

## **FOR A FUTURE TO BE POSSIBLE: BOSNIAN DIALOGUE IN THE AFTERMATH OF WAR**

Three years ago, shortly after the official cessation of the Bosnian War, I was pulled to Bosnia by an invisible thread. A Bosnian Muslim woman refugee, lacking any and all telecommunication or English, drew me there with the power of her determination and vision. "*Please come to Bosnia.*" 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. "*We are Muslim refugees,*" Emsuda reported, "*dispossessed, alone, grieving over so much loss. We must organize ourselves to rebuild our lives. Come soon.*"

Karuna Center for Peacebuilding, which I founded and direct, provides education and training in conflict transformation, reconciliation and healing, and nonviolent social change. We often work with communities in transition and in regions torn by war and violence. As we wish 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 underscored our compatibility and reinforced our decision to engage.

In the years since, Karuna Center has developed *Projekt Dijakom* [pronounced Diya-Kom], the Project for Dialogue and Community-Building, offering education and training in partnership with the Foundation for Community Encouragement, a Seattle-based NGO founded by noted author Dr. M. Scott Peck to promote community-building. FCE community-building practice 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 two dialogue workshops, gatherings of former participants, meetings with educational administrators and local officials plus vigilant crisis management over logistics, enrollments and other organizational problems.

The work that Karuna Center offers in Bosnia has evolved over the years as we closely follow the needs of our local partners and friends, who set the pace and guide our work. From an emphasis on trauma healing of Muslim women, we shifted to skill-development in local organizing with women NGO leaders. After three visits and six seminars, the women asked if we would help them contact their former friends and colleagues: Serb women currently living in the other entity, across the official *Inter-Entity Boundary Line*. Responding to our bewilderment at this request, the Muslim women expressed their desire to reconnect with their neighbors as a cautious first step toward their eventual repatriation to beloved land and homes in their former city and outlying villages.

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 workshop participants have explained 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 either faced death, incarceration in camps, or expulsion. Many of those Muslims who survived currently live in Sanski Most, just 36 kilometers away from land that may have belonged to their family for untold 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 safely with other Serbs.

Criminality and brutality took hold in Prijedor as it did elsewhere in former Yugoslavia. Muslim homes were pillaged, the empty rooms dynamited. Cars were stolen or blown up, livestock destroyed, mosques decimated, farmlands mined or confiscated. Worse still, Prijedor gained a reputation for developing concentration camps early in the Bosnian war. Using warehouses and factories, sometimes schools or hotels, prisoners were reportedly tortured, murdered, raped and starved. It was in Prijedor in 1992 that reporter Roy Gutman discovered and exposed the first concentration camp of the Bosnian war to the international community. Many of the Muslim participants in our inter-ethnic seminars are survivors of those camps: Omarska, Trnopolje, Keraterm. In a 1998 article reporting on a Prijedor war criminal, the New York Times Magazine described "the singular sadism and personal brutality" of the Omarska guards, local Prijedor Serbs. 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. Most homesteads are multi-generational, enlarged to accommodate new members and handed down through the years. Refugee Bosnians in our groups actively fantasized the return, reclamation and rebuilding of their remembered past, although that past can never be restored. Some spoke of their wish to be buried on the land of their grandparents. Despite the tragedy, or in defiance of the tragedy, their primary wish was to return. Perhaps this vision kept them going through the years of exile and constant movement, through the grief of death and loss. It was this quest that motivated their desire to meet with Serbian women. Perhaps the Serb women would help them understand what happened, perhaps they would help them go home.

After prudent reflection with the Muslim women in Sanski Most, we agreed to meet with a small group of Serb women NGO leaders in Prijedor to explore the possibility of bi-communal dialogue. However, very few Serb women came to this meeting and fewer still would risk encountering the Muslims. We imagined that the risk was too great both in terms of their physical safety and their emotional self-protection. What could they say about Omarska, about blown-up houses and missing relatives? The husbands and sons, fathers and brothers, of local women may have committed these atrocities. Most women likely stood-by 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.

However, a few Serb women bravely agreed to travel to Sanski Most for a five-day dialogue group. All the women were fragile and overwhelmed by emotions. They did

their best to create bonds of empathy based on their mutual despair as victims of a war that none of them wanted or could have imagined before it began. They drew on their mutual history as Yugoslavs sharing common geographic space and as women sharing psychological similarities. One of these women, a nurse from Prijedor, bonded deeply with the Muslim group members and poignantly accompanied two Muslim women as they examined the ruins of their former homes inside Republika Srpska. As a way to move forward through the grief, the participants focused concern on the legacy of war and its poisonous effects on the next generation. Since many of the women were also teachers, they suggested that we consider working with Muslim and Serb educators, whose attitudes and behaviors will partially determine the success of future repatriation and reintegration of community.

We agreed with their suggestion, which led to the development of *Projekt Dijakom* for educators from Prijedor and Sanski Most. As facilitators we observed that the educators, both women and men, Muslim and Serb, seemed more ready to concentrate and better able to manage the emotional difficulties of the dialogues than the women, perhaps because their roles provided a mission and a frame for dialogue. We sought and secured endorsements from the Ministers of Education of the two political entities, Republika Srpska and Bosnian Federation, so that *Projekt Dijakom* would be protected by recognition and sanction from the officials.

Karuna Center for Peacebuilding and Foundation for Community Encouragement have now facilitated 5 inter-ethnic educators' seminars, with more on the horizon in coming years. Each dialogue seminar lasts 3-5 days and welcomes about 20 participants in a mix of Serbs and Muslims from both cities, including teachers, school counselors, principals and administrators, some new to dialogue and others returning participants. We return to the region 3 times annually and will soon begin our first advanced seminar in preparation for training a selected small group of Serb and Muslim educators to become future project leaders and dialogue facilitators. We intend to shift responsibility for *Projekt Dijakom* to participant-facilitators as they feel sufficiently confident and skilled, at which time we will stay on as mentors and consultants. This is clearly a difficult goal, as even these educated people in Northwest Bosnia have never experienced group process or participatory education and remain deeply enmeshed in inter-group prejudices and post-traumatic war recovery.

Each inter-ethnic gathering of educators feels like another small miracle to me. Remembering their extremely recent history, I can hardly imagine how we sit in the circle together, let alone conduct rational conversations. But we do, step by step, despite denial, obfuscation, revisionist history, distortion, blame and evasion, let alone multiple traumas and unprocessed grief. Each day, over the course of our allotted 3 to 5 days, 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 active, pro-social, anti-discriminatory behaviors, so as to make repatriation possible for those Muslim and

Serb families who wish to return home. We expect our participants to practice and disseminate nonviolent mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflict, and to utilize their communication skills to more honestly address past injustices and perceptions of history. Other goals include developing expanded or "cross-cutting identities," so that participants learn to identify by role and interests as well as by ethnicity, and strengthening cross-border cooperation to actualize their shared visions of what we have named "welcoming schools."

Our teaching methods are participatory, creative and innovative. Our educator-participants, coming from traditionally structured and rigid classrooms, often comment on how much they learn and later adapt from our pedagogical choices. We teach intensively, presenting important concepts new to Bosnians educated under Yugoslavia's Communism: listening and communication skills, causes of violence and the cycles of revenge, behaviors leading to recovery and reconciliation, conflict mapping, personal responses to conflict, theories of prejudice, legacies of stereotyping and social change. At the conclusion to my presentation of the cycles of violence and reconciliation at our most recent workshop, participants fell absolutely still. After some moments I inquired about this unusual silence and Mirko, a Serb teacher, responded by commenting that the themes presented in the cycle felt so powerful that they ought to be introduced on Serbian television.

Since neither my *Projekt Dijakom* partner Ann Hoewing nor I speak Serbo-Croatian or any Bosnian or Serbian dialects, the entire seminar takes place in translation, requiring trust, patience and attention. Our two translators from Zagreb, Lutvija Rokov and Vesna Arsovski do their best to capture the nuances and subtle shades of meaning each participant and trainer brings to the conversation. However, Ann and I often chuckle that our assiduous attention to finding the perfectly correct phrases are lost on the group. Most of the exercises are practiced by the participants in their own common tongue, but all the work in plenary must be translated back and forth. US-Bosnian cultural differences also require management, such as polychronic communication patterns (many people speaking simultaneously) and needs for steady infusions of "kava," strong black Bosnian coffee best enjoyed with cigarettes.

Our workshops are structured carefully to provide a safe container for the wide spectrum of feelings present in the group. We observe participants testing safety, allowing themselves a modicum of vulnerability, self-reflection and personal insight as they feel trust. Slowly, the conversations of Serbs and Muslims who have segregated themselves during breaks in the workshop dissolve into ethnically mixed small groups or pairs, signifying a notable shift in the life of the group. Participants gradually increase their awareness of the enormous post-war problems they all face and acknowledge the long road they must walk toward restoration and healing.

We pay extremely close attention to the rhythms of the group, shifting our agendas and plans 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 challenge to history and memory. At our most recent seminar a painfully divisive issue became the focal point for two days of instruction and practice in nonviolent conflict resolution skills, as well as an opportunity for participants to reflect on their own behaviors within and beyond the group. The conflict was stimulated by a request from a high-status participant that they each be given a "per diem" allowance for attending the seminar, a practice unacceptable to us but followed by some large and well-funded organizations. Due to the power and persistence of the person voicing the request, group members responded based on self-interest and perhaps fear, destabilizing the group and threatening the life of the project. Using a matrix of conflict responses, we explored the dynamics of conflict avoidance, accommodation, control and collaboration, working very hard to discover the deeper dilemmas surfacing for participants. For us as facilitators as well as for participants, the experience shed light on issues of authority, power and autonomy in Bosnian society, critical concerns in this postwar period of establishing civil society and norms of discourse.

We encourage our 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. When the safety of the group container feels threatened by too much denial or collusion, anger or blame, we shift the focus to their roles as educators where they can temporarily be on safer terrain. We alternate the focus between their responsibilities as educators for modeling tolerance with children, families and each other 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 facilitators observe how much learning develops in each present moment of contact between Serb and Muslim group members.

We know that fear, hurt and historical grievances fuel communal aggression. Deeply wounded people can become angry and violent, unable to express their legitimate individual and group needs skillfully. Politicians and media play on these historical memories which lie just beneath the surface of consciousness, helping to perpetuate endless cycles of revenge and counter-violence. As facilitators we need to hold all group members in this light, remembering the hurt and past injustices carried in each one despite their extremely different current circumstances. We also are reminded repeatedly that war damages everyone, albeit differently. We encounter no winners or victors in Bosnia, an observation that helps us manage our own biases so that we can reach out with compassion to each individual.

At the same time, we must not be partners to collusion or revisionism, or to the pretense that all war loss and suffering was equal. We have sufficient testimony and documentation on the atrocities that occurred in Prijedor, and we understand there was also Muslim aggression, although reportedly not on the same scale. We also understand that perhaps half of all current Prijedor residents are also refugees who fled their homes in what is now the Bosnian Federation or Croatia; these Serbs were not in Prijedor during the war. We must be an ally to each group member, but patiently create the conditions for participants on all sides to reveal to themselves their involvement, silent complicity,

prejudice or unspoken support for war. Once self-admitted, we hope that educators will be able to speak more truth to each other, taking responsibility for themselves and their communities, and offering the recognition of victimhood sought by the innocent. Victims require acknowledgement and apology for the wrongs visited upon them, perhaps more than they crave punishment for the aggressors. Perpetrators, on the other hand, frequently seek denial, silence about the atrocities, forgiveness and new beginnings. Until Serbs and Muslims talk about and express remorse about what really happened in Prijedor, Sanski Most and throughout Bosnia, the unspoken stories lie like the proverbial elephant in the middle of the group circle. As facilitators, Ann and I must recognize and honor the developmental stage of each participant regarding war and memory, encouraging self-awareness and fostering acceptance of the perceptions and history of the other. Pushed too quickly, however, the group will retreat, so we tread with care.

We believe that change in society requires the hands and hearts of a multitude of individuals and institutions representing varying sectors of the community. Change will not come through educators or community leaders alone, nor will it occur through politicians without the consent of their constituents. Change is a process requiring movements within multiple sectors of a society simultaneously. Shifting from a culture of war to a culture of peace demands initiatives and engagement at all levels of that society. Bosnians must be the primary actors in building sustainable peace in Bosnia.

Perhaps civil society was not strong enough in Bosnia prior to the war, but one potential outcome of citizen peacebuilding now is the gradual development of citizen empowerment and greater individual and communal responsibility for their lives and fate. Movement toward a just, well-rooted and sustainable peace in Bosnia calls for a transformation in the severed relationships between the ethnic groups. Without that enormously difficult transformational shift, 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 a swift return to familiar norms and comfortable patterns of hate and blame, or even to chaos and counter-violence. Strategies like sustained dialogue encourage and reinforce the immense shifts required to establish new social behaviors. Educators represent a critical visible sector within Bosnian society. We know their acceptance of each other as Serbs and Muslims in Northwest Bosnia is crucial to a sane future for the region. We also acknowledge that their tragic history makes every inter-ethnic conversation an act of courage.

Before we began our first educators' seminar last year, we met separately with the Serb and Muslim teachers selected by the principals to be our participants. (The fact that teachers do not make this decision independently is an example of the controlled society.) The Muslim educators reported that prior to the war many of them had lived and worked in Prijedor and that in 1992 they were told at a district educators' meeting to leave their jobs and never return. For the Muslims, this began the years of expulsion, isolation and abandonment. They brought with them to the dialogue the agonizing question of why the Serbs forsook them in their moment of exile. In our pre-dialogue exploration with Serb educators the following day, we heard nothing of the fateful meeting, but we did learn

how much fear the Serbs carried regarding the coming encounter. Ann and I remember struggling to manage our own anxieties during those first dramatic of the first dialogue, moments of waiting with the Muslims in a half-formed circle with ten empty chairs, not being positive that the Serbs would arrive. When they did appear, the Muslim teachers approached each one, offering a handshake of greeting that was gladly accepted. For both groups this moment was a victory over war 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. On the bright side, several participants have risked potential criticism and censure to initiate follow-through activities for teachers, students and families. Participants from both sides of the *Inter Entity Boundary Line* express enthusiasm for the joint dialogues and some are growing increasingly comfortable with each other. However, xenophobia and racist stereotypes continue. We find that participants over-estimate their tolerance and acceptance of each other and quite thoroughly reject the other's version of history. We observe that Serb educators are unwilling to break through their denial about the Bosnian War and the documented atrocities that occurred in Prijedor. We also do not hear Muslim educators speak about crimes committed by their parties. Ethnic allegiance and identity remain firm on both sides. Rationalizations and justifications for past behaviors remain largely intact. Our translators inform us about accusations, blame and regressive arguments that emerge during breaks, and also about moments of compassion and connection. 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 as a triumph each positive shift of attitude, each gesture of warmth and reconciliation, and each deviation from dominant ideology. Despite the slow pace and backsliding, there are stories to celebrate.

Mira, a Prijedor Serb attended the first educators' seminar and has since been with us for two other dialogue groups. Risking her own reputation and perhaps her career, she organized a 12 person inter-ethnic group of *Projekt Dijakom* "graduates" to meet monthly on Saturdays in either Sanski Most or Prijedor with students from the host community. This provides an opportunity for the teachers to work together and for Muslim and Serb students to be exposed to teachers from the other entity. For many educators and students, this is their first venture into each other's separated worlds. Parents must volunteer to send their children to these events, thus enlarging the circle of commitment. Building on this remarkable initiative, Mira and her colleagues hope to introduce the students to each other when the situation feels safe enough for pupils to travel to each other's entity. I recently received translation of a grant proposal written by Mira and Muslim colleagues requesting funding to expand this Serb-Muslim exchange of teachers and students.

Faik teaches mathematics in Sanski Most, his home community and has participated in two dialogues. He said he "*couldn't resist returning, knowing the leaders and his past*

*experience in the seminar.*" A serious thinker, Faik observed that the dialogue groups were the most important educational event happening in the region. Following our dialogue model, he has instituted similar "ground rules" in his classroom, which he asserts prevent stereotyping and discrimination. Alija, another Muslim male returnee for a second seminar, reported that everything the dialogues taught him about tolerance *"reflects in his classroom."* Lastly, a school counselor named Nada from Prijedor expressed experiencing so much learning and knowledge that she wants the dialogues *"to never stop."* Asked about *Projekt Dijakom* by her own teenagers, Nada now offers Serb adolescents workshops on tolerance and community building. These initiatives and reflections from participants provide feedback to us that the seeds of peace sown in the groups reach fertile soil among some of our Serb and Muslim educators, their families and their schools. In the next two years we hope to reach as many educators in the two cities as feasible, as well as develop a core group of future dialogue facilitators. Because they have no access to bookstores or libraries in these destroyed, isolated and economically depressed cities, we are currently gathering materials on group process, leadership, social change, healing and reconciliation printed in Serbo-Croatian for our future dialogue leaders.

Emsuda, who drew me to Sanski Most 3 years ago, continues to forge ahead, now rebuilding her demolished home in the totally ravished village of Kozarac, a small settlement near Prijedor where 90% of the residents had been Muslim. Refusing to give victory to "ethnic cleansing," she and other Muslim families reclaimed their property and with the help of generous European governments and NGOs, reconstructed the homes. Whether they can reconstruct a life as Muslim residents in the Serb Republic remains to be seen. Serbs who assist in their return may risk censure from members of their own community who will remind them how much they sacrificed to become an "ethnically pure" Serb state. This time, however, we trust that some Prijedor Serbs will use their newly acquired behaviors and skills as allies on behalf of returning Muslims. Someday perhaps the Muslims in Sanski Most will have an opportunity to accept returning Serbs. As families repatriate in both directions we hope the educators in *Projekt Dijakom* will confidently and proudly reach out their hands in welcome, preparing the way for a future where conflicts are transformed by dialogue and mutual respect.

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