

Why we're fasting for peace

Weekly Mail Sep 27 - Oct 3, 1985

MORE than seven years separate Harald Winkler and Richard Steele, both fasting for peace. That seven years could be a generation.

Winkler is a 21-year-old Wits student who takes a practical approach to issues, seeing two or more sides to most questions.

Steele, 28, released by court order on Friday after two weeks in detention, belongs to a different world, where things are possible solely because they're right — where a "truthful act" has "natural correlations".

Winkler is fasting as a way of communicating with conscriptees, churches and black communities most affected by military patrols. He sees his fast as a way to re-integrate the spiritual and the political, but also as "good political strategy".

Steele says his decision to fast was "quite a natural choice", given his total commitment to non-violence. "I'm just being," he says. "People can respond to me on the level they choose."

Steele spent 1980 in detention barracks for refusing to serve — for what he calls choosing to "non-cooperate".

Winkler has applied to the SADF for classification as a religious objector, a move, he says, that is only possible because of the stand Steele took five years ago — which is where the generations come together.

After Steele's heavily-publicised case, a Commission of Enquiry recommended grounds for CO status beyond membership of a "peace church". It is on personally religious and fairly — but not strictly — pacifist grounds that Winkler applied to do community work, rather than combatant service, when he is called up in January.

Winkler, whose background is Lutheran, plans a career in the church, studying for a bachelor's degree in divinity at Unisa where, he says, one can follow a non-denominational course.

He takes a pragmatic approach to issues. He is a vegetarian primarily out of a concern for the waste of resources in feeding livestock rather than people, but would eat meat in a social situation rather than hurt the person who offered it.

And in his application for religious objector status, he does not claim to hold firmly to the principle of non-violence. He concedes that if his house were robbed, he would probably punch the burglar on the nose.

He argues the "just war" theory which, he says, has a long tradition in the Christian Church — and then states that actions the SADF is taking in Namibia, Angola and South African townships do not meet any of the criteria, "all of which must be fulfilled for the war to be deemed just".

Indeed, he notes that he does not categorically reject all forms of violence, distinguishing between violence used by the state to enforce the status quo and violent acts performed as a reaction of the

Three members of the End Conscription Campaign have begun lengthy fasts in support of the "Troops out of the townships" campaign. BARBARA LUDMAN spoke to two of them in Johannesburg this week.



Richard Steele, also fasting to get the "Troops out of the townships". Pictures by Paul Weinberg, Afrapix

oppressed to change the system.

"I personally would prefer to seek peaceful ways to change South Africa," he notes, "and try to avoid ... violence. However ... I can afford to espouse non-violence because I am privileged; little violence is being done to me."

He is quick to point out that he, Steele and Cape Town Dr Ivan Thoms are not the only people committing themselves to lengthy fasts for peace. "Some people are doing it in a quieter, personal way," he says.

But that is not necessarily his way. "To quite a large extent, I'm doing it for the effect," he says. "The ECC decided on this strategy, and I thought it was a good one. I see a fast at this particular time in a country under an Emergency as a good thing to do, because it's basically very difficult to stop a fast. Even detention cannot stop it."

And from a personal point of view, "I see this fast as an opportunity to have more time to integrate social analysis and my personal beliefs. I've been going through a rapid time of becoming politically aware and I feel that to some extent that has become separate from my values and my faith. One has grown more quickly than the other.

"Although I'm in a movement which tries to combine both aspects, I feel my focus has been on the political side of things, learning about myself as someone with political responsibility. How one relates that to God, to the life of Christ is much less articulated.

"I don't think the majority of people in the mainline churches would do what I'm doing, for the reasons I'm doing it. It would be seen as too political.



Harald Winkler, who has eaten no solids for a week now, talks to a group this week about why he is doing it.

"But I have got a particular understanding of Christianity that doesn't try to be apolitical but is aware of Christianity's social and political dimensions."

In one way only, Steele is also a pragmatist. He favours fasting as a way of communicating because it is accessible. "It is something anyone can do," he says.

It is also "a radical stopping, stepping out and becoming aware of the way we live our lives.

"We are socialised to follow certain habits. If you're able to step out of that habit, even for 24 hours, it gives you a chance to look at the other habits you are following."

"Eating," he says, "is one of our most basic social actions. Meals are a time of fellowship and sharing together. Also, in South Africa, food and the lack of food are important elements in people's lives. There is massive starvation in the rural areas and the cities."

Fasting, then, is "an action that comes from the centre. It is a way to reach into the centre of ourselves." There are good things at the centre, but also "the pain of our society. We need to feel that, to weep with that pain, and respond in a creative way.

"One crux element of the violence in our society is the SADF," he says. "We are aware of the other kinds of

violence, but we are specifically focusing on the SADF, because they are focusing on us, on our lives. It is the SADF that conscripts, and we are both males and conscripts."

He had intended to begin fasting in detention, but was released on Friday, came to Johannesburg for a wedding, and began his fast — up to four litres of water a day, half of it mineral water — on Sunday night.

Brought up as a Baptist, he spent a year in the US at a Mennonite seminary after his release from detention barracks, and two months with the Movement for a New Society. He returned in late 1983 because, he said, "I learned what I needed to. It was time to come back."

When he heard there was a need for someone to run the Phoenix Settlement, Gandhi's memorial at Inanda, he volunteered. He is curator as well as caretaker but prefers the latter designation, the notion of caring. There is little enough to care for since the settlement was attacked in August — just a clinic which serves the black community.

He saw the attack on the settlement, a symbol of non-violence, as evidence of frustration, a lack of cohesion, as a manifestation of tremendous stress, confusion, fear and anger.

But he did not react violently. His commitments are complete.

Like Winkler, he's a vegetarian — but he would not eat meat in a social situation, because, he says, his conviction springs from a reverence for life. Other reasons — his health and his concern for world hunger and a waste of resources — are only secondary.

It is the same with non-violence. His commitment is absolute.

"In order to be able to kill another person, you first have to kill a part of yourself," he says. "I would rather draw suffering and stress onto myself than cause other people suffering and stress through my actions and my life.

"Fasting functions as a lightning conductor. Non-violence does that — it absorbs violence rather than perpetuating it, and then earths it.

"To me, this is something that happens naturally. It's not as if someone goes out to absorb violence. But any truthful act has its natural correlations. When you plant flowers, you get natural beauty. You don't do it for effect. You do it because it's truthful and it's good and it's right."

"I'm not haranguing people with words or weapons," he says.

"Violence generally generates violence in response, but there is another option, total vulnerability. I see the birth of Jesus as a superb example of that option. It is a very strong one. It cuts that spiral of violence and it challenges others on a moral level to make a choice."

●The ECC has called for a 24-hour peace fast on October 6/7, the anniversary of the first use of troops in the townships last year.

For details of campaign events, see public meetings on page 24.

Collection Number: AG1977

END CONSCRIPTION CAMPAIGN (ECC)

PUBLISHER:

Publisher:- Historical Papers Research Archive

Location:- Johannesburg

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