

The Nairobi Peace Tent

by Genevieve Vaughan

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The film of the Peace Tent which Inge Langen and her crew produced shows a scene in which the women who put on the Peace Tent are sitting together in a beautiful garden discussing philosophy. The previous shot is one of the poverty stricken women and children in Nairobi searching for food in the city garbage dump. This juxtaposition gave an undeserved criticism of classism to the effort which was made in putting on this example of international feminist collaboration. In fact women from some thirteen different countries came together to organize this wonderful space for women's free speech. Though most of the women involved were from the north of the globe, they were from middle class or poor backgrounds. There was only one rich woman involved. That was me.

I believe that all of the women who helped to put on the Peace Tent, myself included, did it with the intention of changing a world in which people are rendered so poor as to have to search in the garbage for food. This can be done by changing the structures of oppression, and that requires a change in consciousness and the involvement of millions of people. We felt we could take a step in that direction by sharing information and creating solidarity with the 16,000 women from all nations who attended the Forum. We tried to bridge the barriers of class, race, religion, education etc. set up by the patriarchy.

The question has often presented itself to me of how to use my money for social change, and the alternative between charity and political funding has always been a major consideration. Although I find it tempting to help individuals, I realize that the only way to improve their situation permanently is to change the causes of that situation. It is my feminist faith that if we were to enact women's values on a wide scale, in our institutions and economics, we would solve the problems patriarchy has created and make a better world for all. It is with this in mind that I funded and helped organize the Peace Tent in Nairobi, and brought there to facilitate it the group I had helped to form, the 'Feminist International for Peace and Food'. If I had given the money directly to the people in the garbage dump, their lives would have improved somewhat, but the big picture (in which similar garbage dumps abound) would have remained the same. It is wiser to try to create a multiplier effect by funding an alternative model of communication and interaction, which many people can in turn pick up, spread and use again. The group sitting in the garden was a necessary intermediate step between a woman with resources and those with none. We need to be able to find ways in which feminist women with wealth can use their resources for social

change, together with feminist women with other resources, while resisting attacks against stereotypes of wealthy women, which would be better directed against the denizens of the patriarchy. Such attacks disempower the women who could turn the flow of wealth away from profit and towards the new structures which would satisfy the needs of the many. I myself was intimidated by the notoriety of 'coming out' as a funder, so I did not say publicly that I did it. The funding of the Peace Tent has therefore been attributed to others, especially to groups. Now, no longer intimidated, or at least having learned more what to expect, I say what I do, and have done. I think it is important to say that much of this was an individual initiative so that other individuals can enjoy the benefit of my experience. [It often seems that only groups can fund important things. Individuals can and do.] I did have very capable administrative and organizational help from my cousin, Sissy Farenthold. And many other women put in a great deal of effort — Lori Harvey, my assistant at the time was one.

In 1983 I returned to the US from Italy where I had lived twenty years, determined to use my resources for social change according to feminist values. When I was invited to a Wingspread conference in 1984, for prospective funders of the Nairobi Forum, I was the only one, and the first one, who gave a substantial amount of money so that Dame Nita Barrow's office could begin at 777 UN Plaza. The reason that I had the imagination and consciousness to do so was that I had become a feminist in Italy and had seen something of the oppression of the first world upon the third world from that viewpoint. I recognized the importance of international feminism from my Italian experience and from the travelling I had been privileged to do. In 1983 I funded a trip by Sonia Johnson, soon to be presidential candidate of the Citizens' Party, to Europe to contact women about creating an East-West peace treaty with Soviet women. In 1984 I funded another trip, which I also went on, of Sonia and several other women, to Geneva to the WILPF meeting for International Women's Day. Sonia called for women who were interested in a more radical stance to come together with us to draw up a document asserting a number of feminist demands. Some thirty women attended the meeting she called. We did not finish the document in time so I did something that was very uncharacteristic for me (at the time I was just stepping out of my shy housewife role); I invited them all to Texas for another meeting a few months later. The group that came did indeed finish the document called 'A call to courage for women everywhere', and named themselves the 'Feminist International for Peace and Food'. Most of the women were European, because they had met in Europe, and there were few women of color for that reason. A few other women joined us later and some dropped out, but a core group was formed. The FIPF met again in the fall of 1984 at the house I still had in Rome and we discussed whether we should continue as a group and what should be our purpose. We discussed going to Nairobi, and many women felt we might be seen as northern white women taking advantage of our sisters from the south. Later that year however, two of the women who were in the group at the time, Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz, a Native American woman from

Oklahoma, and Ellen Diederich from Germany, asked me to meet in Geneva with Edith Ballantyne from WILPF. Ellen, who was in our group, talked about how she and her friend Fasia Jansen, an Afro-German singer, had organized a Women's Center at a peace meeting in Prague. They wanted to do something similar at the women's meeting in Nairobi, where it seemed that peace was not being considered a 'women's issue'. That year I had already begun funding Arvonne Fraser's group in preparation for Nairobi, and she had invited me to a meeting of women at the Rockefeller Foundation's villa in Bellaggio. There I met Peggy Antrobus and Devaki Jain of Dawne, for which I was also able to provide funding, as well as Elizabeth Okwenje, who I later brought to the US to travel and talk about the Nairobi Conference after it happened. Through these contacts I was also able to fund a group of some 15 African women journalists to go to the conference. (While we were in Nairobi we had a luncheon to which many of them came). I say this to show that I already had a lot of commitment towards the Nairobi conference.

When Ellen, Roxanne, and I went to Geneva to talk to Edith Ballantine of WILPF about doing a peace center in Nairobi, they had to push me some to say yes to funding it. They thought it would cost a hundred thousand dollars. In the end it cost a lot more than that. And I spent a good deal more on the whole Nairobi effort.

Let me just say that I met wonderful women doing this. All of the ones I have mentioned and many more I haven't and who I also funded, are very special, excellent people, women of great depth, passion and compassion. They gave, and continue to give me great hope. I am glad that the funding I provided helped them and made their efforts easier at least for that moment. I continue to think it was a very good thing to do.

I thought it would be right for the peace center to be done by the Feminist International for Peace and Food, who were looking for a purpose. This was agreed upon and we got to work to make it happen. In February of 1985 we had another meeting of the FIPF to solidify plans. Actress Inge Langen who had lived in Kenya would go there to make contacts ahead of time, and would also provide for the filming of the event. At our meeting in Rome we had talked about the kind of physical space our peace center should be in. Fasia Jansen suggested we use a tent, in order to remain somewhat independent from the physical set up of the conference, which was to be in the rooms of the University of Kenya. Accordingly when she got to Nairobi, Inge rented two large tents that could be put together, and two small ones. She also found a house that we could rent in which the thirty women could stay. It was expensive, and we had to provide our own meals, but it probably cost less than a hotel would have. Deborah Slager who was working for me at our retreat center near Austin went to Nairobi early and performed the miracle of providing the food for everyone. She had the help of several Kenyan women, who we hired after much discussion within the group about whether it was right to have someone help with the cooking. It was decided that we

should because the salary would be useful to them, and their cooking would free us to go to the conference.

In April of 1985 we also organized a meeting of twenty five or thirty women from across the US in Houston, to prepare for Nairobi, draw up a document and discuss possible common agendas. Bella Abzug, Vinie Burrows, Lourdes Arguellas, and many others were there. We considered them allies though they were not themselves part of the FIPF. Many of them did not actually go to Nairobi. One of those who did not was Marilyn Waring from New Zealand who however, suggested we construct a globe and have women write messages on it. We did that and the globe became a symbol for the whole conference. After much discussion of various issues by all, Robin Morgan and I finally put together the document 'Let women lead'. Both it and a shortened version of the 'Call to courage' were translated into Swahili and distributed in Swahili and English at the Peace Tent. That spring one of the original FIPF members, Fran Willard, a US woman living in England suggested to me that she and Joyce Mustasa, a woman from Zimbabwe also living in England, go to Zimbabwe to collect photographs for a calendar celebrating women activists from Southern Africa, to sell at the conference. I funded this and it was a very successful initiative.

How we all actually got to Nairobi is another longer story the experience of being piled into one house- most of us slept on mattresses on the floor. I was in a bedroom with six until I found an unused closet that was big enough for a mattress and went to sleep in there. The great elation of doing something useful in the midst of a group of 16,000 women of all races, cultures, styles and persuasions, with a common feminist heart beneath the differences; the sense of purpose, good will, poetry, beauty, determination of the women are unforgettable. I was really able to help. When I heard that the Iranian and Iraqi women had been screaming at each other in the tent, I knew we had to do something, so we wrote a statement to read at such occasions and at regular intervals, and we began singing to reduce the tension. This created a context more conducive to peaceful dialogue. One of the first days when the South American women came in during an intermission to discuss their issues in a rowdy way, some of the US women were worried. I knew it was all right. They were just like the Italian feminists I knew, but speaking another language. We made friends with the Soviet delegation too. They came to greet us, and it was all rather formal until we asked them to help us set out the chairs. A few minutes of warm, practical collaboration dissolved years of Cold War suspicion.

After the conference was over I continued with follow up. I went on a tour with Elizabeth Okwenje from Uganda and Carmen Del Rio from Chile to various US cities to talk about the situations in their countries and women's efforts for peace. Then I helped Alice Wiser, Gertrude Kauderer, Carmen Del Rio and others do a Peace Caravan in the US to talk about the conference and other women's efforts for peace. Ellen Diederich and Fasia Jansen did one in

Europe, and I was able to contribute a van to them which they later drove through Eastern Europe to the women's peace conference in Moscow and back (in 1987). Ellen and Fasia on their own made a major follow-up effort, recreating Peace Tents in Essen, Mutlangen (where Pershing missiles were being deployed), Stuttgart, Copenhagen, and Belfast. Many thousands of people attended the events in these tents.

Besides the Peace Tent crew, I was able to fund a number of other women to go to Nairobi. Among them I will just mention Chilean Isabel Letelier who brought her beautiful collection of arpilleras to hang along one side of the tent. I funded the trip for Sweet Honey and the Rock who came and sang at our closing session. One of the best projects I contributed to was Native American Charon Asetoyer's. She went to a Kenyan village and brought the country women from there to the conference. She shared a lot of information with them on fetal alcohol syndrome, an issue she had been working with on the reservation where she lived.

During the year previous to the conference I had become very interested in women's radio, and had helped to organize a meeting about it at an AWID conference in Washington. We had a meeting on radio at the Nairobi conference as well and many women came, but afterwards I did not have the energy to continue working in that direction. Fortunately I have been able to see my dream come true to some extent in FIRE, the Feminist International Radio Endeavor, a program which I started in 1991 and continue to fund on short wave, on Radio for Peace International, out of Costa Rica. It is a daily program from a women's perspective, one hour in English, one in Spanish, with an international team of feminist women who not only produce it but travel to conferences in other countries, showing other women how to do radio.

The programs for the Peace Tent were organized only a day or two in advance. Ellen who was in charge of that in collaboration with others, both sought out women to come and speak, and received requests from the groups that were there, for time on the program. We offered WILPF a literature table in the entry of the tent along with others, and of course our own literature table was there with people always present to greet the stream of women coming in. We felt we were performing a service. There were many displays from different countries and we provided stands and partitions on which to hang them. So many women had come with material to show and we were happy to be able to give them the space to make it visible. One of the two small side tents we had rented showed videos made by women, in continuation throughout the day. The other served for personal storytelling. The large tent was always packed and there were many events every day in which women's voices were finally being heard in political dialogue, sometimes after centuries of silence. Sometimes I think the radio program FIRE is another evolution of the Peace Tent.

After Nairobi I have continued my funding of activities which I consider

promote social change according to women's values. I started a women's foundation here in Austin, the Foundation for a Compassionate Society, for which some of the Nairobi sisterhood still work. Ellen and Fasia run a Third World and Native American craft store in Germany. Carmen Del Rio works on Aids projects in the poblaciones in Chile. The Foundation itself employs a number of diverse women and consists of many different projects, women's spaces, computer, video and radio production and training, and we continue to put on programs conferences and events of various kinds, here in the hinterland of Middle America, the belly of the beast. After Nairobi, the FIPF dissipated, its purpose having been served in an excellent way. I hope many of its members will reconvene in Beijing. At present I am helping women to coordinate media efforts from North and South America and I also hope to help bring women spiritual leaders from different parts of the world to that conference.

Altogether a great deal of pure feminist good will, enthusiasm and commitment as well as money were put into the success of the Peace Tent in Nairobi by myself and the Feminist International for Peace and Food. Unfortunately this piece of history has not been recorded, so those who have tried to follow that model have had difficulty. I am partly responsible for this because I chose public anonymity at the time. Now however, I have decided that it is my duty to speak out publicly as a woman who decided to use her money for social change, even if I face some consequences which are due to the kind of stereotyping that puts me in the garden enjoying myself at the expense of the women and children in the garbage dump. Though that kind of hostility has made things more difficult it has not stopped me. I might ask my sisters however to turn their hostility (as I have) against the patriarchal system and not against wealthy women. Most of us are oppressed by the system too, and even if this were not the case, most of us share the values of other orientation that we all are encouraged to acquire as we are socialized into mothering. Our society belittles those values as unrealistic or self sacrificing but I believe we can do things for other people and for society at large without having to be either saints or fools. In fact I believe the need-satisfying, mothering way could be seen as an economic paradigm towards which we should shift, away from the exchange, ego oriented, giving-in-order-to-get paradigm that rules our society. But that too is a longer story.