experience touched her deeply.*

As Dr. Cynthia leads us through the Mae Tao health clinic for Burmese refugees in northwest Thailand, an 8-year old girl, walking on crutches, makes her way past us. Weeks earlier, she had stepped on a land mine, and she is now being fitted for a prosthesis at the clinic. Other refugees, some with shrapnel wounds, and women who have been raped and beaten by Burmese soldiers, lie on cots or visit with relatives.

I am on the Thailand-Burma border with three visiting doctors from *Likhaan* in the Philippines – Sylvia, Junice and Ben. To them, these problems are achingly familiar. Under the Marcos dictatorship, they had risked their lives to bring medical assistance to the wounded and to document human rights abuses. They also treated the psychological damage inflicted by war, torture and displacement. They knew that in addition to the visible, physical injuries of war, the people in the Mae Tao clinic were suffering other — often invisible — psychological wounds caused by violence, displacement, and loss of family, friends and community.

We are here because of a conversation some months earlier with Pippa Curwen of the Burma Relief Centre. Mental health problems are acute among Burmese in the Thai refugee camps, and Pippa had spoken about the need for psychological support for people suffering the trauma of war. Pippa and Dr. Cynthia were seeking links with groups who might provide training to workers in the camps and the clinic to deal with these problems, with an emphasis on the particular problems faced by women refugees. So I asked our Philippine colleagues if they could help. Over the course of the next several months, we worked together to plan a one-week program to share experiences and skills on health strategies in areas of conflict.

The participants in the program are displaced Burmese themselves, from the surrounding refugee camps as well as from the Mae Tao clinic. They are teachers, medics, community organizers – 38 in all. During the training sessions, the participants discuss the problems they are encountering. A young social worker from the women's group at Mae La refugee camp talks about the shame and guilt experienced by women survivors of torture and rape; another woman, a teacher at Hway Ka Loke camp, speaks of child development

## 1999 John Humphrey

Dr. Cynthia Maung is being honoured this year as the recipient of Canada's prestigious John Humphrey Freedom Award, an annual award bestowed by the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development. The award is being jointly given to Dr. Cynthia and Min Ko Naing, a student leader who has been in a Burmese prison since 1989. Warren Allmand, the President of the

problems and her attempts to help traumatized orphans; a youth organizer from Mawker camp raises issues of family disintegration and adolescent depression. A medic from the Mae Tao Clinic wonders how to break down isolation and loneliness in the refugee camps so that people could help each other. “We can cure malaria,” he says, “but we can’t cure the heart.”

As the program progresses, the women grow more confident each day, as they discuss women’s rights as human rights, state violence and domestic violence. The men become quiet and more respectful, giving space to the women to express themselves, applying the techniques of good listening, gender sensitivity and democratic participation that Sylvia had stressed were so important. During role-plays written and performed by the participants, it is obvious that they are already integrating the skills they are learning.

I am humbled by the spirit of these refugee women and men who, having experienced such horror themselves, are so passionate to learn and to help other refugees and their country. When we say goodbye, Sylvia, Junice and Ben thank our Burmese hosts, and tell them that the experience has “touched their souls”, and re-kindled their own commitment to democracy and justice, as they continue to deal with human rights abuses in their own country.

As our visit ends, the Thai New Year begins, and the traditional Water Festival is in full swing. Leaving Mae Sot to begin our journeys home, we are pelted with water from all sides by people celebrating their hope for the coming year. And I think of the hopes and the courage.



From left to right: Dr. Sylvia Estrada-Claudio, Dr. Junice Melgar, Pippa Curwen, Dr. Cynthia Maung, Karen Seabrooke, Dr. Ben Molimo.

## Freedom Award

International Centre, said that the award is in recognition of the inspiration of Dr. Cynthia and Min Ko Naing to all those who struggle for peace and justice.

Inter Pares nominated Dr. Cynthia for the John Humphrey Freedom Award and is proud to be associated with her work. We will continue to support Dr. Cynthia and others working for democracy and justice in Burma.

## Karen Seabrooke

Inter Pares staff member Karen Seabrooke’s commitment to women’s health and human rights goes back many years. She is one of the founders of Women’s Health Interaction, an Ottawa-based health collective that has persistently raised awareness and advocated an end to coercive population control programs. Leading up to the UN Conference on Population and Development in 1994, Karen helped create the Canadian Women’s Committee on Population and Development, which played a lead role in connecting Canadian and international activists on women’s reproductive rights. And she is now involved in follow-up work to the UN conference to analyze the progress made by governments with respect to women’s health and empowerment.

Karen believes that a central part of the work of Inter Pares is helping to build enriching and supportive relationships among women’s groups in Canada and overseas. “The exchange between Burma and the Philippines was a wonderful experience,” Karen says. “Even in such grim situations as Burma, people still maintain the ability to reach out, to support and learn from each other. What a privilege to be able to help create such opportunities, and build something new.”

## Pippa Curwen

Pippa Curwen first came to Thailand in 1981 to teach English in Bangkok. In 1987, she moved to teach at the university in Chiang Mai in the north-western region of Thailand. She was in Chiang Mai when thousands of Burmese students and democracy activists began to cross the border, fleeing the military crack-down against the democracy movement. Pippa and some of her friends set up an organization, the Burma Relief Centre, to organize and coordinate humanitarian assistance to these refugees.

Pippa had no idea that this work would be continuing more than a decade later. Today, Pippa and her colleagues continue to work with Burmese refugee and ethnic minority groups, not only in Thailand but also in the border regions of India and Bangladesh. Their work has expanded beyond providing humanitarian assistance to include organizing women, supporting health programs, facilitating training and support programs for students, and helping to build the capacity of local organizations to address their own needs.

Pippa sees her work as a contribution to the development of a grassroots movement for change, and the restoration of a just and democratic Burma. “I was intensely inspired by the spirit of the students who came to the jungle to struggle for democracy,” Pippa says. “This is what inspires us all to carry on our work.”

## From our own hearts, by our own hands

Sitting on a bench in the crisp air of this mountain town in the highlands of Peru, Diana Avila is speaking with some 30 representatives of the Federation of Women of Yauli. Diana has known many of these peasant women from the surrounding communities for years. Others are new to the organization, and regard the visitors with interest.

“While there are many problems here, there are also resources. And the most important resource of all is each of you.” Diana meets the eyes of Francisca, a long-time leader of the group. “Francisca remembers when she and a group of 60 women went together to the office of the administrator of the community food support program. It took tremendous courage that first time, but they forced the administrator to stop making women vote a particular way, or work on road repair, before they could receive the assistance. You have achieved much, and together there is much more you can achieve.”

Diana Avila, a Peruvian journalist and life-long human rights activist, is the Executive Director of the Project

Counselling Service (PCS), which works throughout Latin America supporting local communities efforts to rebuild after war and economic dislocation. In 1992, when we first met Diana, the internal war was still causing death, fear, and flight in the Peruvian highlands. We had been told that social and economic organizing was next to impossible in rural areas. But Diana insisted that even with the difficulties that persisted, people were beginning to rebuild their lives and communities, and we could work with them.

“Everywhere in my country there are people who are finding a way to organize, to help each other, to discover other ways of living,” she told us. She wanted to support the efforts people were making to change their circumstances by connecting them to other communities doing similar projects. “Addressing common problems gives people a sense of what they can do for themselves. Mutual support among people in similar situations breaks the cycle of dependency and hopelessness

that can kill the spirit. “ Since then, Diana has collaborated with her colleagues to build on the long experience of the PCS in conflict and post-conflict zones throughout Latin America. Diana’s current dream is to build a resource centre that will bring together the experience and analysis of these programs of support for communities and social processes, and to document the perspectives of the people — like the peasant women of Yauli — who are directly involved. She believes that by learning and acting together, Latin Americans can address the polarization and poverty that lie at the root of the social and political conflict they have experienced.

Diana’s determination has been a source of constant inspiration for us at Inter Pares, who have walked with her in this long journey. In her commitment to working with others for change, she embodies the vision and values that, shared widely enough, will ultimately build the future we want for ourselves, our children, and our planet.

## Transforming Ourselves, Transforming the World

We live in an age where unprecedented numbers of people have joined organizations and involved themselves in social action, yet many of us are pessimistic about our ability to create change. How do we continue to act when there is no guarantee that our actions will ultimately be successful in making a better world? Inter Pares staff member, Brian Murphy, has written a book for all of us who want to overcome pessimism and play a part in changing society in the direction of peace, justice and dignity for all human beings. In this book, Brian explores the social and personal dilemmas that can hold us back from social action. At the same time he explains from real experiences how the various constraints we face can be overcome. The book explores a range of issues that affect our

ability as social actors, and puts forward the notion of an “open conspiracy” where citizens from all walks of life can join together in advocacy and action to transform elements of the prevailing social order. Readers of this thoughtful book will find themselves constantly deepening their understanding of the world around them, as well as empowered to act to change it.

*This is a book filled with hope. Far from accepting the myth of inevitability, Brian Murphy dares us to imagine a just future in which ordinary people accept the mantle of intentional citizenship and create a moral alternative to economic globalization. Read this wonderful book.*

~ Maude Barlow, Chairperson,  
Council of Canadians.

*... a hopeful, liberating book. It takes us to the edge of what we do not know.*

*What an affirming place to arrive at!*

~ Lance Evoy, Institute for  
Community Development, Concordia  
University, Montreal.

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