

PEACE ARENA

Theory vs. Practice

In each Newsletter, the Peace Arena offers a space for discussion between scholars and practitioners as they comment on a selected quote. This issue we feature: Valerie Rosoux, Université Catholique de Louvain and Brandon Hamber, University of Ulster and Director of INCORE. The selected quote comes from Duncan Morrow's article "Seeking Peace amid the Memories of War: Learning from the Peace Process in Northern Ireland," from Robert Rothstein's edited volume *After the Piece: Resistance and Reconciliation*:

"Reconciliation," according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, means "to make friendly again after an estrangement" and "to make acquiescent or contentedly submissive to something previously disagreeable".... Classical peacemaking focuses on the first definition, with its emphasis on mutual friendship and the making of new relationships on all sides. Politics ... has often seen reconciliation in the second sense, as something the loser in a conflict must do to come to terms with reality.

BY VALERIE ROSOUX



Duncan Morrow's quotation shows how ambivalent the notion of reconciliation is. On the one hand, most official representatives, scholars, and NGO workers consider reconciliation as the ultimate achievement in societies previously marred by violence. On the other hand, victims or their relatives largely distrust this

notion. Many of them feel bitterness towards what they perceive as an "indecent" injunction to reconcile with their enemies. Rather than a strategy to move forward, reconciliation is perceived as mere rhetoric that does not do proper justice to their sufferings.

The gap between these attitudes underlines a tension that cannot be avoided when speaking about reconciliation: The legitimate need to look forward at a collective level risks ostracising people who are permanently traumatized by the conflict. This tension does not detract from the significance of efforts made to bring about a rapprochement between former adversaries. Nevertheless, it means that the irreversible character of certain trauma cannot be underestimated. These festering wounds—physical as well as mental—are at the origin of an intense hatred that must be taken seriously. I will always remember the eyes of a Colombian woman who tragically told me, "Don't touch my hatred. That is the only thing that's left. They took all I had—except for my hatred."

Is reconciliation always possible, or even necessary, in every instance? It is futile and counterproductive to call for reconciliation regardless of the circumstances. I would personally call for a less ambitious view. Rather than expecting a process that entails forgiveness and harmony, I would insist on the importance of setting achievable aims (coexistence is already a remarkable goal after mass atrocities) and being realistic in terms of timing (changes in this area do not take years but generations). A maximalist conception of reconciliation addresses our need for hope and closure. But does it help them?

BY BRANDON HAMBER



There is a view, as outlined by Morrow, that reconciliation aims at rebuilding fractured relationships after a conflict. This objective is pursued through dialogue, sharing stories, mediation, or other peace-building activities that convene individuals, groups, or communities. The purpose of such activity is to foster those deep and lasting connections across the society considered essential to sustainable peace.

It is challenging to think of political entities engaging in such work, as the Morrow quotation indirectly implies. In politics, claims Morrow, reconciliation has a harder edge and reconciliation is more about the loser becoming "contentedly submissive" with the victor after a conflict ends.

Relationships at all levels matter following political conflict, as they determine whether and how the progress to peace and stability will be made. In a divided society, building a new road is never simply a technical task—it invariably requires negotiation and discussion about the benefits for each actor. Inevitably, harms due to past violence, even in the most mundane of policy decisions, will surface during that process.

Reconciliation is not about a simple decision to cooperate, or designing processes so former adversaries can work together with the long-term aspiration that deeper connections will follow. This could result in a forgive-and-forget mentality or, if Morrow is right, an approach akin to getting on with "negative peace" in a resigned manner. This approach is not conducive to long-term stability or what I understand reconciliation to be.

In the short-term, coexistence and cooperation might be all that is possible. However, if lasting peace is to be guaranteed, we cannot avoid addressing relationships in a deliberate and strategic way. Justice, apology, reparations, acknowledgement, and healing are part of this process—issues that are not separate from reconciliation but central to it.

Brandon Hamber's Response to Valerie Rosoux

It is, of course, as Valerie Rosoux asserts, counterproductive to call for reconciliation regardless of circumstances. No one approach should be imposed without consideration of the local context. I have routinely warned of "false reconciliation" whereby the word is used expediently by politicians to whitewash the past or to belittle victims' pain or calls for justice in the name of peace. As a concept, "closure" is unhelpful as we can never close off memories of mass violations. We have to learn to live with them both as societies and individuals. Unfortunately, to do this, especially in contexts of civil war and internal strife, interaction with the other is often inevitable. Dealing with relationships is part of the painful and challenging process of coming to terms with the past; to say otherwise reduces issues such as healing and justice to the intrapsychic or interpersonal. This is an acontextual way of understanding harm and restoration. ■

Valerie Rosoux's Response to Brandon Hamber

Brandon Hamber is right to emphasize the importance of interpersonal relationships. For even if a rapprochement seems necessary to the representatives of each party, it cannot be imposed by decree. Violent conflicts provoke an infinite series of individual fires that need to be extinguished one by one. The response to past atrocities is ultimately an individual one. Far from being reduced to a Manichean tension between hatred and forgiveness, this individual response brings to the surface deep sadness, fear, loss of trust and hope, and other emotions, which may result in calls for justice and accountability.

Therefore it might be useful to question our own assumptions. Is the aim to distinguish between "good" (resilient) victims and "bad" (resentful) victims or to define a new social contract? It is if—and only if—the diversity of reactions is taken seriously that one can finally see an end and a beginning. ■

Reference: Hamber, B. (2014). Reconciliation. US Institute of Peace Insight Newsletter. (Fall 2014). USIP: Washington DC.