



Engineering Life With Conscience

An interview with Cliff Lester May 2005

HM: As someone who was raised a Quaker do you want to talk about your upbringing and how you understood Quakerism when you were young?

CL: I was 10 years old when my parents became convinced. We lived in Chester, Pennsylvania. In Philadelphia yearly meeting when parents became members the children did also, automatically. I would say I was a typical little kid going to meeting and first day school. The children were in the meeting for the whole hour then and our family always sat on the back bench. Being there the whole hour was expected, I can't say it was really hard except once in a while when some of us would get the giggles. When I was about 13 my father had a problem with the meeting and stopped going for awhile. Since he wasn't going when I objected my mother said she couldn't make me go either. So for a year or so I didn't go but when he started back I did too. I wouldn't say that there were terribly spiritual things going on that I was aware of. There probably were but I didn't know.

When I was 13 or 14 it was wartime and I was ready to go into the army and would've loved to have been a pilot. Then when I was 16 I went to the Friends General Conference which at that time was held every other year in Cape May, New Jersey. At this one Bayard Rustin was speaking to the young Friends and I went and heard him. I came away from there a pacifist. I had a real epiphany, an opening, a sudden recognition that this was right. He was an amazing guy with amazing stories to tell about nonviolence and how to apply it. When I turned 18, I had to register with the selective service so I did rather than take the position of not cooperating with the government at all. Many did take the latter position, became nonregistrants and went to jail. I thought that so long as the law existed which allowed conscientious objection I should go ahead and register. Eventually after pulls and tugs with the local draft board it went through. That was in '48 or '49 during the Korean war. I was a student in college with a student deferment. Of course when I was graduated I was subject to the draft as a conscientious objector which meant that I'd have to do two years of alternative service.

I thought, okay, I'm going to get drafted so why don't I go to Europe with the American Friends Service Committee? If I'm drafted while away I'll say how about letting me stay here and do my two years of alternative service here? Of course it didn't work that way. I spent the summer in work camps in Germany and then came back and had to get a job. That took a little while because I was way out of phase, everybody had filled their

positions from the spring recruiting so there weren't as many openings. But I eventually got a job and of course then got drafted (laughs). So in June of '53 I started alternative service with the American Friends Service Committee in Mexico. That didn't thrill me much but it was all they could offer.

HM: So your government service was done through AFSC?

CL: Well it was and it wasn't. AFSC had gotten burned pretty badly during the second world war when it did run camps for the selective service. That's a long story but they were very unhappy and when they got out of it they said well, no more of that. What they did say was that I could go into the program just like anybody else and it could be alternative service. However they'd have nothing to do with reporting between me and the government. As far as where I was or anything else it was just between me and the selective service. That worked, the government allowed it so I spent two years and that's where I met Jean.

HM: How did it feel to have to deal with the draft board as a conscientious objector? Did you have so much support that it wasn't that difficult?

CL: Well the support I had was from the CCCO-the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors which was formed to assist and give information for people who felt they were COs. So I had that support. And it didn't seem too daunting at the time. The draft board interviews you and they turn you down. They always do, none of them want that blight on their record. So you appeal and finally some judge in Philadelphia had me up for an interview and I spent 15 minutes or a half hour, he said okay and that was the end of that.

HM: What kinds of things did you talk about?

CL: Frankly I can't remember a great deal about that interview. Generally I was saying that I was a Quaker and my beliefs and background said that I was not going to be able to kill anybody so I felt that I was a pacifist and I'd have to object to the war based on my religious beliefs. Not based on the quality of the war but just based on the fact that I believe there's that of God in every person and you can't take a life on that basis. The only thing I specifically remember was him saying "Well you believe in law and order--you don't disagree with having the police who of course are armed." And I had to say I didn't disagree with having police even though they could be quite lethal. I suppose it would be even better if police weren't armed like in Britain where they appear to get away with being largely unarmed. It

would certainly minimize the taking of life. No: that I could ever be one because I'd still have the same problem. In those days the police were all viewed in a much different light than how they're viewed these days in most circles. That's all I can remember him asking me, but I'm sure he asked me other things.

After hearing Bayard Rustin when I was 16, I knew I had a belief in pacifism, but I wasn't sure of its basis. That was something that came from right inside that I didn't need to justify. I kind of recognized that I ought to be looking for the "why", questioning my beliefs about God and Jesus. So I started out working with God to see what I believed and I'm still working on that. I think that my belief is that God is beyond our rational understanding and probably in some other dimension in a way. There isn't any way we can really understand that phenomenon but it's still there and still has impact. So I came to that pretty easily in a way. I'm still working on it because in the beginning I think I was trying to be a whole lot more scientific about it, the cosmos and forces—must be something here, just look at all the order in the universe. Since I was headed to be an engineer may explain that.

HM: Because of the chance of timing and gender I couldn't be drafted. If I had been, though, I don't think I'd be able to serve in the military because of my pacifist leanings. I feel conflicted about that, though, because my brother was an officer in the marines and if he died in combat I think I'd feel guilty about not having been in the same jeopardy he was in.

CL: I've always believed that I don't have the answers about what to do about the problems in the world relating to war and violence. The only thing that I was able to come to was what I believed and needed to do for myself. It may or may not apply for somebody else. I can't justify the position based on success, or some successful way of running the world. So you can't sort of hate the people who are in the marines, they think what they're doing is correct and right. But I don't, that's the problem.

HM: If you were somehow given the capacity to do so would you want to disband the military?

CL: Well in a practical, real world sense there isn't an easy solution like that. Sure, if you could disband all of the armies in the whole world and all of the insurgents and make it so none of the weapons would work, etc. But I think it would take a lot more than what we have as a country to disband an army and still exist. For one thing what would you do about our reputation? That would do us in almost immediately, I think. I think that's a question but I don't think anybody is doing or could do it. You just have to try to work away from where we are to where we want to get to gradually. Like in Iraq, I kind of agree—we've made that mess and if we literally just left I'm not so sure what the result would be. Maybe the staying is worse, though. Maybe we should just get out immediately. I don't think you can solve these problems that easily. I think the people working on alternatives to violence are taking the right kinds of steps but they're all on an individual level and there's an awful lot of people out there that don't get reached.

HM: It would be great if the decision makers could be helped to learn more about their enemies so it would be harder to take their lives, so killing them would be a more wrenching decision.

CL: But they wish it was easier. I think that's part of the problem, that it's the decision makers at the top that most need to be altered. And that would slowly move us away from these paths.

HM: Do you have thoughts about how to get a pacifist message into the world?

CL: I don't think there's ever a limit to the effort to try to do that. I'd say that mostly working with organizations like the AFSC hopefully moves us in that direction, those steps that can be made with other people. And the way you live your life. Those are probably the only ways I'd say you can be effective. That's what I've basically done in my life.

HM: Do you feel like your pacifism has affected many different areas of your life?

CL: I guess I'd say that in the beginning, back when I was starting out, I'd decided that I'd like to work for a company that was on the right side of things so I aimed at pharmaceuticals (I'm a chemical engineer). I did interview with a few before I went to Europe. The problem was since I was going to Europe they didn't want to offer me a job starting in September. So they said come see us when you get back. The problem is that that summer the pharmaceutical industry didn't do too well so by the time fall came there weren't any positions available and I wound up working for an oil company. That concerned me somewhat at the time. I told them that if we were going to be working on government contracts having to do with war I wouldn't be able to do that. They said no problem. This was the Atlantic Refining Company and they didn't have much in the way of government or military contracts at all. They said they had other Quakers working there and it wasn't a problem. And that worked, that satisfied me. It was a small, regional company and didn't have that kind of work. As we merged and a became larger and larger company there's no question that some of the materials, particularly jet fuels, were being sold to the military as well as the commercial market. But I never got into a position where I felt I was dealing directly with that. I maybe looked the other way, I can't be totally clear about it. By that time I was well established, I was part of the Company. I worked there for thirty seven and a half years.

HM: Were you working with the chemical make-up of different oils and fuels?

CL: No, I worked on the designing the managing the refining end of the business. Then I got into the logistics between supply and distribution of materials. Worked in that for a fair time and then wound up on the financial side in planning and performance analysis in the headquarters. So my engineering stopped fairly early on and I drifted away to the broader area of supply and demand.

HM: What do you think about the people who say we're going to run out of oil soon?

CL: Personally I believe in riding a bike, getting a Prius or developing a fuel cell car and getting off the dependence on fossil fuels. But I don't think we're going to run out of oil anytime soon. That isn't to say that in the long run we won't—it is a finite resource but there's an awful lot of it still. The directions we're taking as a country are not too swift. We used to have big gas guzzlers and then the embargo hit and the prices went up. Gasoline was short and all of the sudden people started thinking about efficiency and started buying relatively efficient cars. We went that route and then when prices stabilized the cars went back on that climb up. They had to have muscle—we got the SUV and now everybody's driving a truck. I think it's ridiculous. The oil companies aren't saying go out and do that. They don't have to. You can't build an oil refinery in this coun-

continued on page 9

Cliff Lester, continued from page 7

try anymore, can't be done. So the amount that can be produced is also limited. The oil companies would like the prices to be high, the difference between the cost and the price to be nice so they can make a profit. But they also have plenty of room to say we should be more efficient. For another thing the growth of the vehicles in this country is phenomenal so the demand is expanding even if you were to reduce the average consumption per vehicle. So the oil companies by and large can take a high road and talk about the environment and all that.

HM: Why can't they build refineries in this country? Because of environmental laws?

CL: Yeah, there's no way you could build anywhere here. It isn't that they're big polluters, it's that everyone wouldn't mind having it providing it isn't next to them. So you're not going to find any place where people will be happy to put up a refinery. They'd talk about pollution and there would be some--there's some with any kind of a factory. All you can do is improve and expand the limits of the physical size of the ones you already have. That's why there's such a big deal being made about the one in Bakersfield, I think Shell is trying to get rid of it. In that case the people want it to keep running because they aren't so worried about the environment as they are about their jobs and the local economies. There are a lot of things at play. In the meantime the engineers are out there trying to make what we've got work better and they have quite a bit. In fact the one we had up in Washington state, we doubled the capacity of it with basically the same equipment and some additions.

So the application of your beliefs is actually not so easy in real life. I mean we sit here in a nice house and wonder about how that fits our beliefs.

HM: Everyone needs somewhere to live.

CL: Well sure, but we could live in a tent.

HM: I felt conflicted for awhile about having a kid because of the global human population being too high. Eventually it occurred to me that population isn't the only issue, individual life satisfaction counts too and if having a child makes a person's life feel complete they should feel free to do that. I'd say the same about having a house.

CL: I guess that's one way of looking at it. Just try to stay below the average.

HM: Well is there anything you'd like to add?

CL: The only other area we haven't touched on is the present day relations to the meeting. I think that meeting is an important aspect of my life, it always has been, and it's probably because of the sense of a spiritual community that I feel committed to and I feel is committed to me. I think that makes the meeting a really important part of my life and so I go. I was saying to somebody about adult education--I don't pay a lot of attention to what's going to be on because I'm going anyway so I'll just see when I get there. I feel it ought to be supported and usually it's an interesting hour. I appreciate when we have our occasional retreats. I don't think of myself as a highly spiritual person, to tell you the truth. Jean takes care of that for me. She's right brain and I'm the left brain guy in this family. It's going to these retreats where I get a chance to be in a different place. The Wednesday night discussions, too. It's rather amazing in a way, the amount of interest those sessions are generating. I find that those kind of things help me broaden my spiritual base as much as it can be broadened. I'm not hidebound by it, if we miss it I don't feel like I'm in deep trouble or will fall apart but if we're in town we'll be there.☺