

## CHAPTER FOUR

# THE PIVOTAL ROLE OF ACKNOWLEDGEMENT IN SOCIAL HEALING

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Violent conflict may erupt rapidly, spreading like a wild fire to devastate the land and its inhabitants, or emerge slowly through a process of increasing oppression and deprivation. However violence and atrocities arrive, social healing and physical reconstruction follow the devastation. In our densely populated global commons, there are no empty lands in which groups may settle after they have murdered—or members of their community have been murdered by—their neighbours. Former enemies must forever share the same land and resources, making it essential that they rebuild shattered communal relationships in order to coexist, cooperate and eventually reunite. Acknowledgement of harms done begins this long and painful process of social healing.

The admission or recognition by perpetrators or bystanders that crimes were committed and that victims suffered intensely from those violations creates an opening for a process of social reconstruction. Generous expressions of compassion and concern for victims can serve as a psychological bridge from the tragic past to a secure future. While cultural and historic differences create specific and particular needs from one setting to the next, acknowledgement by members of perpetrating communities about the anguish they or their identity group have inflicted, as well as acceptance of the moral repugnance of their actions, is a core common element that lays the foundation for future apology, atonement, compensation, forgiveness and ultimately, reconciliation.

Victims, whose lives and communities have been shattered by brutality, are helped in their recovery process when members of the aggressor community wrestle with the causes of the genocide or mass violence and engage in a full process of introspection, admission of responsibility, repentance and reassurance about future safety. Anything less comprehensive leaves victim communities frozen in their recovery,

anxious about the future. Yet acknowledgement, which is absolutely essential to victims, is staggeringly difficult for perpetrating communities. For them, acknowledgement comes at a great price to the psyche; it evokes pain, shame and guilt about their own bystander or perpetrator status and about the destructive behaviour of members of their ethnic, religious or national reference group. Group self-deception and denial protect against their wounded and dishonoured collective identity. At the same time, acknowledgement can be a liberating process for perpetrators, substituting for shame and isolation the deep satisfaction of moral reclamation and inclusion.

While forgiveness in the absence of acknowledgement may, for some victims, constitute a personal choice to let go of the psychological burden of victimisation, it is unlikely that authentic, stable relationships between victim and perpetrator groups—which constitute the foundation for *sustainable* reconciliation—truly can evolve without the rectifying power of acknowledgement. “Acknowledgement by others of the victim’s moral injuries is a central element of the healing process” (Rotberg and Thompson 2000, 245; cf. Charles Griswold’s conditions for forgiveness in chapter five).

This chapter will reflect on the lessons learned about acknowledgement and social healing through the peacebuilding fieldwork of the author, whose experiences have been gleaned from postwar dialogues between victim and perpetrator communities, social reconstruction training programmes after armed conflict, second-generation encounters and practitioner-based learning communities. It draws on years of working in conflict environments in the Balkans, Asia, Africa, Israel-Palestine and with specific communities in the US.

### **Origin of the Acknowledgement Inquiry**

Following the cessation of armed violence in Bosnia in 1995, I was invited to develop a peacebuilding and social healing programme with women and educators in two cities of Northern Bosnia: Sanski Most and Prijedor. Prior to the war in Bosnia, these two cities had been home to diverse populations of Muslim and Serbian residents, with a minority of Croatians. As elsewhere in Bosnia, families were mixed, and frequently married without knowledge of the ancestral identities of their new relatives. Religious and ethnic origins had been submerged under President Tito’s banner of *Unity and brotherhood*. Tito’s Yugoslavia was relatively prosperous, peaceful and content; its residents enjoyed summer homes on

the Croatian coast, sufficient rural employment, thriving cosmopolitan city centres and passports for foreign travel.

Tito's death, the fall of Communism and the rising power of Milosevic changed everything. Within a decade, Yugoslavia collapsed, war destroyed Bosnia, new Balkan countries came into being, and ethnic identity became the full and, unfortunately, only marker of an individual's place in the reconstituted post-Yugoslavian world. During the Bosnian War, diverse communities in Sanski Most and Prijedor ceased to exist. An estimated 58,000 Bosnian Muslims, now known as Bosniaks, were expelled from Prijedor by Serb forces and paramilitaries in three days in 1992, their homes looted and blown up behind them. The Muslim population was, to use a phrase coined in this war, "ethnically cleansed" from Prijedor through death, expulsion or intimidation, scattered throughout the Balkans and beyond, and later often resettled in Sanski Most. At the same time, most of the Serbs living in Sanski Most joined their ethnic group in Prijedor (Green 2000a).

Between 1992 and 1995, when the war raged in Bosnia, three camps for extermination, torture and holding—Omarska, Trnopolje and Keraterm—were established in Prijedor and filled with Muslims from the city and surrounding villages. A British reporter, through his photos of starving prisoners, exposed these notorious camps to the world in 1992, three years before the end of the Bosnian War (Stover and Weinstein 2004, 9). During and after the war, Bosnians and the international community knew about the camps. In fact, many of the participants in my groups had been imprisoned within them. When I began work in Bosnia in 1997, my attempts to visit the camps were rebuffed by armed guards. As I observed the immensely strong resistance on the part of Prijedor Serb group participants to acknowledge the existence of the camps, my interest in understanding the role of acknowledgement grew. I observed the struggles of acknowledging the camps through years of interchanges between Serbs and Muslims, as well as through the general resistance of Prijedor Serbs to verify publicly the violence that engulfed their city. Such behaviour, observed during repeated engagements in Sanski Most and Prijedor from 1997 to 2002 in Project DiaCom, the Project for Dialogue and Community Building in Bosnia, motivated this study.

## **Defining Acknowledgement and Social Healing**

Acknowledgement in relation to communal violence brings to the surface what is hidden, unveils new aspects of truth and pushes against denial or distortion of historical events. It implies more than adding knowledge; it

offers recognition, confirmation and admission of what has transpired. Acknowledgement serves as a foundational step, hopefully leading to further levels of reconciliation and forgiveness. Without acknowledgement, victims feel unseen, their losses unconfirmed by the world and their experiences discounted. Individual victims often feel distraught by the denial of perpetrators, especially in circumstances of direct violence. Non-validation of their circumstances exacerbates the rage and bitterness of victim communities. “Acknowledgement is a basic precondition before individual survivors can reestablish the capacity to trust other people and to trust the government” (Rotberg and Thompson 2000, 246). Victims and perpetrators remain caught in a mutually destructive web; neither can move forward, release the burdens of the past or build a joint future.

The emerging concept of social healing can broadly be defined as the reconstruction of communal relations after mass violence. Less familiar than reconciliation and forgiveness, the term is broader, more spacious and perhaps more appropriate in scope for what is realistic in the immediacy of postwar recovery. Reconciliation and forgiveness may be years or decades in the making, more demanding than many victims can manage early in their recovery process, and counter-productive if pushed on societies too quickly by outsiders.

The necessary conditions for reconciliation between formerly antagonistic parties can only be realized over time. Moving beyond the divisions of the past is a multi-dimensional process that can take generations and the different constitutive elements involved in the journey toward reconciliation can rarely be pursued all at the same time. (Rigby 2001, 183)

Social healing, however, asks only that postwar communities begin the process of restoring relations so that they can coexist, make decisions together and rebuild their destroyed commons. Often a prelude to reconciliation and forgiveness, social healing can emerge through initiatives that re-humanise broken relations, rebuild trust, normalise daily life and restore hope. These initiatives are often the provenance of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) engaged in postwar humanitarian and development efforts. Third party interventions can serve as an early bridge to help antagonistic communities join in common reconstruction tasks, shared aid delivery and other physical, economic or social activities that become the building blocks of re-engagement and social healing.

Stover and Weinstein have selected the term “social reconstruction” to define a set of objectives for communities emerging from violent conflict.

They suggest that “reconciliation is a murky concept with multiple meanings” (2004, 5) and believe that social reconstruction may be a more accessible goal.

We define social reconstruction as a process that reaffirms and develops a society and its institutions based on shared values and human rights. It is a process that includes a broad range of programmatic interventions [...] that work together and at multiple levels of society—the individual, neighborhood, community, and state—to address the factors that led to the conflict. (ibid.)

Social healing shares the same parameters. Sincere and unambiguous acknowledgement of oppression and violence is a critical element in social reconstruction and healing. Memories and emotional wounds that persist after mass violence can be acknowledged and integrated through community efforts to participate in collective mourning, rituals, memorialising and re-building all that has been lost, from physical infrastructure and political and social institutions to the more intimate spheres of community life. A vision of renewed social and political arrangements that is endorsed by media and supported by educational programmes can encourage communities to create a more promising shared future. Large public processes like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) may not emerge in all nations recovering from war for reasons of political resistance, economic hardship, lack of infrastructure or fear of prosecution for those in power. All recovering nations and communities, however, will likely embark on at least some rudimentary form of community healing and social restoration, frequently drawn from their own traditions. Many African communities, such as in Somalia, will convene councils of elders and engage in rituals of exchange and compensation to restore social harmony. In certain regions of the world, religious leaders may help to heal the wounds of war and oppression, especially if they have not been collaborators in the violence, as exemplified by Archbishop Tutu in South Africa. Traditional chiefs may reintegrate child soldiers, as practised in Uganda or Mozambique (see chapter ten for a detailed analysis of the reintegration of former child soldiers in Northern Uganda). Both violent conflict and its antidotes exist throughout history and cultures. Unfortunately, the remedies do not last permanently and new conflicts emerge with their own need for social healing.

## Levels of Acknowledgement

### Acknowledgement on a Political Level

Acknowledgement in postwar peacebuilding can range from the most personal (such as with individual perpetrators, victims and families) to the most political—exemplified through public TRC processes or via acknowledgements of atrocities by heads of state. It might not induce further action, or may be the prelude to apologies, reparations, new political arrangements, commitments to a shared and safe future, and to eventual forgiveness and reconciliation (for a detailed discussion of political apology see chapter nine by Don Foster). It is the absence of acknowledgement that leaves victim groups much less able to begin the long journey of personal and social healing. In Sanski Most and Prijedor, the silence of Bosnian Serbs after the war, their refusal to admit the existence of the three prison camps and their inability or unwillingness to confirm the extent of violence perpetrated by many Bosnian Serbs on the Muslim population, contributed to the difficulties of recovery for the victim community. Muslim members of our peacebuilding workshops exploded in anger and tears when, after five years in this dialogue process, a Serb group member named Nada understated the 1992 expulsion of the Muslims as the time the Muslims “left” Prijedor. Captured on the video, *Communities in dialogue: Healing the wounds of war*, this moment became emblematic of the gulf that existed between the two communities despite five years of dialogue and exchange (see [www.karunacenter.org](http://www.karunacenter.org)). For the Bosnian Serbs in the workshops, their lack of acknowledgement to the Muslims kept them at some remove from their own complex emotions, which we may assume included guilt, shame and their perceived sense of powerlessness as bystanders. It is also likely that Serb strongmen in the community, in order to protect themselves, applied great pressure on Prijedor residents to remain silent about atrocities committed and witnessed.

On the international stage, the Armenian genocide in the early days of the twentieth century has never been acknowledged by Turkey, and indeed remains disputed by Turkish politicians, historians and ordinary citizens. According to Samantha Power, an estimated one million Armenians perished in this genocide (2002, xix). Ninety years later, Armenian descendants still call for both Turkish and international recognition of their suffering and a more honest appraisal of their history. Invited to give lectures by the Department of Conflictology at the University of Yerevan in Armenia, my audience revealed their sensitivity regarding acknowledgement of their genocide, asking for my affirmation of their

history in the opening moments of my remarks. Without that acknowledgement, I would have had little positive impact on my listeners.

In contrast to the Turkish-Armenian situation, other heads of state have made public gestures that at least set the record straight (Minow 1998). Former German Chancellor Willy Brandt acknowledged German responsibility for the Holocaust in the old Jewish ghetto of Warsaw, Poland and Prime Minister Murayana of Japan acknowledged and apologised for Japanese atrocities that were committed during the Second World War. The Canadian government has acknowledged historic wrongdoing to its indigenous population. UK Prime Minister Tony Blair acknowledged British responsibility for the Irish famine, and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has acknowledged and apologised for the treatment of the Aborigines by other Australians (cf. chapter nine). Public acknowledgement by officials helps to repair the integrity of perpetrating nations, makes the suffering of victims visible to the entire world through the media coverage afforded politicians and establishes a norm of social responsibility and recognition of harms done. Acknowledgement by political, religious and social leaders also aids in the “formulation of a shared history” (Brounéus and Wallenstein 2007, 4) and, at best, establishes the first phases of a new moral order. Difficult though it may be to confess to guilt, shame and immoral behaviour, acknowledgement and atonement by public figures has widespread value. “Publicly acknowledging the suffering of the victim [...] constitutes a contemporary form of justice in its own right” (Rotberg and Thompson 2002, 268).

Sometimes, acknowledgement includes reparations of land, social benefits or monetary compensation, whereas in other circumstances it is the very fear of compensatory claims that prevents the acknowledgement. Many believe that fear of financial and social reparation demands from the US African-American and Native American populations prevents presidential acknowledgement of the tragedies of slavery or the extermination of native populations. In Japan, the issue of Second World War “comfort women”, or sex slaves, has been hotly contested because of demands by the now-elderly women of Korea and other nations in the region for reparations. However, reparations may be “the most tangible and visible expression of both acknowledgement and change in the aftermath of mass human rights abuses” (Stover and Weinstein 2004, 28).

The dynamics of political acknowledgement are calibrated between what must be done morally, what it will cost financially, who receives protection and what gains might accrue politically. Because of the complexity and possibly high personal stakes involved, political acknowledgement is often withheld or given gingerly. Purely symbolic

acknowledgements of responsibility and remorse from officials do carry some weight, but remain rather light without promise of substantive compensation and a solid pledge of justice and future ethical behaviour.

In addition, we must also bear in mind the complexity of historical situations, which are deeply intertwined and interdependent, with culpability spread over centuries of tangled international relations. For example, a civil war arising in Sri Lanka has roots in British colonialism and its favouring Tamils over the Sinhalese majority. The 1994 genocide in Rwanda arose not in a vacuum but through the history of Belgian colonials privileging Tutsis over Hutus. Parents of Serbs who murdered Bosnian Muslims in the Bosnian War of 1992–95 were imprisoned and murdered in Croatian concentration camps in the Second World War. This raises the question of where political acknowledgement begins and ends. While perpetrators cannot simply blame past history for their current violent behaviour, in order to set the historical record straight, the international community must grapple with the enduring consequences of invasion and discrimination and acknowledge the cyclical nature of history, where perpetrators become victims and vice versa.

### **Acknowledgement on a Personal Level**

On the level of personal acknowledgement for second-generation descendants of victims of genocide and mass violence and their counterparts on the perpetrator side, German–Jewish dialogue groups of recent years provide strong insight into the mutual benefits of acknowledgement and relationship building (cf. chapter two by Beata Hammerich et al.). Martina Emme, the granddaughter of a Nazi soldier and a German member of one such group called One by One (see [www.one-by-one.org](http://www.one-by-one.org)) reports that group dialogues which acknowledge the past and name the truth help break the silence and heal the lingering wounds of war for the second generation. Descendants of perpetrators often live with family fabrications about the role of their kin in genocide or mass violence. Aware of inconsistencies in the family narrative, they are discouraged from biographical investigation and compelled to live with lies and shadows. Solidarity with the descendants of victims helps them integrate their own histories and manage the internal shame they carry for the behaviour of their elders. Martina Emme, interviewed by Nick Grabbe on 16 April 2005, conveyed her experience of dialogue with Jewish members of One by One: “Everything connected with the past was something bad, something painful, so one shouldn’t mention it. Now the only people I feel close to are the people who want to find the truth.”



In other countries, groups of Israelis and Palestinians, Northern Irish, Cypriot and other contemporary or second-generation victims, perpetrators and their descendants meet for dialogue and mutual understanding, attempting to redress the past and build bridges of relationship for the future. In a 2001 dialogue organised by the Karuna Center in Sri Lanka, a country torn by war and ethnic enmity for more than two decades, group members acknowledged the responsibility for violence borne by *all* sides. A participant named Raju, a Tamil and therefore minority Sri Lankan whose ethnic group has largely been the underdog against the national army, responded to acknowledgement of his own victimhood by observing that “we are all in one big pot of suffering” (Dreier and Green 2002, 93). Having received recognition for what the Tamils endured, Raju then acknowledged that despite their ethnic differences and positions in the war, individuals on opposing sides of the conflict all experience the shared grief and loss that is the legacy of communal violence.

In postwar dialogues between members of warring factions, attempts by participants in the perpetrating community to liken their own distress with the agony of victims, can feel to victims like a diminution of their massive losses and denial of responsibility and reality by perpetrators. Bosnian–Muslim dialogue participants felt dismissed when their Serb colleagues referred to mutual suffering during the Bosnian War. To the Muslims, it felt like the Serbs were attempting to equate the suffering on both sides, to create symmetry when the Muslims had experienced asymmetrical wielding of Serb military and state power. Only after the Serbs acknowledged the extreme impact of the genocide on the victims, could the Muslims, like the Sri Lankans mentioned above, admit that perpetrator communities also suffer in wartime (Green 2000a).

Among perpetrators, a motivated forgetfulness of their own wrongdoing, accompanied by the hope that the victims will quickly forget past sufferings, is not uncommon [...] Acknowledgement is awkward, deeply embarrassing, and unlikely to be achieved voluntarily or smoothly. However, the demand (by perpetrators) that past injustices be forgotten [...] inflicts further damage. Asking victims to forget past evils is to treat them as if no great wrong has been done to them, as if they have nothing to feel resentful about. This can only diminish them further. (Rotberg and Thompson 2000, 52–56)

Acknowledgement thus can be seen as vital to interpersonal, communal and political processes of postwar recovery. It can signify and promote safety and truth-telling, help victims regain their basic social, political and economic well-being and dignity, enable perpetrators to integrate

disowned parts of themselves, and endorse a future based on justice, respect and human rights.

## **The Power of Acknowledgement**

In my work with Serbs and Muslims in Bosnia, two breakthrough moments of acknowledgement leading to social healing may be identified. The first involved Milka, one of the Serb educators engaged with her Muslim counterparts for six years of dialogue and peacebuilding. Unlike her Serb colleagues in the programme, Milka was quite forthcoming about her memories of war in Prijedor, better able to connect with the Muslims, and the only Serb group member who fully acknowledged the atrocities committed by Serb military and paramilitary forces against the Muslim population of Bosnia. Milka's breaking with the silence of the Serbs encouraged some reluctant acknowledgement by other Serbs in the group, and began a process of engagement in social healing by the larger educational establishment in Prijedor. Unfortunately, Milka's acknowledgement isolated her from her Serb colleagues in Project DiaCom,<sup>1</sup> a price often paid by those who challenge the taboos of silence. Today Milka and Vahidin, a Muslim member of Project DiaCom, co-facilitate intercommunal peacebuilding and dialogue programmes for educators in both Sanski Most and Prijedor, and bring groups of students together across the divides that still separate the two cities.

The other acknowledgement event that shifted the group was far more dramatic and incisive. After several years of intense facilitation work with Project DiaCom, I invited four members of One by One, the German-Jewish dialogue group discussed above, to join me for a multilevel dialogue process in Sanski Most and Prijedor (Green 2003). Two Jewish second-generation group members plus two German members, one a first-generation German Protestant minister, came to Bosnia to participate in the dialogues and especially to share their insights about the necessity of confronting the truth in the first generation. After an initial round of introductions, Gottfried, the German minister, immediately and tearfully acknowledged German complicity in the Balkans in the Second World War as well as German reluctance to intervene actively in preventing the destruction of Bosnia in 1992. His honesty and raw emotions riveted the Bosnians, unused to such emotional openness, especially from men. In the following days of dialogue, Mary, a Jewish One by One participant who was raised in Romania and felt at home in the landscape and culture of Bosnia, shared her biography and the loss of her family in Auschwitz. As the Bosnian Serbs demonstrated their empathy for Mary, a Bosnian

Muslim member of Project DiaCom named Muhamed blurted out through his tears that the Serbs showed more compassion for Mary, a stranger, than they ever had for him, a fellow Bosnian and fellow group member who had been imprisoned, starved and tortured in one of the unspoken-about Serb camps in Prijedor.

Muhamed's pain stopped the group. His longing for acknowledgement from his Serb colleagues and their incapacity to offer that to him demonstrated the lack of recognition of war crimes in Project DiaCom and thus the inability even to think about reconciliation or forgiveness. The Serbs, unwilling to admit the presence of prison camps in their city, struggling to acknowledge even to themselves the extent of atrocities perpetrated by members of their community, perhaps by their own family members, shut out the tears and rage of Muhamed and the other Bosnian Muslims in self-protection.

These are understandable dynamics, visible wherever closely linked communities struggle to re-establish relations after mass violence. For members of perpetrating communities, overwhelming emotions accompany admission of abuses committed in their name. Avoiding, evading, minimising, distancing and denying are common human responses. Acknowledgement and all that may follow it frequently require time, coaxing, reassurance and appropriate political and psychological structures. Empathy is needed for all those involved in violent conflict since all have suffered, differently but irrevocably.

Acknowledgement often requires recognising the humanity of victims and perpetrators who have been dehumanised. For example, the Bereaved Families Forum, composed of Israelis and Palestinians who have lost loved ones in the regional violence, mutually acknowledges their common suffering. Rather than encouraging escalating cycles of violence through revenge and enmity, these families act in solidarity with each other to prevent further bloodshed. With direct access for visits between Israel and Palestine blocked by travel closures, members meet by phone and email, and also travel out of the region to meet face to face and lobby governments (in the US and elsewhere) to work for peace in the Middle East. Amiram Goldin, a member of the Bereaved Families Forum, which now includes 200 Palestinian and 200 Israeli families, acknowledges, "Our future is the same future. We share a destiny" (Solomon 2002). Unusual in communities where hostilities and violence continue, the Forum models a radical path toward peace, arising from the deep well of loss and grief and based on acknowledgement of a common humanity, mutual suffering and commitment to nonviolent solutions of their regional conflict.

In Armenia and Turkey, the ninety-year-old unacknowledged genocide of Armenians continues to fester. Currently, in progressive circles in Turkey, intellectuals are speaking out despite government threats and censures. Prominent among them is the Nobel Prize author Orhan Pamuk, who is urging the Turkish government finally to acknowledge the genocide. Pamuk was accused of public denigration of Turkish identity for stating to the press that the decaying Ottoman Empire, predecessor to the current Republic of Turkey, was responsible for the genocide of approximately one million Armenians from 1915 to 1917. In an article in the *Guardian*, Matossian reports that Pamuk, “the wielder of Turkey’s finest pen [...] has spoken and cut a swath through his country’s conscience” (27 February 2005). His power to bring this story to the world’s stage is augmented by a Turkish saying that “a sword won’t cut without inspiration from the pen” (Matossian 2005). Pamuk and his colleagues may succeed in moving this genocide, long recognised by scholars and historians, to the public arena, where perhaps Turkish and Armenian leaders might begin to thaw their frozen relations. Time does not heal what has never been acknowledged. Time, in fact, in this case has only strengthened the case for genocide, as more history and personal testimony have been uncovered. Although there are no longer Armenians or Turks with living memory of the events that transpired, the unacknowledged legacy has created enmity among successive generations on both sides, and prevented social healing between citizens and governments of these neighbouring countries.

Remembrance and validation of the dehumanising injuries to victims are common themes in these examples. The lack of remembrance and acknowledgement stings and is held in collective memory. “Like property, animosities are inherited too” (Rotberg and Thompson 2000, 54). The seeds of future violence are contained in unhealed memories and the silence of deceit.

### **Differing Motivations for Rapprochement**

Members of victim, perpetrator and bystander groups have different motivations for engaging in dialogue and social healing. Palestinians, for example, require not only acknowledgement from the Israeli group members, but commitment to social action to redress the grievances of occupation and to shift the vast asymmetry of power. For Palestinians, their interest in dialogue is at least partially instrumental; they are suffering directly from Israeli occupation and need Israeli partners to help change the conditions of Palestinian lives. However, it seems to me that

Israelis may participate in dialogue to reduce their shame and helplessness about the occupation and to express their compassion for the Palestinians. Most do not want to challenge their own government or engage in social action, which leaves the Palestinians feeling the incompleteness of acknowledgement unaccompanied by further responsibility (Green 2000b). Palestinian activist Jonathan Kuttab writes that dialogue can be a “substitute for action [...] that assuages the conscience of members of the oppressor group”. Instead, he believes that “individuals who engage in dialogue must do so with full acknowledgement that dialogue must only be a first step toward action aimed at empowerment of the oppressed” (Kuttab 1998, 25–26).

### **In the Absence of Acknowledgement**

The impasse of Turkey and Armenia presents a situation of demand by victims and denial by perpetrators, resulting in a ninety-year absence of acknowledgement. Two very different country case studies below demonstrate the absence of acknowledgement and lack of social healing due to silence and avoidance.

#### **Case Study: Cambodia**

Cambodia experienced the auto-genocide of the Khmer Rouge regime led by Pol Pot during the years 1975 to 1979. Estimates range from 850,000 to three million deaths of Cambodian adults and children, due to execution, forced hardships or starvation. Thirty years later and despite international pressure, Cambodia still has neither a public TRC process nor full acknowledgement of complicity by former members of the regime or their accomplices. Bob Maat, who has worked in Cambodia for twenty-five years, reported in an interview that there is little private conversation about the past among Cambodian refugees in the US or those internally displaced inside Cambodia. Many current leaders have ties to the Khmer Rouge and wish to remain silent lest their own lives be threatened. Fear of reprisal may partially explain the silence of ordinary citizens, while others claim that speaking of the past is against their culture. On the other hand, Cambodian NGO leaders talk privately about second- and third-generation trauma and an unhealed legacy that haunts and diminishes Cambodian life. Reportedly, Cambodians resent the luxurious lives of former Khmer Rouge leaders who are protected and privileged by the current government and who fortify their positions with threats of renewed violence in response to legal accountability (Lambourne 2004).

The international community has been encouraging Cambodia to establish a TRC or related public trial since the 1990s, but Cambodian political leaders have repeatedly sabotaged and resisted international efforts. In 1997, the UN passed a resolution establishing the Khmer Rouge Trial Task Force. Ten years later, in 2007, opposition from Cambodian leaders continues to delay the trials. Procedural haggling, the selection and balance of foreign and local judges, and extensive corruption have delayed the start of procedures. International judges have threatened to leave rather than agree to a corrupt “show trial” process. Currently, prosecutors are interviewing key witnesses, reviewing documents and making arrests, but no opening trial date has been set.

Cambodians appear divided about a TRC, although according to two research surveys, most Cambodians want the Khmer Rouge leaders to be prosecuted (Lambourne 2004). The history of the past remains so hidden that young people now question the actual existence of the genocide, despite museums piled with bones, skulls, victim photos and identity details that feel eerily reminiscent of the Nazis in their exact record-keeping procedures. Revisionist history of this magnitude, a convenient ruse for those intent on avoiding punishment, points to the need for public judicial and accountability processes that offer the Cambodian public a full rendition of their recent history.

In reflecting on the South African experience, former National Research Director of the TRC, Charles Villa-Vicencio, writes:

The nation continues its struggle of remembering against forgetting. Silence persists and conversation beckons ... This silence eats like a cancer. It renders victims unable to move on or grasp the opportunity to repair or restore their lives. (2007, 11)

Most professionals working in the fields of transitional justice and peacebuilding, as well as mental health experts, would affirm this statement, having seen the harm caused by unacknowledged trauma, with its multigenerational grip on communities. While each culture and society finds unique paths to healing from genocide and mass violence, silence and denial offer little hope of genuine recovery and renewal, and instead threaten the community with revisionism and potential future harm. The Cambodian case study sheds light on the multiple dangers of silence and lack of acknowledgement in the face of genocide or mass violence: impunity, threats of renewed violence, revisionist history, the psychosocial costs of unrecognised trauma and continued internal wounding, a society without justice or reconciliation, and the inability to recreate a vital,

forward-moving country. Cambodians continue to suffer silently, their future haunted by the unhealed past.

### **Case Study: Yugoslavia**

The successor states of former Yugoslavia present a different picture to that of Cambodia, but also exemplify the lack of public regional and national acknowledgement, social healing processes or a locally based TRC. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), based in the Netherlands, tried Milosevic and other high-profile war criminals; the trial was broadcast and avidly followed in Bosnia and other successor states. However, ordinary citizens felt removed from these international trials and many infamous war criminals remain at-large in Serbia and Bosnia, reducing the impact of the ICTY in the public eye.

Minow (1998) has skilfully detailed the history, effectiveness and critiques of contemporary trials following mass atrocities, including the benchmark Nuremberg Trials following the Second World War, the ICTY and the Rwandan genocide trials. She explains that these trials “demand accountability and acknowledgement of harms done” (1998, 26), but are not designed to reconstruct relationships or heal shattered communities. Vital for their overarching authority, trials uphold international standards of ethics, conscience and human rights. A trial can make records available and condemn crimes against humanity on behalf of the international community. No other response to mass atrocities has the public impact of an international trial. However, more local and relational approaches are required to advance social healing for individuals and communities

In the former Yugoslavia, the governments of the successor states, as well as the media, the educated elite and the general public have shown little will to address issues of accountability and apology. On the contrary, there has been a reversion in some regions of former Yugoslavia to the very ethnic nationalism that enflamed the war. Many attempts at rebuilding multi-ethnic communities have been rejected and personal relations suffer from lack of acknowledgement and responsibility for war crimes. In Bosnia, most people now live in separate regions. The Bosnian Serbs have proclaimed much of northern and eastern Bosnia as the entity of Republika Srpska; the Croats live in the south-western Herzegovina area, and the Muslims, or Bosniaks, in central and north-western Bosnia. Once a vibrant mix of peoples, with one third of its citizens married across ethnicities, Bosnians now appear reluctant to reunite and reconcile. In Croatia, most of the Serbs have moved to Serbia, and in Kosovo, now ninety-five percent Albanian, the remaining Serbs live in protected

enclaves. Rather than acknowledgement leading to social healing and communal reconstruction, the former Yugoslavia is hardening along ethnic lines, with little enticement to do otherwise from any of its governments.

In *My neighbor, my enemy*, Stover and Weinstein (2004) offer a thorough examination of justice and social reconstruction in former Yugoslavia. Using local investigators, their teams travelled for four years in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia, with a particular research focus on postwar social relations. They concentrated on one Croatian city, Vukovar, and two Bosnian cities, Mostar in Herzegovina, and Prijedor in Republika Srpska. Regarding the ICTY and its impact in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the researchers felt that its removal to The Hague contributed to the failure of establishing a strong local legal system and to insufficient public education about war atrocities. They also found that even local tribunals and trials “often divided small multi-ethnic communities by causing further suspicion and fear” (2004, 323). These researchers believe that inadequate attention is paid to social reconstruction and healing on the individual, community and regional level, without which there can be no secure future.

In Prijedor, Mostar and Vukovar, Stover and Weinstein (2004) researchers found many residents (who formerly had a richly diverse community life) with shattered dreams and few repaired or new inter-ethnic friendships. Aside from the modest work of external NGOs committed to rebuilding trust and mutual understanding through dialogue and joint activities, there is little emphasis on social healing in the three cities from civil society, religious institutions or the governments. Lack of acknowledgement was a strong theme in highly polarised Vukovar, where “Croat participants [in the study] longed for some kind of acknowledgement of or an apology for the anguish and persecution that so many Croats had been exposed to during the war” (2004, 296). Similar findings were documented for Mostar and Prijedor, where school and housing patterns are now segregated and work relations, if bi-communal, are strained. Studies show that in all three cities, nationalism, ethnic pride, caution and authoritarianism are high on the scales, while readiness for reconciliation is low and promoting reconciliation would be premature. Findings suggest that there is “little demonstrated empathy for the needs and experiences of the opposing national group in the community” (2004, 201). In Bosnia, some question the very viability of the state, now divided into three distinct regions with little ethnic overlap.

As argued in this chapter, relational and community healing is as essential for sustainable peace as trials, tribunals, reparations and new economic, political and legal structures. Recovery from war and



prevention of the next war require a wide spectrum of approaches and a generous commitment of resources from those supporting the emergence of a new social order. It has been my observation that acknowledgement from all levels of society about harms inflicted on vulnerable populations forms the cornerstone of social healing and reconstruction, and allows for the development of subsequent steps in social reconnection and political stability. With little groundwork being offered in promoting inter-ethnic social relations, it may not be surprising that Stover and Weinstein's researchers found such a lack of readiness for reconciliation, which will take far more conscious effort and nurturing than previously available in the Balkans.

Sarajevo attorney and Bosnian activist Jakob Finci, in an interview in Sarajevo in 2003, reported that he has been advocating for a TRC process in Bosnia for most of the previous decade. While some Bosnians believe that economic reform to help the struggling nation must precede legal processes, others believe only a TRC will prevent Bosnia from cementing the current separation of communities. As in Cambodia, many leaders were likely involved in the atrocities and will avoid public trials to protect themselves and their compatriots. Without acknowledgement of responsibility from leaders, attention from the media, educational focus or high-impact NGO involvement, inter-ethnic relations in the Balkans will likely remain frozen, perhaps dangerously so. While there are no threats of war, except in Kosovo, which is extremely fragile, there is no peace and prosperity either, and the region presents a very poor climate for external economic investment. Members of the Yugoslav successor states feel an increasing sense of isolation as the rest of Europe develops economically and joins the European Union. To move forward, the countries of this region may have to look to the past, at the multiple tragedies of the 1990s, acknowledge all that transpired and find acceptable pathways for social reconstruction and a peaceful future.

### **Rwanda's Experiment with Acknowledgement, Truth and Justice**

The final case study of this chapter presents yet another variation on postwar social healing, Rwanda's home-grown *gacaca* process. Based on traditional methods for healing minor disputes, Rwanda took its grass-roots conflict resolution processes to new levels in order to bring post-genocide truth and justice to its hundreds of rural, impoverished communities. Rwandan trials and tribunals also took place in Tanzania through the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), in

Belgium, Switzerland and in national courts in Rwanda (Stover and Weinstein 2004). These official trials, while important for international jurisprudence, were very costly, encumbered with judicial difficulties, and had low visibility and impact on ordinary Rwandan citizens, who in some cases were unaware of their existence. Gacaca, however, involves Rwandans at all levels, takes place in villages throughout the country, engages local community members as leaders and judges, entails face-to-face interaction between perpetrators and victim-survivors, and may be the most creative attempt at social healing after mass violence so far in use globally. While it is certainly not perfect and has its critics, gacaca is worth examining through the lens of acknowledgement and social reconstruction.

Because gacaca is modelled after a traditional approach to resolving communal and relational disputes in Rwanda, the population accepted the process as an appropriate means of social repair. Rwandans selected 250,000 fellow citizens (both Tutsis and Hutus) to be judges, each choice made based on the individual being “a person of integrity” rather than a person of high status or educational achievement.

Gacaca then operates as follows: prisoners, many in jail since the 1994 genocide, are brought before the gacaca court, which takes place within the community, outdoors or in a simple structure, in the local common language of Kinyarwanda, with the gacaca judges presiding. Community members testify about what they had experienced or seen during the genocide, corroborating or contradicting each other, accusing or defending, perhaps fabricating, embellishing or meandering, but often speaking precisely from their involvement and memories. Community members come and go throughout the days of the trial; prisoners and witnesses are called to testify; arguments ensue about who did or saw what; and in the end, the judges sort the responses and render a verdict.

Social restoration and communal harmony lie at the heart of gacaca. Rwanda is densely populated, small in size and predominately rural; economic survival depends on cooperation among its largely agrarian citizens to share and manage the land. Social harmony is thus essential and the memories associated with Rwanda’s horrendous genocide of approximately one million people in one hundred days must be dealt with. Fear and mistrust are rampant. Acknowledgement of wrongs committed is one key to the future.

Researchers reporting in Stover and Weinstein (2004) reflect on what Rwandan survivors consider most important, which includes admission of guilt and economic compensation to families who have suffered great loss, often supplied through labour of prisoners. Perhaps because of the

communal structure and the need of each other for survival, further punishment beyond years already served in prison ranked less important to most survivor families.

Many survivors seemed less interested in the punishment of those who killed their families and destroyed their homes than in having them come forward and admit their wrong. Survivors also expressed considerable interest in compensation ... because of the dire economic circumstances in which many survivors live. Survivors expressed generally negative attitudes toward trials in classical courts because they neither require penitence on the part of the convicted nor facilitate face to face contact between the victims and their victimizers and because they lack the means for providing compensation. (2004, 173)

Hutu members of the perpetrating group interviewed in the study also sought renewal of relationships for all Rwandans, but were less committed to reparations, likely because of widespread poverty and an already marginal hold on survival. For Hutus, who are the vast majority of Rwandans, removal of collective guilt and release of possibly innocent prisoners are critical to social harmony. Many Hutus, frequently through *gacaca*, have acknowledged responsibility for their role in genocide, served in community reparation programmes and been successfully released back into their original community. An international Quaker group in Rwanda leads "Healing and Rebuilding our Communities" workshops for Tutsis and Hutus, based on acknowledgement, confession, atonement, collective mourning, reconnection and community healing. Rwandan participants describe their joy in lifting the burdens of separation, guilt, shame, hatred, fear, tension and the myriad other emotions that plague post-genocide communities. "Now I am human," said Samuel, a released prisoner, as he sought and received forgiveness from those whose families he killed. Another prisoner, Juvenal, reflected on how the workshop had transformed his pain and suffering: "Once you have stored sweet words in your heart, they stick there and they help you to eliminate the bitterness" (Mahler and Ntakirutimana 2007, 4–7).

Shadows of genocide will no doubt continue to plague Rwanda, and non-prosecution for murders committed by the ruling Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) government in 1994 remains an issue to be addressed. However, for all its faults, Rwanda is fully engaged in a process of acknowledgement and social healing that will continue for years to come, moving the country forward in tolerance and social reconstruction. Unlike the former Yugoslavia and Cambodia, or Armenia-Turkey, for a much older example, Rwanda has moved ahead and is grappling with the challenges of memory, identity, truth and justice in its

unique fashion, offering direction to the country and an experiment in grassroots justice to the global community. .

## **The Transformational Potential of Acknowledgement for Victims, Perpetrators and the Global Community**

Victims, perpetrators and bystanders have different but overlapping needs. According to Minow, “After mass atrocities, victims, perpetrators, and bystanders each require mutual acknowledgement” (1998, 121). Victims sometimes feel guilty for having survived while loved ones died, shame at their failure to protect their families, helpless in the face of such onslaughts, and dehumanised by their experiences. Perpetrators are sometimes pawns of ruthless and opportunistic leaders, forced to commit atrocities or die, seduced by greed, bullied by shame and otherwise misused. Child soldiers, members of armed forces and militias and ordinary neighbours betraying their friends, all need to be brought back into the human community. Bystanders suffer their own guilt and shame for self-protection and not doing more to help others, being propelled by their fear, gaining materially from war and behaving unethically. Acknowledgement that does not encompass all these groups will be incomplete.

At the heart of reconciliation is the preparedness of erstwhile enemies to anticipate a shared future either with or alongside each other. This requires a profound redefinition of one’s personal and collective identity vis à vis “the other,” a transformation from “us” versus “them” and “victims” versus “perpetrators,” toward a new definition and relationship that acknowledges difference but on the basis of a shared identity as survivors and as human beings. (Rigby 2001, 186)

Victims of mass violence face the onerous tasks of reconstructing lives without family members, homes and most of the social, psychological, economic and political supports necessary for survival and growth. Victims may be compromised in body, mind and spirit from the assaults and losses of atrocities. Many manage to find their bearings and re-establish manageable lives, but some never recover, and all victims live with the ghosts of the past and often with deep fears for the future. Victims whose grief and losses are acknowledged publicly feel less isolated, safer and more connected to their communities. Where there is acknowledgement, apologies and reparations may follow, as well as further steps towards social, economic and political reconstruction.

Perpetrators, accomplices and their families and communities also require attention after mass violence. They too have been damaged, albeit in different ways from those who have been direct or secondary victims. Those who violate others, in a profound sense, violate themselves (cf. chapter ten on former child soldiers). Not all perpetrators are troubled by their violence, but for those who wish to atone for their crimes, acknowledging responsibility to victims and their communities allows an individual perpetrator to be seen as a human being: flawed, perhaps pained, frequently harmed by life and hopefully no longer dangerous. Perpetrators who admit their wrong doings to victims sometimes begin a process of reclaiming themselves as persons larger than their crime and as individuals who may one day be worthy of renewal, respect and redemption. Archbishop Tutu has written much about the notion of “*ubuntu*”.

In “*ubuntu*,” we are all part of one community and by creating a space within which the perpetrators of abuses might rejoin this community, they can be helped to regain something of their lost humanity and thereby enrich us all through the restoration of social harmony and wholeness. (Rigby 2001, 10)

Bystanding members of perpetrating ethnic or identity groups feel blamed, isolated and guilty by association, whether or not they committed crimes of violence. Bystanders from nations that have engaged in genocidal behaviour frequently feel caught in collective blame and experience themselves as members of pariah nations. Children of perpetrators, as discussed previously in regard to the descendants of the Third Reich, experience pain and rage about the silence and the war record of their parents. These groups, too, benefit from the process of acknowledgement and social healing begun by those responsible for crimes against humanity.

For the global community, acknowledgement and full disclosure by groups responsible for war crimes sets the historical record straight. As we have seen, governments, armies and entire societies frequently deny complicity in atrocities that they have plainly committed, thereby distorting history and confirming Napoleon’s adage that “history is a pack of lies, agreed upon” (Blackey 1996). To keep an accurate historical record, the human community must know what its members have done so that sanctions and punishments can be applied, compensations awarded, safety protected and human rights upheld. Furthermore, social cooperation on the national and global level requires that communities be in right relationship with each other, aware of dangers and in a constant process of

renewal and reconstruction. There is much to disparage in global human relations and social healing, yet at the same time as wars break out, other members of the global family are engaged in the social healing tasks of acknowledgement, apology, atonement, reparations and sometimes forgiveness and reconciliation. Without acknowledgement of our human crimes and weaknesses, we could not move forward, and could not rescue ourselves from endless cycles of revenge and retaliation.

## Conclusion

Contemporary experiments in transitional justice, reconciliation, forgiveness and social healing have arisen in response to recent wars and atrocities. Like the proverbial phoenix rising from the ashes, these public processes give hope to the international community. We are far from the end of war as a method of conflict resolution, and in fact current global conditions are not predictive of a rosy future. However, we are moving forward in recognising the enduring effects of violence on individuals, identity groups and nations, as well as in perceiving the fragility of our planet. Perhaps these insights will make us wise enough one day to desist from war as a means of problem solving so that we might claim our full humanity and global unity. Until then, acknowledgement, confession, contrition, compensation and commitment from those who have engaged in genocide and mass violence help propel the human enterprise forward. Hopefully, we will move towards a more generous, peaceful, compassionate future, one in which our crimes are acknowledged and our communities healed and at peace.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Project DiaCom, the Project for Dialogue and Community Building in Bosnia, was initiated by Karuna Center for Peacebuilding in 2000 in partnership with educators from Sanski Most and Prijedor, Bosnia.