

Live Peace

Joy Balazo and Young Ambassadors for Peace

MARGARET REESON



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Foreword

I am thrilled that Margaret Reeson has told the remarkable story of Joy Balazo. One day sealed for me the importance of Joy's pioneering work.

It was Wednesday 25 February 2004. Thirty-five of us were meeting on the Waiheru military base near the Ambon Airport in a Young Ambassadors for Peace/Concerned Women of Maluku Workshop.

It seemed an impossible possibility that Muslims and Christians were there together to talk about peace – and this on a military base! What was even more extraordinary is that half those attending the workshop were young Muslims, some whose parents had been killed by Christians, and half were young Christians, some who likewise had had parents killed by Muslims.

The burnt-out mosques and burnt-out churches in the surrounding villages and in Ambon itself were mute witness to the violence that had left Muslims and Christians dead and injured. Even as we met, survivors were deeply suspicious of each other as a tentative peace held. The markets had re-opened. Life was slowly beginning to return to normal after the terrible Muslim-Christian clashes that had racked the Malukus for nearly four years.

I have never forgotten that workshop. There at Joy Balazo's invitation, there in the midst of make or break tension ... a miracle took place.

Joy had organised a way to tackle prejudice. We sat down together on the floor and in simple and playful ways did things together that helped us face what makes us human, the importance of our word and the nature of power. Slowly, the tension gave way, the suspicions eased, and in an amazing way we became one community. Then together, as the group shared, participants mapped the malicious way provocateurs from beyond had ripped their region apart.

It is the Wednesday night I remember best. The course was over for the day, the evening meal finished. Joy, her sister Menggay and I talked for hours in a little storeroom at the back of the meeting hall. First we shared the miracle of what had happened that day. And then we talked about how all this had come about. In this book you will read a much

longer and more detailed account of how Young Ambassadors for Peace came into being. But the key elements were there that night. They were not easily forgettable.

What stood out for me was the terrible time Joy had lived through in her earlier life in the Philippines. She had felt called to the task of researching and documenting human rights abuses, visiting sites where people had been murdered, making known to the wider world what was happening. The military were ‘salvaging’ those who stood for justice against the injustice of powerful forces in the Philippines under Marcos and then Aquino. She became a marked person. It took a while before this feisty woman acceded to her friends’ pleas to leave the Philippines. After she came to Australia, while still working for justice, she asked herself the most basic question of her life. Instead of reacting to injustice, how could she proactively work for a just peace? Instead of reporting the carnage of power and hate, how could she be part of building new communities of peace?

Slowly, in workshops like this, we were seeing the hard work involved in creating Young Ambassadors for Peace in some of the most difficult places in Asia and the Pacific. What changes we had seen in Christian and Muslim young people alike as they heard the call to be agents for peace, and not agents for hatred!

Over the years I have had the privilege as a minister to see miracles in the lives of many individuals. I had never seen so clearly what I saw that day – a miracle in the life of society: enemies becoming friends who work together for peace.

Two days later, flying back to Jakarta from Ambon, I was seated on the plane next to a Muslim woman. ‘What were you doing in Ambon?’ she asked, soon after the plane had taken off. I described to her what had happened in the Closing The Gap workshop. Muslims and Christians caught up in the destruction had found a way to plan for peace together. ‘Tell me more,’ she said. ‘We need to hear about this. It is so good.’

Joy Balazo has brought joy to so many people, giving them hope in impossible situations, building coalitions across seemingly intractable boundaries. It is my prayer that as you read this book you will thank God for the contribution of this amazing powerhouse of a woman to peace in our part of the world.

Rev. Professor Dean Drayton

Prologue

The small woman watched them arrive. She could feel the thud of her own heartbeat, the tension in her own body. What was she doing? Was this gathering of people a mistake?

One by one her guests came into the meeting room. A few were weary from flights through the night. They were astonished to be there at all, as their visas had been refused until the last moment. Some looked ill at ease and avoided the eyes of others. Some caught her eye and smiled or waved in recognition. Of all the strangers in the room, she was the only person who was familiar to them all. Beyond the wide windows the vista of hills flowed to the horizon in the olive, blue-purple and grey-green of the Australian bush, a landscape foreign to most of them. This location had been chosen because it was peaceful and neutral, but perhaps newcomers saw it as strange and unsettling.

Voices murmured tentatively, but the languages and accents sounded unfamiliar. Even those who spoke the same language may have come from an enemy tribe or faction. A few brave souls moved around the room, introducing themselves to others. It was not easy. Were there spies among them? Were they in danger?

What brought them together, this very mixed company from very different places, different languages, different religious beliefs and different conflicts? Each of their homelands knew violence and pain over years and decades: tribe against tribe, Christian against Muslim, indigenous people against later comers, military authorities against tribal people, faction against faction. These were people who understood the problems their people faced and longed to find ways to bring peace to communities where peace seemed to be an impossible dream.

She had always known that this was a risky business. It was a risk for her boss, who might wonder why he had been persuaded to apply substantial funds to such an uncertain enterprise. It was a risk to her own reputation if her plan was a very public failure. More importantly, some of the people who had trusted her enough to come to this place did not trust each other. They could not feel safe in the presence of traditional

enemies. Had she placed them in harm's way?

Each person in that meeting room had accepted the invitation to attend a workshop on peacemaking. They came from regions as unlike each other as Fiji and Burma, the Solomon Islands and Ambon in Maluku Province, Indonesia or Sri Lanka and the highlands of Papua New Guinea (PNG). The only things they had in common were that each of them came from a region where serious conflict seemed normal and each was committed to trying to find a way to peace. And, despite their initial nervousness, they trusted Joy Balazo, the small woman originally from the Philippines, who had invited them to come. She had met them in their homelands or communicated over months arranging for their attendance. She had won their confidence. Now there was a growing sense of excitement, of new possibilities. Joy said that they could become Young Ambassadors for Peace.

It was December 2001. These strangers and enemies from places in Asia and the Pacific had gathered in neutral territory, in a conference centre in quiet bushland on the outskirts of Canberra, Australia. In some ways they were a reflection of the ancient story of the ark in the great flood with its cargo of unlikely fellow travellers. Those who would not usually travel together were prepared to do something beyond reason because it gave hope for survival – and because God directed it.

This day was a long way, in time and direction, from where it all began. Or where it would go.

1

First Steps

The young girl was close to tears. Her older brothers and sisters were teasing her again.

‘Look at your skin.’ It was true. Her arm was the colour of milk chocolate and their arms were pale caramel. Joy knew that she was the baby of the Balazo family, the youngest of ten children, loved, cherished and protected in a household of privilege. But it was very disturbing to be told that in some way she was different from the rest of the family.

‘I think our father and mother bought you from the Muslims,’ a sister said. ‘That’s why your skin is darker than ours.’

Joy could not imagine who ‘the Muslims’ might be. She had never met a Muslim person, although many lived in other parts of her home island. All she knew was that they were outsiders, not good Catholics like her family. A thoughtless joke planted an idea in her young mind. Somehow she was different and did not quite belong – and that Muslims, whoever they were, were outsiders.

Joy Balazo lived with her family in the coastal town of Tudela on the island of Mindanao, one of the largest of the seven thousand islands that make up the archipelago of the Philippines. Her parents, Ulpiano Balazo and Fermina Galimpin, were prosperous landowners, very active with their extensive business at the corn and rice mill, community work and church affairs. Some of her older brothers and sisters she barely knew, as they were adult, married and had moved away by the time she was old enough to be aware of them. In the busy household, Joy was often left to her own devices in the care of the staff. She was happy to be independent and grew in confidence.

It was a time of new hope and confidence for the Philippines. The Pacific War that had reached Mindanao in 1942 was over, and the centuries of Spanish and then American rule over the islands of the Philippines had come to an end. Like many migrants across the Philippines, her family had moved from one region to another, in their

case from the island of Bohol to the island of Mindanao to settle and establish their business in the town of Tudela.

In many ways Joy had a strong sense of identity, despite the teasing of her sisters about the Muslims. She knew that her family was privileged and not poor. She knew that they belonged to the Christian majority in their region of Mindanao. She knew that her family was Catholic, not Anglican or belonging to the Protestant United Church of Christ of the Philippines; her parents did not approve of those other churches. Her family had a heritage from the hundreds of years of Spanish rule in the Philippines and were known as 'lowlanders' who had taken up coastal land; the indigenous tribal groups lived inland in the mountains. She was proud of her own regional language, although she spoke only English at school. There was great security in the care of her extended family, with wealthy grandparents who were generous to their youngest grandchild. Her parents were respected in the community where her father served as mayor and had established a school in their neighbourhood for local children. He was very serious about education and was strict about the study programs of his own children. Both parents were devout Catholics, giving much time, energy and commitment to their church, with respected priests and nuns as frequent visitors in their home. They valued honesty and were fair in their dealings with their workers.

Young Joy began to notice differences that had nothing to do with the colour of her skin. As a child, she loved to spend time with the children of the people who worked for her parents at the mill and the maids who worked in their house. With her two sisters Menggay and Chayong, who were nearest to her in age, these children were her closest friends. And yet these children were only allowed to enter her house by the back door and had to stay in the kitchen. After playing together for hours, the time would always come when she would go into the big house and her young friends would stay outside and go to their own small houses. This puzzled and confused her as a child. It did not seem right, but she did not know what questions to ask about it. Often on hot tropical nights she would choose to sleep on the mats in their part of the house with the two housemaids and the six women who worked in the mill, fascinated by their storytelling about their home island of Bohol and their scary stories about magic. But there was always a separation between those who ranked as people who could be invited to parties and dinners in the big house and those who served them.



Map 1.1: The Republic of the Philippines

One day at school some boys started to tease the girls. Joy picked up a stone and threw it at the boys, striking one boy who was a newcomer to the town and an outsider. Shouting and tears erupted and soon the school principal appeared to deal with the chaos. Joy knew that she had done something bad and should be punished. In the confusion some of her friends ran to tell her mother at their house nearby, and suddenly, there was her mother arriving in their car, the first car in that town, a large and imposing woman coming to protect her daughter. At the time Joy was grateful for the influence of a powerful family. Later she would wonder about the boy and his family who had been powerless and excluded.

Menggay, her older sister, was different in her own way. She, too, was a very independent girl. The whole family was very religious with faithful attendance at Mass, thoughtful fasting during Lent, participation in the special liturgies of the church year and commitment to raising funds for the work of their church. Menggay, even as a young girl, had a special love for those in the community who were in need, and she made close friends with the children of the poorest neighbours. This became a key part of her Christian experience. When the other children went out looking for anything they could sell to find money for food, Menggay went with them. On one occasion, when the other children were collecting empty bottles for sale, Menggay discovered entire cases of empty ones in the basement of her home, the leftovers from her parents' entertaining, and proudly presented them to her friends; her mother was not amused!

When Joy was a teenager, Menggay encouraged her to go with her to visit families living in poverty in shacks near the beach. The two girls would ask about their wellbeing and encourage them to come to church. One summer holiday, as members of the Catholic organisation Legion of Mary, Menggay took Joy to stay in a village that was several hours' walk away from their home. Their plan was to teach religion and prepare the village children for their First Communion. For Joy this was an eye-opener. The barefoot children did not have some of the advantages of her family, and even a simple gift of lollies was received with delight.

Education was important to the Balazo family, and Joy's parents expected their children to make the most of their schooling. Father was not satisfied with Joy's schoolwork at elementary school and thought

that she could do much better. Her older sisters helped her to prepare for high school with some extra tutoring. She attended San Isidro High School in her home town of Tudela. While she was at high school, Joy's Christian faith deepened. Every day she was surrounded by people who took their Catholic beliefs very seriously and she was influenced by the nuns. Even though not many other young people did this, Joy loved to call in at the church on her way to school to kneel and pray for a time. The ritual of the Mass was very meaningful to her; she believed that the consecration of the host was a profound time when the presence of God was very real and it was a time to talk with God. As the years of high school went on, she became more certain that God wanted her to enter the convent. Two of her older sisters had already become nuns. She would often talk about this with school friends and found that other girls, including her special friend Carmen, were also thinking about taking this path. They talked about the lives of the saints and Joy was impressed by the story of St Therese of the Child Jesus who was only about fourteen years old when she entered a convent in France. This seemed to Joy to be a wonderful thing. She was so moved by it that she wrote a letter to the mother superior of a convent saying that she believed that she had a vocation as a nun. The mother superior wrote back kindly, but encouraged her to complete her education before she took any further steps in that direction. In retrospect, Joy commented, 'I think that was part of God's guidance for my life.'

Joy's father had a dream for his community. He hoped to establish a hospital in the town of Tudela and arranged for one of his older daughters and a son to study medicine. When Joy was ready to begin university education, she thought at first that she would like to study medicine too. However, Ulpiano Balazo insisted that she should study pharmacy. Although she was not at all interested in pharmacy and still dreamed of entering the convent, she was very young and no match for her father's authority. She enrolled at the large University of San Carlos on Cebu Island. It was her first time living away from home.

Once there, Joy decided that she might be able to manipulate affairs. Later she recalled, 'The only way to get out of it was not to study. I passed all the other subjects but I failed chemistry. Chemistry was

one thing that was really important for a pharmacist!' At the end of the academic year Joy had to face her father. He was no fool. 'So, what do you *really* want to study?' he asked.

'A Bachelor of Arts, and then become a nun,' she answered.

For the next stage of her university education Joy completed a BA at the small Catholic Immaculate Conception College on Mindanao not far from home. The teachers were almost all nuns and priests from America, Ireland and elsewhere. English was the language used in school and her own language was not allowed in the classroom. 'We became little brown Americans,' Joy said later. She was able to board with a married brother and go home for weekends. Her vision of becoming a nun had not left her. Her sister Menggay shared that dream but encouraged Joy to take the first steps into that life ahead of her for fear that their father would block the way for his youngest child. They suspected that Ulpiano Balazo might object to four of his daughters entering a convent. It was a time when there were possible boyfriends for the lively, pretty Joy, but she was not interested. She had other plans.

It had always seemed clear to Joy that God was calling her to life and ministry as a nun. When at last, after what seemed like years of waiting, she flew to Manila to begin as an 'aspirant' with the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, Joy was excited and full of hope. She was twenty years old. The Order of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary was an international order of nuns who had arrived in the Philippines in 1912 as a community of contemplative-active nuns committed to lives of prayer and service in hospitals, schools and indigenous communities, with workers, farmers and both urban and rural poor people. Two older sisters had already joined this order and this was the order that her sister Menggay also hoped to join. For the first three months she joined other young women who were also aspiring to become nuns as they began a process of testing their vocation. When this period of preparation was complete, Joy was sent from Manila for novitiate training in Tagaytay City in the province of Cavite on the island of Luzon. Here she became a postulant and for the first time wore the black uniform of the postulant.

The rhythm of worship and work was as she had expected. The postulants worked in the kitchen, laundry, housecleaning or garden, studied French as this was a French order and followed the daily pattern

of prayer. Joy was impressed by the way her teachers insisted that simple work was of value. They said, 'Whatever you do, do it well.' After the community of university life that had been her world until recently, the disciplines of the novitiate were very different. There were rules to be learned and theology to be studied. A big sign read 'SILENCE' and the young women struggled with the temptation to talk as they did their practical work, waiting for the evening when they were free to chat during recreation while they did their sewing. Later, when Menggay joined Joy in the novitiate, her rebellious sister did not bend easily to the convent rules and sometimes carried a 'Silence' sign around in front of her, talking as she went.

One lesson by the senior sister impressed Joy. Sister said,

Always be conscious of what you are doing. Be present in that moment. When you are talking with people, they need to know that they are important to you. They will know if you are taking them seriously and attending to what they are saying to you. We are not there for our own purposes but for others.

Joy never forgot this and learned to listen to the real needs of others with attention and empathy.

After a period as a postulant, Joy took the next step in the journey. In a solemn ceremony she became a novice. The black uniform of the postulant was exchanged for the white habit of the nuns, her glossy black hair was shorn very short to be hidden under her veil, a crown of flowers was placed on her head and she was given a new name. Her original name had been Concepcion Barbara Galimpin Balazo, known by the family name of Joy. Now she became Sister Ludivina Gracia – 'divine light'. (Her sisters who had preceded her into the convent were known as Sister Lucilla and Sister Lucinda, and when her sister Menggay joined her later, she became known as Sister Leonora.) The veil and the white habit of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary were a profound sign to her that she was moving in the direction where God wanted her to be, and as Sister Ludivina she was determined to do her very best to serve God. In time Sister Ludivina/Joy came to the moment when she made her profession as a nun, a significant step to which she had been moving for years.

To her own surprise, her new work as a professed nun began to make her feel unsettled rather than the contentment she had expected. Her first assignment was to the Stella Maris School on the island of Cebu, a Catholic school for girls who mostly came from privileged homes. Her role in participating in their life of privilege did not seem to be what she had imagined when she had dreamed of serving God. At the school, she soon found that the schoolgirls liked to come to her with their problems. She was young and understanding, and often girls would come to talk and begin to weep over their problems. But just when Joy was comforting and counselling them, the bell for prayers would ring and she would have to obey it, no matter what state the girls were in. She began to feel distressed about this pattern and thought, 'This is not right. God wants me to listen to the problem of this little girl but I have to drop it to go and pray. Is this what I really want?'

A new assignment brought Joy back to the sprawling city of Manila and the comfort and security of the community of the large convent associated with an orphanage. With two senior nuns she was appointed to carry out basic healthcare in a dispensary in a slum area of the city. This was a part of the city that she had never seen before and the poverty shocked her. She followed the other nuns along narrow lanes and alleyways to the simple dispensary where they attended to the basic health needs of those who came. In the afternoon, the three nuns made their way deeper into the slum to visit families. Crowded together, thousands of families tried to make their homes from rusted corrugated iron, salvaged scrap and plastic. There were signs that people did their best to keep their children clean and their places tidy, but there was no electricity, no clean running water and no effective sanitation. In the steamy heat, the stench of piles of rotting rubbish and human waste filled the air. The women walked carefully along boards over streams and beside the river where so many primitive structures had been built, and they watched drifting debris floating past in polluted water. In heavy tropical rains these insecure houses would often be flooded, leaving mud underfoot as the water receded. As they entered dwellings to speak to families, they were welcomed with respect as women of God but Joy felt uncomfortable. Little children with beautiful faces stared at her curiously. Women tried to make a space for the nuns in the crowded space where everything they possessed was arranged in boxes and hanging from lines overhead in their small shelter. These people were

hungry and impoverished, helpless and desolate, without a voice in a harsh world. It seemed almost indecent to intrude into their lives. The nuns brought no hope for change, no comfort other than their presence and even the promise of prayer sounded hollow. In the evening, back in the safety of the convent, Joy showered off the stains and pollution of a day in the slum then went to the dining room for a fine meal with meat and dessert.

Memories of the sights of the day haunted her. 'How could this be right?' she asked herself. The pattern of working in the dispensary and then visiting households continued but it was always confronting. The discrepancy between the wealth of the convent and the people they met each day troubled her. As a nun she could always escape back to comfort and protection. She thought, 'This is very convenient if you want to hide from the world. But I want to go beyond these walls. Of course it is a very secure place here. And it assures me that I am safe to go to heaven!'

The daily rhythm of prayer, the beauty and peace of the worship in the convent chapel, the attention to God, and the service to the community – all these things were what Joy had imagined and hoped for in the years that led to becoming a nun. And yet there was still some unease. She was not comfortable when people in the community tended to treat the nuns with extreme honour. 'They adore us!' she thought, and that did not seem right either. The work of prayer of many devout nuns was significant and powerful and yet she was dimly aware that there was a divide between the calm of the chapel and increasing instability in the streets outside that would soon lead to martial law under President Ferdinand Marcos. She did her work well and loved to be responsible for the preparation of the chapel for worship, but the sense of unease was growing. Her love of God had not disappeared, but she did not think, after all, that she was meant to be a contemplative nun. She seemed to be in the wrong place. The inequalities in society were very disturbing, and although Joy did not know how to confront this, she began to feel that there must be some more practical way, a more concrete approach to the fragmentation of the world into classes.

Each month the nuns spent time with the mother provincial to reflect on their work and life of faith. At one meeting the wise Sister Avelina Alcaneses recognised Joy's unhappiness and challenged her about this.

'What is troubling you?'

'I am not happy any more staying where there is a big gap. There is

such a discrepancy between our lives in this wealthy convent and the lives of the people in the slums.' It was hard to express what was on her mind but she heard herself saying, 'This is not the right place for me. I want to leave.'

After she had left the room of the mother provincial, Joy was shocked by what she had just said. What was she doing? She was taking a great risk to leave the security of the convent and would need to have a great deal of courage to step into an unknown future. She had no idea what she would do next. How could she dare to think that she might be able to serve God better in some other way? Perhaps her parents would be so disappointed that they would reject her. What would the other nuns think of her as she walked away from her vows? By withdrawing from their community, she was creating extra work for the leaders of the international Order of the Missionary Sisters of Mary. One of her older sisters, Sister Lucille, had already taken the step of leaving the order but two others, Sister Lucinda (Chayong) and Sister Leonora (Menggay) remained. What would they think? She could not bring herself to tell Menggay until the last minute, but Menggay suspected that something was going on.

On the day that Joy was to leave, Menggay had to visit the mother provincial in her room. Stooping to pick up something that she had dropped, she saw her sister Joy's suitcase under the table and knew that she was leaving. That day, when Joy came to say goodbye to the sisters, she no longer wore the white uniform with the veil to cover her head but was dressed in civilian clothes with her very short stubbly hair visible. The sisters crowded around her, weeping. She was loved by them and had been a good and faithful nun. They would continue to care for her and pray for her, even though they had no idea where God would lead her.

With a plane ticket back to Mindanao in her possession, Joy picked up her bag and walked away. She knew that she would need all her courage to face a very uncertain future. A simple step would be to get a decent haircut so that she did not look so strange. The more difficult step would be to find out where God wanted her to be, if not in the convent, and how she was to live. Sister Ludivina had been left behind and now it was simply Joy.