

Reconciliation: A Path of Courage, Commitment and Compassion

Keynote Address
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I offer a warm welcome to all of you assembled for this weekend and invite you to open your hearts and give your attentive support to the gifted speakers, panelists, artists and workshop presenters who will grace this event. We are embarking together on a journey of exploration into extremely complex, emotionally laden and spiritually rich topics: forgiveness, reconciliation and restorative justice. We hope the process of our exploration will offer new insights, deepen our current understandings and perhaps motivate each of us in our own practice of forgiving, restoring and reconciling.

I especially want to welcome Dr. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela who has flown here from South Africa to be with us, and who has probed deeply and written poignantly about the psychology of communal violence and the path of apology and forgiveness.

Just the simple act of defining our terms could fill several volumes. I shall start with a few definitions, just as a way to guide us into this weekend. 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.

Illustrative of the struggle to restore humanity and surrender hatreds is a dialogue group called One by One, composed of second generation survivors of the Holocaust and second generation descendants of the Third Reich, mostly Boston area Jews and Berlin area Germans. They have been meeting together in dialogue for many years, facing their ghosts, staring down their ancestors and dueling with the wrenching history and internal messages that keep them apart. They and similar groups have made tremendous breakthroughs in the process of re-humanization, understanding and befriending each other against all odds. Dialogue work is of necessity small and intimate rather than large-scale and public, and for those who persist, discourse and relationship are within reach.

Reconciliation is both a spiritual and a political process. For national or inter-communal political reconciliation, Amnesty International spells out four requirements:

- a. Establishing the truth
- b. Strengthening the rule of law
- c. Building on a foundation of maximum participation and transparency
- d. Including the moral right to compensation and reparation

From a spiritual point of view, Father Luis Aguirre, a Jesuit priest imprisoned for many years under Uruguay's dictatorship, asks us to consider the experience of churches in developing models for reconciliation. Under church law, one who has sinned is required to examine his/her conscience, acknowledge wrong-doing, express a firm resolve not to commit future offense, and do penance for the harm done. Only then, with reparation for evil and compensation for injustice, can reconciliation or restoration of community be

considered.

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.

Where both victims and perpetrators are present, victims frequently respond to genuine remorse from the aggressor, opening the door to connection and possibly forgiveness by those who were violated. Pumla writes that “victims themselves sometimes seem to be looking for an opportunity to forgive, because they see this as something that can bring to an end a lifetime of hatred, which ties them so inextricably to the perpetrator.”

Restorative justice aims to restore the humanity of offenders, to repair rather than punish, to rehabilitate rather than incarcerate. Fueling the restorative justice movement is the insight that the injustices and abuse embedded in our social structures contribute to anti-social and criminal behavior. Reparative approaches help to bring offenders back into the human community, and to build bridges between victims and those who betrayed their trust and violated their faith. Restorative justice may require reparations, symbolic or economic, as well as acknowledgement and contrition.

I believe that reconciliation, forgiveness and restorative justice 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. In the most dire circumstances, we do have the inner freedom to choose our own response.

There are several stories to illustrate this point, one that you may remember in the writing of Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Viktor Frankel, who wrote in *Man's Search for Meaning*:

“We who lived in the concentration camps can remember those who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from us but the last of human freedoms...the freedom to choose our spirit in any circumstance.”

Amy Biehl was a US university student volunteering in the Black townships of South Africa during the apartheid years. She was murdered by a small group of young men from that township. Her parents established the Amy Biehl Foundation, met the men who murdered her daughter, sought clemency in their sentencing and helped rehabilitate and develop employment for these men and their community. Rather than spend their years in bitterness, these parents mobilized an astounding creative capacity for forgiveness, reconciliation and restorative justice in the name of their daughter.

And in Tibet, many of the monks imprisoned by the Chinese emerged from long years of privation and torture without hatred for their Chinese captors. The monks actually had compassion for the circumstances that led the Chinese to behave so brutally, believing that their vicious behavior would haunt their fate in this life and the next.

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.”

“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 let go a little, you will have a little happiness.
If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of happiness.
If you let go completely, you will be free.
Ajahn Chah

We will hear about these processes in great depth over the weekend, including learning from those who have survived mass violence and are engaged in their own reparative journeys. Beyond the words, these are extremely difficult and heart-wrenching processes, given the extent of the suffering humans inflict on each other. Let us take a moment of silence together to acknowledge those who have gone before us, who have illuminated for us the path of healing. “*If you want to see the brave*, the Bhagavad Gita tells us, *look for those who can forgive.*”

This morning I want to look at the passage toward reconciliation, and especially speak about what I have learned from working as a peacebuilder in Bosnia and other war-torn societies for many years.

The first and most critical step in reconciliation, as I observe the process, is acknowledgement from the perpetrator to the victim that a wrong has been done. In Bosnia, I have been engaged for seven years with a group of educators composed of Bosnian Muslim survivors of the 1990’s genocide working together with a group of Bosnian Serbs, whose community perpetrated the genocide. Although there were no Serb perpetrators in our group, the Muslim survivors needed to hear the Serb participants acknowledge the genocide and the suffering. Complicating the circumstances in Bosnia, although certainly not in South Africa or the Holocaust, there is a long history of mutual oppression and mistreatment, with the result that perpetrator groups confound the past and the present. To the extent that the acknowledgement of all of this history and the denial of the 1990’s genocide is withheld, our dialogue has been blocked.

For the Serb educators, admission of the genocide has been extremely difficult to offer, because it evokes pain, shame and guilt about their own bystander status and about atrocities committed in their name. The Serb tendency has been to try and equalize the suffering, to spread the responsibility equally among all ethnic communities, to avoid direct acknowledgement. Pumla writes about the same tendency to equalize responsibility in the South African experience.

An illustrative incident occurred after many years of dialogue, when we were training an advanced group to become peacebuilding facilitators themselves. One of the Serb women, a person very skilled and committed to inter-communal healing in Bosnia, spoke of the expulsion of the Muslim community from their homes as the time the Muslims *left*, or *migrated*. Her choice of the words *left* and *migrated*, rather than the naming of the Muslim experience of expulsion, had serious consequences within the group. During 3

days in 1992, 58,000 Muslim residents had been expelled from their homes in their previously well-integrated city, many killed, some raped, many taken to camps, others put on busses for points unknown, their homes exploded or torched behind them.

All of this was known, lived through, witnessed, revisited frequently by this group of educators in dialogue. Yet this Serb woman could not name the crime, and this lack of acknowledgement created a wall of separation from the Muslim participants, who have repeatedly asked for acknowledgement as the core building block of trust. We can see this same need for acknowledgement on the part of women who have been battered at home or raped on the streets, from Holocaust survivors, from family members who have hurt each other emotionally, from colleagues and friends. In this country, we have never had a presidential acknowledgement or sufficient national dialogue on the evils of slavery or the genocide of the Native Americans. Without it, victims feel unseen, insecure and unable to move forward. A classic example is Armenia, where the Turkish government has never yet admitted the existence of the genocide of the early 20th century and where the Armenians are still demanding recognition for their suffering.

Where there is acknowledgement, the ice jam begins to thaw and relationships begin to move forward. When the acknowledgement comes from religious or political leaders, the impact increases. Pumla writes: "To give the vocabulary (of reconciliation) greater permanence and lend it a multiplier effect throughout the larger society, it needs to be reinforced at the level of political leadership."

What we hope follows admission is apology, taking responsibility for one's actions, or for actions done in one's name. Truth is such a relief, for victim and for violator. Truth can set the individual or the community free to explore the past, to look back together at the suffering and the causes, to begin the long process of healing. Authentic apology includes regrets or remorse for the injury done and responsibility for one's own role in the injury, either as violator or as bystander. In Rwanda's *gacaca* process of community justice, some prisoners are offering lightweight apologies as a means of seeking prison release, but these are roundly rejected by the community, who sense the presence or absence of genuine spiritual remorse, sorrow and repentance. In our inter-personal relationships, genuine apology allows the love to flow again; it releases both parties from the gloom of withholding love, of nursing our private hurt. It seems to me that apology is a two-way gift; we benefit both when we offer and receive apology.

After apology, then what? Is that the end of the story? In mass violence, apology is an essential but an incomplete process. What will prevent the perpetrators from repeating the crime? How do we know this community remorse is genuine? What would help to restore trust in the other side? I think along with the apology must come attention to the rule of law and commitment from the aggressor side not to repeat the transgression. In Bosnia, for example, war criminals remain on the loose and Bosnian Muslims fear that if the international community leaves, which is inevitable someday, that they will be utterly unsafe and unprotected. This fear is more than the voice of trauma speaking; it is the voice of international neglect and local deficiency in both political will and economic resources. The lack of acknowledgement, the absence of remorse, the nonexistence of commitment to a new future and the inattention to the rule of law leaves divided Bosnia fragile and dangerous.

Facilitating inter-group dialogue with Israelis and Palestinians in the Oslo years before the second *Intifada*, another issue arose that sheds light on the inter-communal restoration process. For the Palestinians, dialogue was an instrumental activity to help their community attain freedom and human rights. As such, they expected their Israeli dialogue partners to join them in the liberation struggle that articulated and demonstrated their

demands for justice. For the Israelis, on the other hand, dialogue was an inter-personal process that helped them build relationships with Palestinians and assuage their guilt. The Israelis, however, were unwilling to demonstrate their political solidarity with Palestinians, which greatly frustrated the Palestinian dialogue members and reduced their faith in the Israeli group as partners in the struggle. The lesson I took away from this experience is that acknowledgement and apology, without action and visible commitment to redress injustices, can seem insufficient and relatively empty to victim communities.

Victims need to see the aggressor community wrestle with the causes of the genocide or mass violence, deal with their own war criminals, feel partnered in the restoration of justice, and observe that the spiritual and political leaders on the aggressor side are engaged in a full process of introspection and repentance. In the former Yugoslavia, this process has not yet happened, leaving the victim communities unsettled in their recovery, unsure about the future, anxious and certainly untrusting. I want to cite a study just completed by a Croatian peace psychologist of three formerly well-integrated cities in the former Yugoslavia, Vukovar in Croatia and Mostar and Prijedor in Bosnia.

The study found that ten years after the mass atrocities in these cities, there is almost no re-integration of populations and tremendous resistance to any attempts to restore inter-communal relations. "The cities are deeply divided along ethnic lines... Inter-group relations are very rare and are entirely superficial... All the informants speak of pre-war relations characterized by harmony and multiculturalism... Deep distrust creates insurmountable boundaries and prevents cooperation around any common objective... There is no will to re-integrate... no incentive to social recuperation."

Required for social renewal, the study goes on to say, are four levels of social reconstruction that the authors believe must be planned and monitored to occur simultaneously from the top down and bottom up:

- a. Individual: recuperation and healing of individual trauma
- b. Community: re-establishment of communal networks and renewal of trust
- c. Society: development of new civic initiatives and economic cooperation
- d. Political: a functional state with rules of law and guaranteed protection

Another critical step in the healing of societies divided by mass violence is the issue of reparations or compensation, economic or symbolic. Clearly victims have rights of compensation, and perhaps how individuals and their governments deal with reparations offers a lens into understanding the extent of remorse and regret. Some say, for example, that no US President has apologized for slavery or Native American extermination because of fear that their descendants would demand reparations.

In Rwanda, reparations take the form of community service, building homes for families devastated by genocide, constructing schools, health clinics, working the land, repairing what was destroyed. In Germany, reparations have been paid to individual Holocaust survivors or their descendants, as well as to the Israeli government. Swiss banks have made the news contesting reparations from Holocaust victims. Many European countries, including some who fought with Germany, have not compensated victims or their families. Bosnia has no structural process for addressing this issue, nor do other former Yugoslavian regions. In the US, it took Japanese-Americans thirty years of legislative battle to receive compensation from the US government for the loss of their homes seized in WWII when they were interred. I understand the final compensation was considered quite inadequate.

Compensation is complicated. No compensation ever repairs the loss and betrayal, the suffering and endless nightmares, the lifetime spent without loved ones or trust in

humanity. Mental and physical health cannot necessarily be restored. And yet, reparations offer a token of care and connection, of economic or psychological help, especially in the context of remorse and contrition, and with assurance that the violence will never be repeated. Compensation is not a payoff or a silencing, but rather one step among many in the long process of inter-communal healing.

Compensation can fuel resentment and make future generations embittered. Why should second or third generation post-Holocaust Germans pay for the sins of their grandparents generation? Why should today's white Americans compensate for slavery? We can look at the negative response to affirmative action, a form of group compensation for denied opportunity, to see both the need and the challenges of delayed reparations.

Symbolic reparations also aid the restorative process. Museums, monuments, memorials, public literary and artworks, days of commemoration, new historical narratives, revised history books: all of these are examples of symbolic reparations, and all play a role in re-humanization and national healing. I find it revealing that the most visited monument in Washington DC is the haunting Vietnam Memorial Wall, symbol of our brokenness and unhealed national wounds. I shudder to think about Iraq in the context of the Vietnam Wall, yet at this moment we must think of Iraq. I will return to that subject in my closing.

So far we have reflected on acknowledgement, apology, atonement and remorse, redressing past grievances, commitment to not repeating the offense, and reparations. For me, all of these are steps in the long journey toward reconciliation. I want to add one final stage, which invites both victim and aggressor groups to move toward establishing a new, just, safe and mutually satisfying relationship. For the victims, this acknowledges that the apologies and atonement, the reparations and commitments, have been genuine and trustworthy. The victims, or their descendants, for this often takes many generations, are ready to re-engage with the perpetrator group or their descendants. For the aggressor group, this re-engagement shows their intention to build mutual relationships, to uphold their commitments, to be trustworthy to those whose group they have harmed.

Most groups in conflict must live side-by-side forever after the conflict. There are no empty spaces on this planet and we see from the Israeli-Palestinian situation the tragedy that ensued from believing that there was a dispensable population or empty land to be given to a people who had no safe homeland. To live together as neighboring countries, such as in the former Yugoslavia, or as one country such as in South Africa, Rwanda or Northern Ireland, enemy groups must become collaborators in sharing land, water, borders, government and citizenship. Thus, how communities and nations reconcile and how they establish structures of equality, participation and justice, determines how they can help prevent future violent conflict. Where there is no full restorative process, no re-humanization or mutuality, the lack of healing may lead them over time down the dark path of counter-revenge, where victims and perpetrators, in the same or reverse roles, engage again in communal violence.

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 for this weekend is to pay attention to what the human family has learned about forgiveness, reconciliation and restorative justice, for here we have representatives of its

accumulated wisdom and experience. With that, there is one more challenge we must attend to. 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 deliberations. Most of us at this gathering are Americans, and many of us likely protest this war. Nonetheless, we are bystanders watching the US slide daily into an increasingly chaotic and dangerous situation, with terrible echoes of Vietnam. 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.

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