

MSPP Keynote September 2008
*Reconciliation and Forgiveness in Divided Societies:
A Psychologist's Reflections from the Field*

Congratulations to the visionaries, directors, and faculty of MSPP for your commitment to widen the scope of psychological inquiry and practice to include the community, the nation, and the global commons. Surely there are troubles on all fronts that would benefit from the insights and interventions of psychologists and our colleagues in related fields. It is good and important for us to push our boundaries as mental health professionals beyond the traditions that have circumscribed our profession. We are needed on the streets and in the world. We have much to contribute, and an obligation to do so. Failure to expand would impoverish all of us, depriving those who suffer from the violence of war and injustice the opportunity to benefit from our collective insights. Additionally, of course, we serve ourselves as we serve others, gaining in compassion and wisdom as we plunge into the chaos of violence, its causes, and its aftermath.

As one who has chosen this path of global engagement, I hope my experiences and reflections will be useful and perhaps inspiring for future planning of MSPP and to those of you engaged in the healing professions. I began my professional career in NY many decades ago, coming out of the anti-war and civil rights movements to work in race relations and inter-group dialogue through the former Center for Human Relations at NYU. When I relocated to New England, I took my doctoral degree at BU, worked at a university counseling center, taught in MA programs at Lesley College and Antioch University, co-founded a feminist therapy collective in New Hampshire, and later established a private practice in Amherst, Massachusetts. During those years, my activism for social change was more of an avocation, although I have always believed that our work as therapists and academics also serves as a form of social change.

Nonetheless, by the mid 1980's Reagan years, I found myself very concerned about the direction of the country and the world. I thus accepted invitations to join the boards of directors of two national and two international peace organizations, which afforded me entry into the world of global activism. The people I met and the inspiration I drew propelled me onward, and I apprenticed myself to those leading international workshops on peace, justice, and nonviolence. I saw how relevant my skills as a psychologist were, especially those in the area of group facilitation, conflict management, post-conflict reconciliation, and interpersonal relationships. Of course I had a great deal to learn, and am still learning, but we mental health professionals come to social engagement with valuable complementary expertise.

My earliest international engagements in this phase of my life were citizen diplomacy trips to the former Soviet Union through the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and intense engagement with the people of Burma after the first military crackdown in 1988, guided by the International Network of Engaged Buddhists headquartered in Thailand. I found myself leading delegates of journalists and activists across the Thai border and through the jungles of Burma to reach camps of starving and malaria-ridden college students and professors who had fled Rangoon in fear of their lives, as well as to serve the needs of thousands of ethnic group members under persecution by the Burmese military. During this time I kept my private practice and part-time academic career at Antioch going, but eventually found that my mind was increasingly drawn to the intensity of my international engagement, and I saw that my life as a therapist would have to end.

Careers are not necessarily permanent in our current understanding of growth and change, and I was ready to embark on a new path. I mention this by way of reminding young people in our field of psychology that choices made today may lead to new

directions in the future, and to remind middle-aged colleagues about the avenues wide-open for your own exploration. My way of managing this career shift was to allow my clients their natural time for termination and then to take a year of study and retreat in Asia with my husband for spiritual and political deepening. That was undoubtedly a wise decision for us, and led me to found Karuna Center for Peacebuilding in 1994 when we returned from Asia.

We struggled, of course. Founding one's own NGO is not a path to remarkable financial success, nor did work come easily in the early years. However, my commitment was clear and the work and I co-evolved. One of my earliest invitations, which relates profoundly to the topic of reconciliation and forgiveness that I will speak about today, was to develop a Convocation at Auschwitz to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II and the liberation of the concentration camps. No small challenge, this week-long program involved two hundred participants and the leadership of as many clergy from all faiths as I could summon to participate. We engaged in profound dialogue at the gates of Auschwitz, stood in silence together at the tracks of Birkenau, and held each other in tenderness through our rawness, a mix of Americans, Germans, other Europeans, Japanese, Christians, Jews, Quakers, Buddhists, and others. Directing this program called on every skill and insight I had ever developed as a psychologist and many skills I had no idea even existed. Serving in this way felt exactly right to me, as if I was fulfilling my obligation to the world with the tools my practice as a psychologist had offered me.

At the Convocation at Auschwitz was a film-maker from NY, who had also worked in Bosnia. She mentioned my name to a Bosnian Muslim woman refugee who had lost her home, her community, and much of her extended kin in the violence of the Bosnian War. Emsuda phoned me in 1996, speaking through a translator, and by 1997 we had begun Karuna Center's largest project, which lasted six years. In my years in Bosnia, I saw the full measure of the challenges of reconciliation and forgiveness in divided societies. Bosnia was shattered. The Muslim, or Bosniak, women and educators I worked with over the years had lost everything. The Serb women and educators had gained nothing from the violence, and Bosnia has still not recovered or put itself together. Bosnia remains unsustainably fragmented: two entities in fragile and tense relationship.

All that we learned in the fires of Bosnia has served us well as our work expanded to other Balkan countries, to the Mid East, Africa, and Asia. Additionally, I was invited to join the faculty of the School for International Training in Brattleboro, where I am today a full professor teaching peacebuilding and conflict transformation to graduate students and directing a remarkable Summer Peacebuilding Institute called CONTACT, which stands for Conflict Transformation Across Cultures. For me, having a field-based practice of international peacebuilding plus an academic career, sharing what I learn with motivated graduate students, is an ideal combination. Teaching is important, and a life as a scholar-practitioner provides the opportunity to synthesize and articulate what I learn in the field for the benefit of those who will follow. In sum, I seem to have come round right in this late life career, and I am thrilled to see MSPP moving its curriculum to include this vital work.

Psychology can be seen as the youngest of the world's wisdom traditions, and certainly a major contribution from the west to the world's collective insights. We as Americans are so steeped in psychology that we hardly recognize the power of the waters we swim in. One of my group participants in Bosnia named Milka said: "Paula, you are so psychological. Here in Bosnia we did not think or talk about our feelings." In Sri Lanka, after an intense inter-communal dialogue experience, Raju said: "I would never have known that we are all in one big pot of suffering. We never communicate this way. We never learn about each other." And from the Republic of Georgia in August, by email, as

the war crashes around them, a CONTACT participant named Sopho writes: “I do not know how realistic is the reconciliation but we should stand for each other ... we should not allow it again... we need to cooperate... we need to learn to listen to each other.” What more fundamental tool do we mental health professionals have than encouraging people to listen to each other, to listen with their full being, recognizing the biases and filters that cloud listening, learning to walk in the shoes of the other, understanding issues of perception, threat, historical wounds, and mirror images that separate us, and shifting from debate mode to deep dialogue, where listening and hearing can flower into respect and compassion.

As I take us into a full exploration of reconciliation and forgiveness in divided societies, let us remember that we live in a profoundly divided society, so in evidence now in election season. Armed conflict clearly heightens divisions and creates a particular impetus for reconciliation in a regional or national history, but the needs for inter-group or identity-group communication, healing, and reconciliation exist within most societies, and certainly our own. Were we to truly apply the insights of our own western wisdom tradition, our finely developed psychology, to our national and sub-national problems, we would likely transform ourselves into a more generous, compassionate, and inclusive society. What a challenge to offer ourselves as psychologists: to heal our own body politic.

Working in many post-war societies, I have observed a stream of activities that move toward reconciliation and forgiveness. I actually do not believe there is an end-point where a society can stop and say that it is fully healed, any more than I believe a country can say it has achieved permanent peace or social justice. We are always in process toward reconciliation and forgiveness, peace and justice. There is no resting place, but there are signposts of progress. The steps I will explore in the long journey toward reconciliation and forgiveness are acknowledgement, apology, reparations, atonement, economic, political and social restructuring, national and communal mechanisms of transitional justice such as Truth and Reconciliation Commissions and national dialogues, and social healing programs. These steps are interactive rather than linear, and engage different segments of the population over many years.

As psychologists, you will have a deep understanding of the resistance to acknowledgement. We recognize it from our own family and work relations, and from our inner dialogues with ourselves. We know denial is a profound defense mechanism, a protection against recognizing and admitting the inadmissible, avoiding dissonance that challenges what we believe about ourselves. We go to great lengths to protect ourselves, as do our sisters and brothers in regions suffering from armed conflict. I recognized this issue most clearly during my years in Bosnia, where there were so many war crimes and so much that needed to be acknowledged. I came to understand over time that acknowledgement was key to the full spectrum of healing mechanisms that could lead to reconciliation.

In Bosnia, the women and educators I worked with in six years of dialogue and peacebuilding belonged to two major groups: Muslims, now called Bosniaks, who were primarily victims, and Bosnian Serbs who were primarily members of the violator community. Prior to 1992, they had all lived in a city of northern Bosnia called Prijedor, but as a result of ethnic cleansing, (a twisted phrase invented during the Bosnian War) Prijedor became a Serb city and the Muslims were removed to nearby Sanski Most. Three prison and death camps were created in abandoned factories in Prijedor. Everyone knew of the existence of these camps, and in fact many of our Muslim participants were camp survivors or relatives of those who perished within Omarska, Trnopolje, or Keraterm. Photos of the camps appeared in international newspapers, exposed by a western

journalist. Yet the Serbs in our group, good people all, struggling to live with themselves, could not acknowledge the existence or purpose of the camps. This became incredibly difficult for the Muslims, emblematic of the Serb refusal to see their pain, hear their agony, recognize their tremendous losses and suffering. The Serbs, on the other hand, were so full of shame, guilt, divided loyalties, and political allegiances, that they could barely lift up their heads, or else lifted them up with denial, defensiveness, and false pride. One of their comebacks was to equate all suffering as equal, as they too had suffered during wartime, although not proportionally to the victim group.

Slowly, over the years, one or two Serb group members would break rank, acknowledge the political manipulation that had contributed to the war, and even allude to the prison camps. About four years into our work together, I invited members of a post-Holocaust group I was working with to come with me to Bosnia to meet the educators in our training program. One of the guests, originally from Romania, spoke of her family's demise in Auschwitz and her life-long trauma. The Serb and Muslim Bosnians were visibly moved, some of them weeping. At that point, one of our Muslim educators, a man named Muhamed, burst into tears himself, telling the Serb educators that they had more compassion for Mary, the guest from Romania, than they had for him, a fellow-Bosnian, teacher colleague, former resident of Prijedor, and survivor of one of the camps. Why, he demanded, could they not acknowledge his pain and his history, which had been caused by their compatriots? Muhamed's passion broke through some level of denial, and moved the process forward.

Muhamed said he did not need an apology, just acknowledgement of what he had endured and by whom. Other Muslims expressed similar sentiments, at that moment and throughout the long dialogue process. They wanted their pain acknowledged, recognized, legitimated. Acknowledgement was their first step in the healing process, the beginning of re-weaving the shattered bonds of trust that had existed between Serbs and Muslims in Bosnia for generations, where no one would have used such identities. Over the subsequent years, acknowledgement did increase among these group members and for those they worked with in their communities. In fact, they went on to found the first bi-communal NGO in northern Bosnia and have continued the work of social healing in the region over many years now.

However, shame, humiliation, family demands, and political loyalties have kept acknowledgement to a minimum, and Bosnia has had no public truth and reconciliation process to allow for a national catharsis and healing. There have been small attempts at social healing within Bosnia, but it remains a profoundly divided society and a split country. Further steps in the reconciliation and forgiveness process, such as apology, reparations, atonement, and political restructuring are tasks that await Bosnia and indeed most of the former Yugoslav Republics. I recently received an inquiry about developing a center for dialogue in Srebrenica, but so far there is no political will for such an undertaking.

My favorite story about apology comes from work in Nepal last year. As you know, Nepal is recovering from a ten-year armed insurgency by Nepali Maoist forces. In the villages and mountains throughout the country, government and Maoists armed groups killed, plundered, and fought intensely, creating large numbers of internally displaced people and many deaths. Nepal's new coalition government will probably organize a TRC at some point in the coming years and they are very aware of the need for social inclusion and justice, which were clearly issues causing the civil war. We have been working there on peacebuilding and social healing, and last year conducted a needs assessment that included villagers in conflict-affected regions. One villager reported that ten Maoists had returned to her village. "What did you do with them?" I asked. "We tied

them to a fence,” she responded. “Why did you tie them up?” “Because we wanted an apology.” “So what happened?” I continued. “We kept them tied up for two days and then they apologized,” she replied.

There must be better ways to extract an apology than tying up ten Maoists, and I am not sure a forced apology is worth much anyway. But the story so beautifully illustrates the psychological needs of these villagers. They were not asking for compensation, for a TRC process, or for anything other than a personal villager-to-villager apology. In their eyes, this re-established the record and enabled them to accept the returning Maoists. Of course there may be more story over time, but apology is a key to moving forward in all interpersonal and communal conflicts, as well as in national conflict resolution. In fact, the role of leading political figures apologizing to victim groups on behalf of their country, even if the violence was done hundreds of years ago, has assumed great proportion in current global politics. Native Americans and African Americans are still waiting for such apology from our national leaders as has been done by Canadian and Australian leaders to their indigenous populations, to East Asian countries by former Japanese Prime Ministers, to Jews by German leaders, and many others. We need apology by our husbands and wives, parents and children, colleagues and friends, and we need to offer apology for our own offenses for the sake of our futures together, for the sake of trust, safety, community, and love. This is another area where we as psychologists have so much experience and perhaps some wisdom to contribute, and where our skills can be very well used.

All communities through time and history have ways of managing conflict and moving forward, so western psychology is certainly not unique, but as I said earlier in speaking about groups from Bosnia, Sri Lanka, Georgia, and elsewhere, groups in conflict often move forward without looking back, perhaps thereby sowing the seeds of another round of conflict. In Rwanda, the government has instituted rather comprehensive programs of grassroots confession, justice, and compensation, which seems to be helping many with looking back in order to build a more solid future, essential in a very tiny and overcrowded country where perpetrators and surviving victims must forever live side by side.

Reparations or compensation is another critical step in the social healing process, one that can be organized as either individual reparations or undertaken on a community-wide basis, providing education, job training, health care, housing, or other critical needs to disenfranchised populations recovering from war and injustice. For many victims of mass violence, acknowledgement and apology without tangible signs of compensation seem empty and insincere. South Africa had a renowned TRC process that has set the bar for all other national transitional justice programs to follow. Much of it was laudable and impeccable. But promised reparations to the black African communities have not been forthcoming and many townships and rural regions are almost as impoverished now as they were during the apartheid regime. Crime and racial tensions are high, and black youth are unemployed and alienated. I was in South Africa last year for a conference, and I feel like it is a powder-keg of potential explosion.

At the conference, a South African videographer showed a documentary about an apartheid-era white policeman who had a terminal cancer diagnosis and wanted to apologize before he died to a black family for the murder of their son. The video shows him visiting the elderly parents in their township home; the parents are silent, offering neither rejection nor forgiveness. As the policeman stands to depart, the young son of the murdered policeman, now fifteen, enters the living room and throws a crockery pitcher at the policeman, causing blood to flow. The film ends there. The son, five years old at the time of his father’s murder, has received nothing from white society, nor has he been part

of any national TRC or local reconciliation process.

What are the teaching points of this story? The son has received neither reparations from the South African government nor from the policeman who murdered his father. The murderer comes seeking forgiveness so he can die more peacefully; he does not come bearing gifts. The son's rage at the policeman and the society that allowed his father to be murdered is clear and direct. Neither his psychological nor economic needs were met by this encounter, which was addressed to his grandparents and not to him at all. An acknowledgement-apology-reparations approach might have changed the scenario. Sometimes our apologies are insufficient without compensation. Perhaps the policeman might have died with even a clearer conscience had he been truly generous with this family, seeking to meet their needs rather than his own.

For another group of young black men in South Africa, this did indeed occur. You may know the story of Amy Biehl, a young white American graduate student who volunteered in the black townships and was murdered there by a group of youth who had no idea that she was working on behalf of their community. Her parents used their grief as a vehicle for their own transformation, establishing the Amy Biehl Foundation in her honor, dedicated to the education and employment of black township youth. They actually met the men who murdered their daughter and befriended their families, establishing deep and continued ties in the community backed by extensive financial help through their foundation. The Biehl family certainly did not owe reparations; they gave out of their understanding that healing comes in many ways and that generosity of spirit opens hearts and saves future lives. They came to the township as full, despite their grief, as the policeman came empty, despite his very different role in murder.

I want to speak briefly about atonement and then mention restructuring of unjust institutions, before looking at the end toward reconciliation and forgiveness. Atonement is a psychological and spiritual process where the violator engages in his/her own inner work of reflection and repentance and develops awareness of the attitudes and behaviors that resulted in harm to others. Atonement in relationship includes a commitment to changed behavior in the future, to addressing problems without violence, and to improved communication between parties or groups. In the Rwandan grassroots trials, known as gacaca, victims recognize where there has been genuine repentance and are most apt to engage in forgiveness with those who seem genuinely repentant. Those who do not seem to have adequately reflected on their crimes are often told to return to prison for further reflection. The origin of the word penitentiary, you may remember, was to provide an opportunity to become penitent for one's misdeeds. Unfortunately today's prisons foster exactly the opposite of what was once intended. In personal relations and with clients of therapists, there is also recognition of authentic atonement, which sparks trust and a willingness to move on.

In communal and international relations, we have the added factor of unjust political, economic, and social relations that are causative in many regions suffering from mass violence. These issues must be redressed to prevent future violence and to lead toward genuine reconciliation. Structural issues also exist in family relations and emerge in our work as therapists in gender relations, adolescent roles in families, etc, but unjust structures are most pronounced in communal conflict. We should not expect any group to reconcile and/or forgive if they are being asked to live under the same set of oppressive conditions that existed before the armed conflict. There is truth in the slogan "if you want peace, work for justice." There is no long-term peace under conditions of oppression.

A Nepalese woman in one of my trainings for new women parliamentarians this summer had actually been born in bonded labor, as a virtual slave. She was freed fifteen years ago

when Nepal finally outlawed bonded labor. She and her family had become Maoists to fight government oppressions based on class and caste. Although illiterate, the Maoists had appointed her to parliament under a mandate to increase the proportion of women. Now all eyes are on Neena and others in the new coalition government to make sure unjust political, social, and economic structures are transformed so that there can be peace. Who better to protest against unjust structures than a freed slave.

Lastly, we come to reconciliation and forgiveness. The Latin root word for reconciliation is *conciliatus*, which means to come together or to assemble a council. Thus to reconcile means: to re-unite the council, to restore broken relations to friendship and harmony, to walk together again. Reconciliation, reunion, reuniting: all require more than one, community rather than singularity.

I believe reconciliation entails willingly planting a seed of intention in the heart. It is a commitment to restore harmony where suffering has set us apart. In the hierarchy of difficulty in peacemaking, inter-communal reconciliation may be the most demanding. The surrender of hatreds passed on through the generations, the releasing of chosen narratives, the willingness to re-establish normal relations, the capacity to relinquish fantasies of vengeance, these are excruciatingly difficult.

Forgiveness, on the other hand, may be a solitary undertaking, an inward spiritual decision to let go of the burden of pain and hate, of outrage and betrayal. Forgiveness may be an inner letting go, not a forgetting but a long process of releasing heart-constricting grief and loss. Both forgiveness and reconciliation require courage, commitment and compassion. Each takes time and cannot be rushed or demanded by others; both may be processes over time rather than singular specific acts.

I have learned so much from my former student and colleague Joseph Sebarenzi, the former Speaker of the Rwandan Parliament, who lost almost his entire family in the Rwandan genocide. Joseph has been on a path of forgiveness because he has discovered for himself that a lifetime of vengeance and rage will harm not only his own body and spirit, but his children and future generations. Such lives are an embodiment of true courage.

I believe that reconciliation and forgiveness are invitational, calling forth in us the most conscious and generous response possible. Contrition where we have wronged, and forgiveness where we have been offended, may have their own rewards in an inner peace, a lessening of bitterness and struggle, the relief of aligning our behavior with what we know to be right.

Let us listen briefly to a few spiritual teachers:

“Forgiveness”, wrote Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield, “is the necessary ground for any healing... True forgiveness is not a misguided effort to suppress or ignore our pain. It is a deep process repeated over and over in our heart that honors the grief and betrayal, and in its own time ripens into the freedom to truly forgive.”

“If you want to see the brave, the Bhagavad Gita tells us, look for those who can forgive.”

Archbishop Desmond Tutu reminds us that: “*without forgiveness, there is no future.*” He believes that without forgiveness we are chained to the past, victims to our victimization. He closes his book *No Future without Forgiveness*, with these words:

“Our (South African) experiment is going to succeed because God wants us to succeed, not for our glory or aggrandizement but for the sake of God’s world. God wants to show us that there is life after conflict and repression—that because of forgiveness, there is a future.”

Lastly, I wish to say that reconciliation is fragile and impermanent and that mistrust after mass violence lives in the national psyche of victims and their descendants. Equally, fear of revenge lives in the minds of aggressors and their descendants. Trust must be given and earned by every generation. Mutual regard must be expressed and demonstrated. Human relations must be cultivated actively lest we slide into greed-driven or fear-driven separation fueled by the ambitions of ruthless leaders tugging on the sentimental walls of nationalism and ethnic identity.

Our task as psychologists/peacebuilders is to pay attention to the accumulated wisdom and experience of the human family as it struggles with healing, forgiveness and reconciliation. With that, as we think about South Africa, Bosnia, Rwanda, and the many other countries that have suffered from genocide and mass violence in recent decades, let us also hold Iraq in our hearts.

Iraq will be and must be an enormous cloud hanging over our future. Most of us at this gathering are Americans, and many of us likely protested this war. Nonetheless, we are bystanders watching this chaotic and dangerous situation, and its potential expansion in coming decades as oil resources shrink. What is our responsibility, here and now, to prevent our descendants from having to apologize to Iraqi descendants for our unwillingness or inability to respond to the destruction and mass violence done in our name? Let us hold this challenge as we speak and listen this weekend, and mine the wisdom of the past for this dilemma of the present. It will remind us of our own humanity and fallibility, and keep us on the edge of remembering that each of us is both victim and violator, and that the journey of reconciliation and forgiveness always awaits us.