

PEACEWORK

For a Future to be Possible: Bosnian Dialogue in the Aftermath of War

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Three years ago, shortly after the cessation of the Bosnian War, I was pulled to Bosnia by the determination and vision of a Bosnian Muslim woman refugee. With the aid of a translator shouting over the static of a Bosnian phone connection, Emsuda implored me to share my skills as a healer and peacebuilder with the women of Northwestern Bosnia. "Please come to Bosnia. Help us rebuild our lives."

Karuna Center for Peacebuilding provides education and training in conflict transformation, reconciliation, and non-violent social change. We often work with communities in transition and in regions



Serb educator Nada and Muslim educator Alija struggling through a painful moment in interethnic dialogue. Photo: John Mottern

torn by war and violence. To operate respectfully and in partnership, we enter other cultures and conflicts carefully. Emsuda's invitation matched our mandate. Her connection to organizations close to our vision, such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation, paved the way for our first 1997 trip. Our hearts responded to Bosnia. Our experiences there reinforced our decision to engage.

In the years since, Karuna Center has developed Projekt Dijkom, the Project for Dialogue and Community-Building, offering education and training in partnership with the Foundation for Communi-

ty Encouragement, a Seattle-based NGO. FCE community-building leader Ann Hoewing and I currently facilitate seminars for educators three times yearly in two Bosnian cities: one Muslim, the other Serb. Each trip to Bosnia includes dialogue workshops, follow-through conversations with former participants, meetings with educational administrators, and vigilant crisis management.

The work that Karuna Center offers in Bosnia has evolved over the years as we closely follow the pace and guidance of our local partners. From an early emphasis on trauma healing and organizational development with Muslim women leaders, our participants asked us to help them contact their former friends and colleagues: Serb women currently living across the official Inter-Entity Boundary Line. The Muslim women wanted to reconnect with their neighbors as a cautious first step toward repatriation.

The paired cities, Muslim Sanski Most and Serbian Prijedor, with a combined population of about 160,000, once housed Serbs and Muslims, plus a smaller percentage of Croats, without regard to ethnicity. Under Tito, ethnic identity became a relic from the past, replaced with Brotherhood and Unity, his slogan for a united Yugoslavia. In fact, participants report that examining past history, especially past hatreds and atrocities, was a punishable offense. During the 1992-95 Bosnian war, however, with Tito dead and Milosevic in command, Prijedor was "ethnically cleansed" of Muslims, who faced expulsion, incarceration in camps, or death. Many of those Muslims who survived currently live in Sanski Most, just 36 kilometers away from land that may have belonged to their families for generations. As the war came to a close, Serbs living in the ethnically-mixed Sanski Most region also lost their ancestral homes as they fled to Prijedor in the Republika Srpska to live in safety with other Serbs.

Criminality and brutality took hold in Prijedor as they did elsewhere in former Yugoslavia. Homes were pillaged and dynamited, mosques decimated, livestock and farmlands destroyed. Worse still, Prijedor gained a reputation for operating

concentration camps early in the Bosnian war. Some Muslim participants in our inter-ethnic seminars are survivors of those camps: Omarska, Trnopolje, Keraterm. With this history, with this house-by-house destruction of people and property, why would the Muslim women seek out their Serb neighbors? And why would they want to reside there again, among the ruins and ghosts?

Unlike most Americans, Bosnians live deeply rooted in family, land, and place. Homes are often multi-generational, expanding to accommodate new members and handed down through the years. Refugee Bosnians in our groups actively fantasized reclaiming and rebuilding their beloved homesteads. Despite the tragedy, or in defiance of the tragedy, their vision of return kept hope alive through the years of exile and grief. The Muslim women now hoped that dialogue with Serb women would help them understand the havoc. Perhaps dialogue would ease their way home.

After careful reflection, we agreed to meet with Serb women in Prijedor to explore bi-communal dialogue. However, very few Serb women would risk encountering the Muslims. We imagine that the danger was too great both in terms of physical safety and emotional self-protection. Many women likely stood aside as the violence escalated; few risked their own lives to become rescuers. Now Serb women were being invited to an impossible conversation, and most declined.

A few brave Serb women, however, participated in a five-day dialogue group. The women on both sides were fragile and overwhelmed by emotions. They did their best to create bonds of empathy based on their mutual despair, common history as Yugoslavs, and shared fate as women victims of a war they did not invite and could not control. Out of their concern for the next generation, they suggested that we work with Muslim and Serb educators, whose attitudes and behaviors will partially determine the success of future repatriation and reintegration of community.

Their advice led to the development of Projekt Dijkom for educators from Prijedor and Sanski Most. We secured en-

dorsements from the Ministers of Education of the two political entities, Republika Srpska and Bosnian Federation, so that Projekt Dijakom would be protected by official recognition and sanction. Initially, educators participated hesitantly, but their mission in shaping the future provided a common frame for building relationships.

We have now facilitated seven inter-ethnic educators' seminars, with more on the horizon in coming years. Each dialogue seminar lasts three to five days and welcomes about 25 educators, in a mix of Serb and Muslim teachers, school counselors, and administrators, both new and returning participants. We have also started our first training seminar to prepare a selected group of Serb and Muslim educators as future project leaders and dialogue facilitators. Responsibility for Projekt Dijakom will shift to local facilitators as they strengthen their ability to confront their deeply conflicted identities, prejudices, and post-traumatic war wounds.

Each inter-ethnic gathering of educators feels like another small miracle to me. Remembering their extremely recent history, I can hardly imagine how we can sit in the circle together, let alone conduct rational conversations. But we do, step by step, despite denial, revisionist history, blame, and evasion, let alone multiple traumas and unprocessed grief. Each day of the workshop we remain in dialogue, facing the past in order to have a future, and learning the theories and skills of communication and peacebuilding.

The long-term goals of Projekt Dijakom include sensitizing a significant number of educators in the two school districts in multi-cultural tolerance and socially responsible behaviors, so as to make repatriation possible for those Muslim and Serb families who wish to return home. We hope participants will use their communication and conflict resolution skills to address past injustices and perceptions of history, strengthen cross-border cooperation, and promote what we have named "welcoming schools."

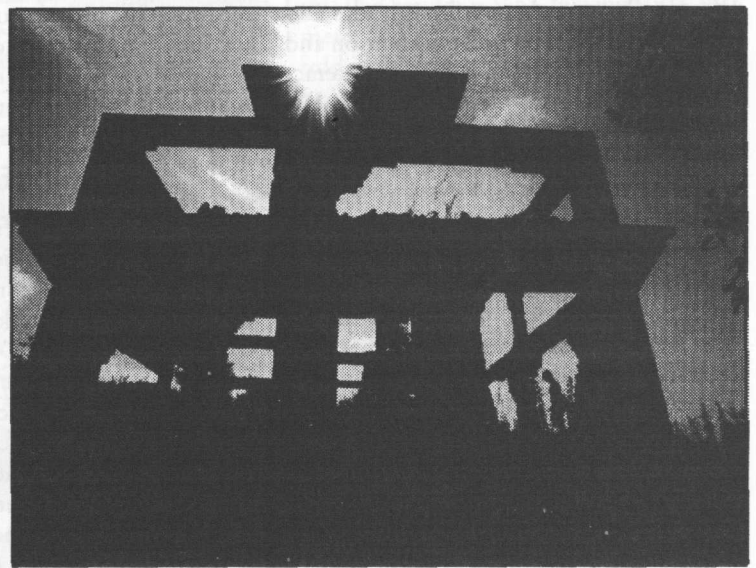
Our teaching methods are participatory and innovative. Accustomed to traditionally structured classrooms, teachers sometimes replicate our democratic and collaborative styles in their classrooms. We present issues of group process and civic responsibility new to Bosnians educated under Yugoslavia's Communism. After my

presentation of the cycles of violence and reconciliation at a recent workshop, a Serb teacher commented that these concepts ought to be taught on Serbian television.

Workshops are designed to provide a safe container for the wide spectrum of feelings present in the group. We observe participants testing safety, becoming vulnerable, and self-disclosing as they feel trust. Slowly, Serbs and Muslims who have segregated themselves begin ethnically mixed conversations, acknowledging together the enormous post-war problems and the long road toward restoration and healing.

We pay close attention to the rhythms of the group, shifting our agendas to match their emerging needs. Often a crisis erupts, challenging us to design an intervention on the spot. The group crisis may be a sharp expression of ethnic prejudice or blame, an issue of member dominance or withdrawal, an inappropriate verbal attack, or a dispute about history and memory. Each crisis becomes an opportunity to examine issues of individual and collective authority and responsibility in Bosnia, critical concerns in this postwar period of establishing civil society.

We encourage participants to dialogue rather than debate, to accept divergent perspectives, to identify both common ground and differences, to soften rhetoric and emphasize feelings, to behave respectfully, and to address past issues with as much honesty as they can manage. We alternate the focus between their responsibilities as educators for modeling tolerance and their roles as human beings caught in their own process of grief, rage, prejudice, and fear. Although it is emotionally safer for participants to focus on their dilemmas as educators outside the dialogue group, we observe how much learning



Emsuda stands on the rim of a destroyed home in her demolished village of Kozarac, a Muslim community near Prijedor, now inside the Bosnian Serb Republic. Photo: John Mottern

develops in each moment of contact between Serb and Muslim group members.

We know that fear, hurt, and historical grievances fuel communal aggression. Deeply wounded people often become caught in cycles of anger and grievance fueled by ideology and mythology. Politicians and media play on these historical memories, contributing to endless cycles of revenge and counter-violence. All of these wounds, beliefs, myths, and traumas are present in the dialogue. As facilitators we must be allies to Muslims and Serbs, encouraging them to recognize the suffering of others and to express their own needs in ways that do not perpetuate revenge. At the same time, we must guard against denial or revisionism about the Bosnian War, in which not all suffering was equal and where there were victims and perpetrators, rescuers and bystanders.

We believe that shifting from a culture of war to a culture of peace demands initiative and engagement at all levels of society. Change will not come through educators or community leaders alone, nor will it occur through politicians without the consent of their constituents. Bosnian civic and governmental leaders across ethnic lines must be the primary actors in building sustainable peace in Bosnia.

Movement toward a well-rooted and sustainable peace in Bosnia calls for a transformation in the severed relationships between the ethnic groups. Without that, the Dayton Accords and other official agreements will continue to be sabotaged by the

people. Postwar changes in attitudes and behaviors require conscious intention and continuous reinforcement to counteract patterns of hatred, blame, and counter-violence. Strategies like sustained dialogue encourage and reinforce the shifts required to establish new social behaviors. Educators represent a critical sector within Bosnian society. We know their acceptance of each other as Serbs and Muslims in North-west Bosnia is crucial to a sane future for this region. We also acknowledge that their tragic history makes every inter-ethnic conversation an act of courage and an experience of grace.

As we reflect on the series of seminars already completed and look toward the next two years of continued dialogue and community-building, we see both positive and challenging patterns. Plagued by their traumas, histories, and current nationalist mythologies, defensiveness falls away slowly and unevenly. We have no yardstick to

measure the pace of progress, nor can we account for the myriad social pressures within families and communities that press against change. From our own experiences as Americans we recognize the tenacity of racism and prejudice in the individual and collective psyche. Thus we note and affirm each positive shift of attitude, deviation from dominant ideology, and gesture of warmth and reconciliation. Despite the slow pace and backsliding, there are triumphs. "Graduates" of our program initiated an inter-ethnic educators' group and enthusiastically teach newly acquired skills to students and colleagues. In the future, as families repatriate in both directions, we know that educators from Projekt Dijakom will reach out their hands in welcome, modeling a future where conflicts are transformed by dialogue, kindness, and mutual respect. ☪

School for International Training: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures (CONTACT)

CONTACT provides training for conflict resolution in intergroup, communal, and public life and takes a participatory, experiential approach to the training. Participants come from countries all around the world, and can choose from two programs: the Summer Institute is a 2-3 week residential program, and the Graduate Certificate program combines a 4-week residential with coursework and a seminar to follow.

For information: CONTACT, Center for Social Policy and Institutional Development, School for International Training, Kipling Rd. POB 676, Brattleboro VT 05302-0676; 802/258-3339; cspid@sit.edu; www.sit.edu/conflict

The Long Road Home: a slideshow about post-war Bosnia. The Long Road Home is a presentation about the return of refugees to the Bosnian town of Kozarac. The slideshow, given by peace activist and writer Claire Schaeffer-Duffy, focuses on the domestic destruction and the role women play in reconstruction. To arrange for a presentation of The Long Road Home, contact: Claire Schaeffer-Duffy, Saints Francis & Therese Catholic Worker, 52 Mason St., Worcester MA 01610; 508/753-3588

The Continuing Agony of East Timor

After the August 30 referendum, when the East Timorese people voted overwhelmingly for independence from Indonesia, hundreds of thousands of East Timorese were brutally murdered or driven from their homes by Indonesian military and paramilitary forces. Many were forced to go to West Timor; the UN mission reports that 100,000 have been relocated to other parts of Indonesia. The humanitarian and security situations remain severe, despite the fact that an international force is in place and the Indonesian legislature has recognized the results of the referendum. A firm US policy based on the rights of the Timorese people rather than US economic and geopolitical interests in Indonesia could have prevented this humanitarian disaster. The scale of the crisis and the nature of US involvement in this situation demand that we respond.

Action #1: Pick up your phone. Tell your representatives that you feel strongly about the humanitarian crisis in East Timor and support the struggle for independence. Two bills are under discussion in Congress. In the Senate, S.1568 suspends economic assistance until the results of the August

30, 1999 referendum vote in East Timor have been implemented. In the House, HR. 2895—the East Timor Self-Determination Act—would support independence for East Timor and “lock in” the sanctions imposed on Indonesia.

The Congressional switchboard number is (202) 224-3121. Ask to speak with the legislative aide for foreign policy. Tell your congressperson that these sanctions must remain in place until:

- The refugees in West Timor have been voluntarily repatriated to East Timor;
- The free flow of humanitarian aid and the security of the internally displaced in East Timor have been guaranteed;
- The Indonesian armed forces have fully and verifiably withdrawn, including the Special Forces Kopassus;
- The militias have been fully disarmed and disbanded;
- The UN transitional authority has been allowed to fulfill its mission to facilitate self-determination for East Timor.

For how to contact your representatives, please go to www.visi.com/juan/congress. If you do not know your representative's name, you can visit

www.congress.org and enter your address and zip code. If the office has not already co-sponsored the East Timor Self-Determination Act, ask the aide to obtain a copy of HR.2895 (for the House of Representatives) from Rep. Patrick Kennedy or S.1568 (for the Senate) from Sen. Russell Feingold. Emphasize that you will call back to learn the legislator's decision.

Action #2: Agitate, demonstrate, and educate. Write to your legislators and local media. Remember that powerful US and international institutions bear much of the responsibility for the tragedy of East Timor. Read the alternative progressive media to learn more about how militarism and corporate greed can work to block grassroots democracy and peace and justice (both at home and abroad). Talk to friends, neighbors, and community organizations. Get involved with ETAN, Mobilization for Survival, Grassroots International, the American Friends Service Committee, or your campus peace and justice group. When US leaders facilitate oppression abroad, we need to raise the social costs of their actions at home.