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Phyllis Taylor Speaks on Issue of Empowerment

By Moira Taylor

Cyrus Jackson introduced her as someone who has a strong vision of a better world for all people. As Phyllis Taylor addressed Guilford's freshmen class last Wednesday, in one speech during her two day visit, she seemed to convince the audience of this view.

Taylor, a Quaker visitor, works as a nurse counselor at an urban medical center in Philadelphia. She is a founder of "Witness for Peace" in Nicaragua and serves on both the national executive committee and the national steering committee for the organization. She also serves on the "National Council of the Fellowship of Reconciliation" and has been an active member of "Amnesty International" for over 10 years, including formerly serving as a board member.

In addition to two talks on Wednesday, Taylor held a discussion session with students organizing the campus chapter of "Amnesty International" on the morning of Thursday September 11. The Women's Center also sponsored a Thursday afternoon lecture entitled "Women as Social Activists," in which Taylor discussed much of her background and the various factors which influenced and played into her life as an activist.

Focusing on the issue of silence at the IDS lecture, Taylor examined positive and negative ways of using silence in dealing with our lives and the world around us. She explained the trouble she, a Jewish youth living in New York during the 50's had understanding the silence she



Phyllis Taylor

photo by Rachel Rumsey

saw both in Europe, and in the United States. Europeans, although threatened, seemed to accept what they saw through fear, she said. Conversely, Americans though virtually unthreatened, and who needn't fear being taken from their home, were also silent, she explained. In all of this, she vowed that she would not be a silent person.

In her commitment to non-violence, Taylor also emphasized the importance of what she called "walking the talk." The necessity she expressed, was for people to "put their feet behind what they say." Actions, she said, could range from writing a letter to free a prisoner of conscience to marching for a cause. The theme of Taylor's Wednesday night speech entitled "Human Rights: One Group's Response," "Amnesty International Celebrates 25 Years," ran along the same

lines. Addressing many members of Greensboro's Amnesty International chapter and members of the Religious Coalition to Reverse the Arms Race," Taylor focused on AI's mandates, functions and structure, in addition to raising thoughts on the horror of human rights abuses.

Taylor outlines "Amnesty International's" four mandates. The first mandate is and continues to be, to work on behalf of prisoners of conscience, for example through local adoption groups. Secondly, they work to provide a fair and speedy trial for individuals. Taylor explained that people can be detained without charge in some 50 countries, and elaborated on several cases and stories of "unjustly held individuals." Their third mandate is to work towards the abolition of both torture and the death penalty.

Although AI's criteria relies on an individual's commitment to non-violence, exception is often taken in cases of torture. Using "urgent action" methods, the group pleads to put a stop to the torture, but won't fight for a prisoner's freedom if they have been involved in violence. Their last focus is on disappearances. Working in the health care field, Taylor explained the essential need for a love one "to know that someone is dead to be able to go on. She went on to say that disappearances are hard because of this; people are stuck not knowing the status of a husband, child, boyfriend, or sibling.

Obviously affected by the subject of torture, Taylor relayed several chilling images in lieu of explaining AI's campaign to stop it. The abuse of children, which Taylor

described as "unimaginable," is one focus where AI publishes materials "which will touch people and move people to action. . . Torture is such an abomination," she continued, "that torturers should not have any safe haven, anywhere."

Since AI has focused solely on the four mandates, Taylor believes its credibility has been maintained. She feels the organization's accomplishments through the influence of the AI members "has created an awareness of human rights abuses that no other organization has done."

Again stressing her point of the dangers of remaining silent, Taylor emphasized the "need to be concerned and speak out for people all over the world without getting discouraged, because 'it's easy to want to turn off and away.'" She added that "human rights transcend all national boundaries."

Taylor concluded Wednesday night by illustrating the need for us to work together to bring about change. Taylor made up a type of Aesop fable, where a squirrel asks a bird how much a snowflake weighs. The evidence of their weight comes when the three million some odd snowflake falls and breaks the branch. Taylor also described one woman's letter writing efforts, and how the prisoner's (who she sought to release) file was two inches thick with her letters. Therefore he was more of a burden than anything, so the government released him. Pulling together strong images representative of that thought, she said hopes were that we "may all become snowflakes and typists and add light to the prisons around the world."