

## When the Guns are Silenced: Social Healing and Peacebuilding in War-recovering Communities

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I am pleased to be invited to this conference. As an American at a European conference concerned with peace, I want to acknowledge my appreciation for the recognition by European countries of our global interdependence, and by your governments' willingness to commit resources toward the solution of global problems. I am currently more hopeful that the US will begin to behave as a responsible member of the global community, and thus glad to be here to think together about sensitive and skillful approaches to postwar recovery.

What binds us at this conference is our common work as psychologists. Our profession imbues us with a particular concern for the causes and consequences of assaults on the human person individually and collectively, and the challenges of both healing from these wounds and preventing further suffering. Over many decades, my attention has been especially riveted by those human behaviors that lead us to prejudice, fear, and enmity toward identified others or outsiders, and the disastrous end-point of those distorted beliefs in war and armed conflict. I work toward the day when we human beings can lift the delusive veil of separation to discover our radical interdependence. My engagement as a peacebuilder is ultimately toward that end.

This morning I will present a model or framework entitled: *Breaking the Cycle of Revenge; Moving toward Reconciliation*. After we reflect on the framework together, I will talk about our approach to utilizing *Breaking the Cycle* in postwar and divided communities. To follow, we will look at how the framework interfaces with the contact hypothesis first posited by Gordon Allport half a century ago, and then end with describing how we utilize the model at our international peacebuilding training program, which is named CONTACT.

We use *Breaking the Cycle of Revenge; Moving toward Reconciliation* frequently in our work with war-recovering communities, and people seem to find themselves and their story embedded in the model. In Republika Srpska, the Serbian component of still-divided Bosnia, an educator suggested I present the model on Serb television. In Israeli-Palestinian workshops, participants seized upon it immediately for translation into both languages, as they did in Azerbaijan, Rwanda, and elsewhere.

As you can see, the diagram has a closed circle depicting the endless cycles of revenge, and an open arc leading toward reconciliation. Olga Botcharova, a Russian woman who in the early 1990's worked in Croatia, developed the concept, based on her observation of long held grievances and historical memories manifesting over time in cycles of revenge. In the ensuing years, we have adapted the diagram, reversed some signposts, and added

stages based on feedback from participants. We regard all models as works in progress, augmented by new insights and expanded perspectives.

In the closed circle, acts of aggression from a particular national or identity group result in various psychological states, beginning with pain and denial, moving through suppression to humiliation to anger to desire for revenge, and finally to development of good/evil narratives that result in a retaliatory act of aggression. In the mix we added manipulation by leaders, which we see augments and fortifies dehumanization and fantasies of revenge.

In teaching the cycles at trainings and workshops, we move through the inner cycle slowly, stopping at each marker for reflections and personal testimonies. Many of our groups contain members of victim and violator communities where there has been terrible loss and suffering, so that we must proceed carefully. We never present the cycles to a new group in its formative stages, but wait until there is sufficient trust and safety, so that the participants can properly hold the stories. We might introduce the cycles in day five of a ten-day training or in part two of a four-part series of seminars. Safety, respect, and confidentiality are the operative needs. A solid group container, built by the facilitators in the first days of a workshop, is essential to hold the painful narratives and strong feelings toward others that may emerge as participants explore the cycles.

After the presentation of the cycle of revenge, we invite small groups to reflect on the cycle as it relates to their own lived experiences. Often there are tears, and almost always there is recognition. Participants appreciate acknowledgement of what they have endured and gratitude for a cognitive map on which to place recognized memories. We know that much of the inner circle describes the experiences of the victim, yet we find people relate to the cycle no matter where they were in a recent conflict, as it lifts up all sorts of historical memory and family violence. Our small group reflections lead to plenary discussion, so that the feelings emerging from this inner cycle are fully examined before we move toward the possibility of healing and hope.

The question of how the inner cycle of revenge might be broken so that conflictants can move toward a positive shared future is a central dilemma for all those involved in peace and conflict. This model posits that time for mourning and expressing grief is crucial, which makes sense from a psychological point of view. Not described in the model, but just as important, are the concomitant political necessities, such as a cease-fire agreement, monitoring of violence, and other safety, security, and protective measures. Also essential is economic reconstruction and recovery, so that employment, for example, can both normalize life and restore dignity.

With security measures in place, those who have been victims can begin to mourn their losses, rebuild their ravaged communities, and reengage in the future. Those who have been, or have lived among perpetrators, can find ways to reach out to these victim communities, to rebuild their own dignity, to heal the shame they may feel for violence perpetrated by their community, and to become part of a shared future. Although activists, educators, and NGO actors usually participate early on after violent conflict,

issues of wider participation are critical for all parties in postwar recovery, and multiple stakeholders should be included. Engaging actual combatants and veterans is most difficult, and ways of engaging them in postwar peacebuilding should be created where possible.

On the outer cycle, the diagram moves from expression of grief and mourning to memorializing losses. This issue of how to memorialize requires special care, so that it does not emphasize specific historical memories of one side while demonizing the other, and yet tells the truth. There now exists a whole sub-field of peacebuilding focused on conflict-sensitive memorialization, especially in regard to museums. One example is the genocide museum in Rwanda, built with international support and visited by all school children. How can the genocide be portrayed truthfully in ways that build community rather than reinforce separation and enmity between ethnic groups? A commentary on the significant healing power of memorials is the fact that in my own society, the Vietnam Wall in Washington DC is the most visited memorial in a city filled with structures dedicated to historical memory.

Following mourning and memorializing, the diagram names the processes of managing anger, confronting fears, and accepting loss. This phase echoes Elizabeth Kubler Ross' noted stages on death and dying, and like all such lists is not as linear in the mind and heart as on paper. Nonetheless, these are critical tasks and perhaps help develop the resilience to return to life and imagine a future, especially a possible, if distant, bi-communal future. We must remember that there are no third countries for wounded parties to retreat to, so that Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda must evermore share community, as must all who have slaughtered, or been slaughtered by, their neighbors.

Moving along on the cycle, we note the re-engagement section, which we might say is the special provenance of peacebuilding. We can group these activities around the concept of re-weaving community. They include: understanding root causes, re-humanizing the enemy, promoting tolerance, encouraging coexistence, joint problem-solving, establishing just institutions, and reconstruction of a meaningful history. Taken together, this is a lifetime of work, reminding us that reconciliation is a demanding process that will consume the life-span of disputants in violent conflict, and as we know, their descendants as well. Again, our workshop presentations explore each of these stages, reflect on possibilities, elicit shared examples from other countries, and serve as models for our participants to envision their own projects and programs. We allow a full day for the presentation of the cycles, group work, discussions, and processing of emotions, so that participants feel acknowledged, validated, and encouraged.

It can feel daunting to present this framework to groups of people who have been engaged on both sides of armed conflict, even with a sturdy group container and positive facilitator/participant relations. While strong emotions of grief are present and must be responded to, we also observe a shared sense that a corner can be turned, that the future need not necessarily be a replication or vindication of the past, and that hope, fragile and delicate as it is, might be cautiously nurtured and cultivated. In this sense, the cycle, with

its long arc pointing toward reconciliation, is a gift and a lifeline to those struggling with recovery.

Let us look at the contact hypothesis, developed by Gordon Allport in the 1950's in his book The Nature of Prejudice, and frequently described as one of the most successful concepts to emerge from social psychology. The kernel of his thesis is that properly managed contact between groups can reduce prejudices and lead to more positive interactions. Casual contact is insufficient to challenge intractable and long-held stereotypes and biases. However, structured personal interactions supported by cooperative activities will fortify the connections and lead to the best outcomes. Recent re-investigations of Allport's conclusions by contemporary social psychologists, including studies by the well-regarded Thomas Pettigrew, have reinforced the contact hypothesis, emphasizing that reducing anxiety in the contact situations greatly increases the likelihood of successful shifts in prejudicial attitudes. Furthermore, current studies suggest that positive connections with specific members of disfavored groups transfers to other members of the disfavored group, which is good news for us working in inter-group relations. And to add a modern touch, a group is investigating the efficacy of the contact hypothesis through internet connections. Two researchers from Israel suggest that the internet may be the best tool yet for effectively putting the contact hypothesis into practice. In Israel, of course, there are hardly any other means available.

Lastly, I want to introduce a program I created that I call CONTACT, named with this thesis in mind and also because CONTACT is an acronym for Conflict Transformation across Cultures. The CONTACT Program takes place each year in June at the School for International Training in Vermont, US, where I am a professor. I have just parted from our thirteenth group, numbering about sixty participants from approximately twenty-five countries engaged in NGOs, academia, government, and related careers. The CONTACT Program is a large experiment in inter-group connections and the power of intense and highly structured exposure to change attitudes, reduce stereotypes, and generally challenge and blow away the biases of our students.

Each year our group includes people toward whom there are very deeply entrenched prejudices, such as gays/lesbians, Americans, Muslims, Jews, Africans, etc. Represented are members of all major religious faiths, many cultures, classes, races, geographies, and perhaps a hundred languages. We work on this treasure-trove of differences and prejudices deliberately and carefully, teaching concepts of multiple identities, sources of group socialization, ideals of tolerance, and models of pro-social behaviors, all embedded in a curriculum of peacebuilding. For many of our students, this experience was their first in a multi-cultural environment, their first intellectual understanding of the nature of prejudice, their first time to meet members of disfavored or feared groups, and certainly their first exposure to gays/lesbians who are out of the closet.

For the CONTACT Program, we have further experimented with our use of the *Cycles of Revenge and Reconciliation*. After a full presentation, we draw the cycles on the floor. We ask participants to move slowly and silently around the cycles, and to stand on the place in the inner or outer cycle that is most resonant with their present state of mind. The

movement and silence add a dimension of reality and truthfulness, as participants try out one phase, move to another, and finally settle on the phase that is most true for them. We then ask for volunteers to share their feelings and decisions, which invariably becomes very emotional and calls forth a great deal of compassion, solidarity, and care for each other. We have four faculty and eight assistants in the room, so we are well-staffed for processing, managing, and holding our container. We go at this slowly, process what emerges, and end the experience with silence and then music. The work is a turning point in the life of the group, and no doubt one more challenge to any remaining stereotypes or distancing from unfamiliar others.

Some years ago, one of our graduate students used the CONTACT Program for her MA thesis, interviewing past participants to document their experience several years after they had returned home. She found significant and lasting change in attitudes toward others, and in their ongoing commitment to promote tolerance and stand up for social inclusion. The model they remembered the most was the cycles of revenge and reconciliation, perhaps not surprising given the physicality and emotional impact of identifying their place by standing on the cycles.

In conclusion, the end of war is not the end of violent conflict, nor the end of hatred, prejudice, anti-social behaviors, or threats. The end of war is as delicate as glass, with recent statistics suggesting that nearly half of all war-endings are followed by more war within five years, most especially in fragile or failed states. Marginalization, dehumanization, human greed, and both real and existential fears continue to drive communities and governments toward war.

War is a form of mental illness on a grand scale. For those of us working as psychologists in peacebuilding, our real effort should be in preventing conflict and harm so that we avoid the ravages of war. However, since we as a global community are not yet able to prevent armed conflict, we must continue to work in postwar communities, nurturing peace where there has been deep wounding, trauma, and impossible loss. When the guns are silenced, social healing and peacebuilding initiatives become imperative. If we psychologists can assist in small measure toward the prevention of war, our profession will have made a very worthy contribution to human development and evolution. In the process, we will have added to the practice of compassion, in ourselves and in the world.

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