

CONTACT

TRAINING A NEW GENERATION OF PEACEBUILDERS

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Standing by helplessly as we watch our world devour itself in orgies of greed, hatred, abused power and violence is more than many of us can bear. On all continents, members of war-torn communities and witnesses from afar feel called to respond to the conflicts plaguing our current era. The new field of *peacebuilding* has emerged especially in response to post Cold War, identity-based local and regional conflicts. With this emerging field arises the need to train peacebuilders, those who will carry out the work of conflict prevention and resolution in the next generation. CONTACT, an innovative and person-centered education and training program, is one such response.

Indeed the Post-Cold War era has witnessed an inordinate number of violent conflicts involving diverse cultural and religious groups, many of long duration and all resulting in extreme suffering, dislocation and devastation of the bonds of community and decency. It will take decades to recover from the physical destruction, and generations to heal from the seeds of betrayal, distrust and hatred sown by intercommunal warfare.

When betrayal appears to be based on religious and cultural differences, a legacy of enmity passes from the generation of victims to their descendants. Holocaust research now reports the presence of secondary trauma among *third* generation families of survivors, which will likely be replicated among survivor families in other genocides. Less obvious but also documented is the suffering of perpetrators and their families, where guilt and shame, rage and revenge, or helplessness and isolation hinder recovery and may spark further intercommunal violence.

Many of us believe that the international community should assume responsibility for the prevention and healing of intercommunal conflict, for both altruistic and selfish reasons. A community at war is inherently unstable and dangerous, both for itself and the world. With the hundreds of wars fought in recent decades, we now face a global population of some 30-50 million refugees and an even larger and uncountable number of traumatized individuals and societies. Many of those traumatized by armed conflict are children, who will make decisions in the next generation. Decisions made by angry, aggrieved, disenfranchised and abused populations will be neither rationale nor reconciling, but more likely vengeful and destructive. The cycles of inter-religious and inter-cultural enmity will continue. Warfare, already dominant in the global mind, threatens to become further entrenched and glorified as the only instrument to address religious and cultural grievances and to solve conflicts.

The international community has failed in its obligation to behave as a community of moral concern, not because it lacks the tools but because it seems to lack the will or the motivation to act beyond narrow self-interests. Furthermore, nation-states resist intervention in intrastate conflict, preferring agreements that keep the precedent of sovereignty inviolable, thus preventing third party checks on intercommunal warfare.

Beneath the Surface of Religious and Cultural Conflicts

Although most conflicts involving culture and religion currently are fought within state boundaries, the roots of these conflicts extend beyond the nation-state to include the interests of external stakeholders. Interlocked sources of armed conflict such as unjust economic and political arrangements, massive arms trade, poverty, inequitable distribution of land, water and other natural resources, failed post-colonial governments,

centuries of exploitation, historical grievances, and misuse of power, may be framed or misconstrued as conflicts of identity, religion and culture.

Identity or religious and cultural differences seldom, if ever, *cause* armed conflict but are frequently exploited to foment conflict. Popular leaders may evoke sacred images or historical memories to incite violence, manipulating populations for private gain or glory and creating the *illusion* that religious or cultural differences are provoking war. Competition for scarce resources, and at a deeper level greed, anger, fear and misguided notions of separateness, more likely underlie the causes of war. Religious or cultural fundamentalism may stimulate conflict, but fundamentalism often masks a deeper fear of annihilation, a sense troubling many cultural and religious groups today that global homogeneity, aggressive commercialism and diminishing resources will displace their centuries-old practices and patterns of culture.

Religion, culture, ethnicity and identity *per se* do not *cause* rampant intercommunal violence, but function rather as banners to which communities rally in the search for protection from complex and menacing forces of change. Applying the label of *identity-based conflict* masks the complex macro forces and deep existential fears confronting the human family. Thus we understand the phrase *religious and cultural conflicts* to stand in for an aggregation of subterranean issues that fuel contemporary violence.

Training for Transformation

We come now to the issue of responding to our catastrophic global quandary. A full analysis of the sources of armed conflict or the possible responses lie beyond the scope of this paper. We will focus attention on one modest response to the problems of conflicting ethnic and religious communities: the training of Track Two peacebuilders within a multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-ethnic learning environment.

What do we know about contact and prejudice? We know that cultural isolation breeds stereotypes and an exaggeration of the worst characteristics of the “other.” Relationship reduces fear of difference and enables adversaries to meet each other beyond the prevailing distortions and mythologies that community members are taught to hold about particular “others.” We have learned from Yugoslavia, however, that proximity does not prevent the reawakening of prejudices by cynical leadership.

While contact by itself offers an insufficient promise of intercommunal harmony or social responsibility, we know that we can inoculate against some hatreds and prejudices through exposure. Although relationship does not guarantee a contract of equity or social justice, it is often a pre-condition for social change, a task much harder to manage in the abstract, without living beings representing themselves and their needs. Furthermore, contact is essential to communication and thus to creating, managing and maintaining peace agreements. We often refer to this as *social peacebuilding*.

Many of us engaged in the training of peacebuilders have witnessed remarkable transformation among participants in multicultural educational settings. In the best of circumstances, participants in training experience empathy, build loyalties across differences, and forge a genuine culture of peace, foreshadowing a future we hope they will strive to create. Replicating these transformational experiences within training settings and beyond the educational environment can create opportunities for adversaries to build the trust and alliances essential to resolving conflicts.

We would thus ideally seek to educate large numbers of peacebuilders who understand the causes and complexities of contemporary conflict and who have attained a sufficient level of self-insight, multicultural competence and functional skills. Peacebuilders would be able to work with communities in conflict to separate real from imagined threats, develop constituencies to support change, and facilitate mutual problem solving.

Conflict Resolution, a new and burgeoning academic field, has already emerged to help guide our comprehension of, and response to the rising tide of ethnic violence in the post-Cold War world. *Conflict Transformation* moves the field to an even more demanding threshold of application and practice, aiming at the development in the individual of an inclusive sense of community that embraces the “other,” as well as learning strategies to change unjust systems and oppressive structures.

Conflict transformation education seeks to educate peacebuilders who will influence their own communities, work cross-culturally with the identified “other” in their region and/or serve globally in conflict prevention and management through governments, non-government organizations, religious and secular institutions, the academy, media, the private sector and elsewhere. *Their training should be relationship-focused, process-oriented, self-reflective and empathic.* Such education would support self-awareness, inner development, skill building, and theoretical understanding of the characteristics and structural sources of war and violence within conflict-habituated regional, national and global systems.

Self-awareness or consciousness involves recognizing and monitoring the flow of thoughts and emotions in the mind so that one’s behavior is ethical, principled and clear rather than dictated by negative thought-forms or conditioned feelings. Skill building includes learning competencies beneficial to managing conflicts, such as multicultural communication expertise, dialogue and group facilitation, problem solving, consensus process, negotiation and mediation. Conflict theory includes: understanding the multiple and inter-related sources of contemporary armed conflict; developing the ability to analyze the needs and motivations of stakeholders in a particular conflict region; recognizing repetitive cycles of vengeance or escalation in deep-rooted conflict systems, and using these analytic tools to apply appropriate and timely interventions to prevent or check violence and warfare.

Training for peacebuilders currently follows two compatible and overlapping models: an international focus with a mixed group or a local/regional focus designed to prevent or ameliorate armed conflict within a specific locality. The latter encourages relationship-building among conflictants within the region and develops objectives and strategies for intervention based on the local context. International training for peacebuilders offers a more broad, generic framework which participants can apply to their own local and regional armed conflicts, and the possibility of escape from parochial prejudices to a more universal worldview. Successful programs in international training include Responding to Conflict in England and Eastern Mennonite University’s Summer Peacebuilding Institute and the School for International Training’s CONTACT Program, both in the US.

International conflict transformation education should be offered in various locations around the world, facilitated by international teams of seasoned peacebuilders who themselves come from diverse cultural communities and have wide experience in conflict regions. The trainers would ideally create a learning environment where adult participants from a broad range of religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds can share their experiences, feelings and beliefs in safety and mutual respect. Training designs should reflect varied, culturally sensitive conflict resolution practices, encouraging indigenous

modalities as well as western-developed models. Healing and reconciliation, prejudice-reduction, tolerance toward unfamiliar views, experimentation with new behaviors, and recognition of the violence and hatred within our own hearts should be part of a transforming curriculum.

We can identify several overlapping needs in the field: to *prevent* further outbreaks of inter-ethnic conflict throughout the world, to *heal* individuals from the enmity and trauma of communal violence, and to *reconcile* shattered communities so that a shared future might be possible. To be effective leaders in conflict prevention, healing and reconciliation, peacebuilders must enter their own process of recovery, healing and reconciliation, know themselves deeply, meet the “other,” and guard against the tendencies toward enmity and separation that plague the human mind.

Without exposure to perceived “enemies,” without awareness training and attentiveness, and despite good cognitive education, those who seek to build peace without pacifying their own hearts may compound the problem and perhaps fall short of embracing a more inclusive and tolerant model of human relations. “*All humankind is one*” is an easy truth to speak, but a difficult ethic to live. For transformative peacebuilding education, the experience of our kinship and our common ground must be lived and internalized. *Personal healing, inner transformation and interpersonal experience with other conflict survivors across cultures is as crucial in this field as theoretical knowledge and skills development.*

Testing the Model

My convictions are borne out of my experience at the School for International Training in the US where we developed a program called CONTACT, or Conflict Transformation Across Cultures. In June 2000 we welcomed our fourth annual class, 80 participants over a four-week period from all continents, approximately 30 countries and most of the world’s major religious traditions. Participants ranged in age from 20’s-70’s and represented a variety of professions, including law, education, social work, NGO management, academics, psychology, religion, engineering and business. In many cases our students came from opposing sides of a conflict, such as Israelis and Palestinians, Serbs, Croats, Macedonians and Bosnians from the Yugoslav Successor States, Sri Lankan Tamils and Sinhalese, and Armenians and Azerbaijanis from the Caucasus.

Our core course for peacebuilders became an interactive laboratory where group members explored their differences, investigated their impulses toward violence and revenge, tested their beliefs, exposed their wounds and aired their religious and cultural worldviews. Community-building facilitated understanding, multicultural sensitivity and healing. Participants marveled continually at their ability and inclination to make friends with the “other,” be that other a culturally perceived “enemy” or someone of different race, culture, religion, geographic origin, gender or sexual orientation. It was of high significance to a Bosnian Muslim that his best friend during the course was an Armenian Christian. A religious Muslim found it critical to engage in intense conversation with a lesbian on issues of homosexuality. South Africans from across the racial divide co-facilitated a discussion on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, not in complete agreement but in a working partnership. German and Jewish participants encountered their historic link in an exercise on reconciliation, while Palestinians and Israelis as well as former Yugoslavs committed to joint future work. A Macedonian woman, in tears of grief and relief, told the group that she had found for the first time the friends she had lost in the Balkan Wars.

Students learned that the “other” is not the enemy. *The enemy is injustice and structural violence, which in turn is rooted in negative, fear-based human qualities we share, such as greed, malice and selfishness.* Participants saw that suffering occurs on both sides of a conflict, among victims and also among perpetrators. Group members learned to contextualize their own conflict within a world caught in an orgy of violence and enmity, not isolated, random or without cause. They felt less alone with their pain, less reactive, more concerned with the universal human endeavor to reach beyond differences. They learned to see their lives in the context of a universal tragedy of ethnic warfare currently tearing apart the world. Their suffering became the material of learning and transformation.

Our tasks as facilitators included monitoring the cognitive, affective and skill-building dimensions of the course, maintaining the focus, introducing learning materials, retrieving theories from direct experience, and constantly building a container large and fluid enough to embrace the vast differences of our learning community. Throughout the core course and the electives, we created a *culture of peace*, providing an opportunity and a model, the first for many participants, to manage the tension between diversity and homogeneity, accepting genuine difference while maintaining harmony in a multicultural community. Intimate exposure to people of such diversity offered liberation from the blinding confines of particular tragedies into an understanding of conflict at once more relative and universal. A palpable spirit of peace stimulated an outflow of empathy and compassion.

Shifts in attitude and behavior cannot be “taught” intellectually; they are learned through encounter. We observed religious, racial and ethnic stereotypes and prejudices replaced by genuine relationships. New friends from radically different cultures and religions provided a means of escape from the absolutism in one’s own background. Hardbound ideologies shifted. Impacted, intractable ideas and beliefs became softer. Participants within their own setting have a difficult time seeing their ethnic conflict through a wider lens. Group pressure often keeps them frozen in “us/them” paradigms. However, these same participants, released from the constriction of polarization by the presence of an international community, more readily unfreeze, shift and universalize.

Fifty group members from twenty-five countries in a core course in peacebuilding cannot build authentic relationships without conflict, especially when that group includes so many who are considered “other” by virtue of their membership in a different religion, culture, class or global region. The group practiced skills of conflict transformation through inter-personal and inter-group conflicts, learned cross-cultural communication through trial and error, managed vastly diverse political and religious viewpoints, and experienced healing and reconciliation directly with each other, later extrapolating each of these lessons to build theory and application.

We felt the effect of war trauma on classmates and lived with each other’s suffering and broken hearts. The fragility of many group members fostered our understanding that recovery from war evolves slowly and that the movement toward reconciliation is long and arduous. Particular conflict arose for this group around a spectrum exercise on issues of violence and nonviolence. Many who had directly experienced the threat or the actuality of armed conflict or interpersonal violence felt conflicted about nonviolence as a feasible theoretical moral choice for peacebuilders. A heartfelt process of conflict transformation followed as group members revealed biographical histories that continue to shape ethical dilemmas and strategic decisions.

The Journey Forward

Before they returned to their own communities, the CONTACT group established Internet communication to encourage exchange of information and future shared projects. Additionally, for the first time in 2000, CONTACT began a yearlong distance learning program, which will provide more cognitive learning and an exposure trip to a region in conflict for twenty students motivated to acquire more academic knowledge of the field.

We know these peacebuilders return to families and colleagues who have not changed as they have in their month of training. Many face an arduous reentry journey to very different circumstances, including war-ravaged and divided communities, cultural isolation and entrenched hopelessness. Transitioning from the heights of a bonded peacebuilding community to meet colleagues who have been deprived of such liberating experiences can create loneliness and a sense of futility and defeat.

However, group members who have risked and encountered each other at deep levels, celebrated and grieved together, and experienced a peace-able community, have savored an undreamed-of reality. A vision of the possible has been seen. Unity has been discovered in the midst of difference and turmoil. Dissension has been managed; conflict has not resulted in loss or violence, in hatred or disconnection. These seeds of peace will not be neglected. Something new will grow through their skills, their confidence and their transformation.

As I communicate with former participants around the world, I hear about their commitments and engagement. A Sri Lankan professor now facilitates inter-ethnic dialogue for local politicians. A Palestinian NGO leader developed a bi-communal youth camp. An American offers psychological skills for trauma counseling in Bosnia. An Armenian has designed her Ph.D. studies to bridge peacebuilding and economics.

Loyalty to Life Itself

We need to honor their efforts by increasing the number of self-reflective, deeply engaged peacebuilders worldwide, supporting their ongoing development, nurturing their initiatives and linking them in an interconnected web. Our troubled world could use an “army” of peacebuilders. Those of us in the forefront of education and training, who hope our work might prevent future violent conflicts, need the visible and tangible advocacy of esteemed international leaders such as Nobel Peace Laureates to endorse, encourage and invigorate the training and education of peacebuilders.

Our survival depends on a significant portion of the human race accomplishing a change in worldview, from one of patriotic and tribal loyalties to loyalty to life itself.

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For more information: www.sit.edu/conflict and <www.karunacenter.org>

