

**Reconciliation and Forgiveness in Divided Societies:  
A Path of Courage, Compassion, and Commitment**

By Paula Green

*“It is hard to imagine a world without forgiveness.  
Without forgiveness, life would be unbearable.  
Without forgiveness, our lives are chained,  
Forced to carry the sufferings of the past and repeat them with no release.”*  
(Kornfield, 2002, p. 21)

**Overview**

From the Ottoman Turkish Genocide of Armenians in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda in its final decade, this century that was to see the end of war has been stained by unremitting violence. From our century of suffering, a new movement has emerged to establish legal, ethical, psychological, and spiritual reconciliation processes to nurture communal healing and enable former enemies to build a future as neighbors and fellow citizens. These reconciliation practices have developed in response to patterns of contemporary violence, where frequently, revenge is fueled by powerful collective narratives and advanced by opportunistic leadership. Our collective survival will require our adherence to this growing international reconciliation agenda; we must protect victims, hold perpetrators accountable, and develop methods of facing truth, establishing justice, and expressing compassion.

South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) stands as the most remarkable and visible experiment in post-conflict reconciliation, offering guidance and inspiration to others who choose to embark upon this path. Elsewhere, from Rwanda to North Ireland, generous overtures of reconciliation and forgiveness arising from societies shattered by mass violence bestow the possibility of renewed life to those who have suffered incalculable loss and invite healing for fractured communities. These processes,

new in the human community and still in the investigational stage, offer the best hope we have for social healing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Minow, 1998).

This chapter will discuss global applications of reconciliation, forgiveness, and restorative justice processes, with examples from the Conflict Transformation Across Cultures (CONTACT) Program and from Bosnia, Rwanda, the Middle East, South Africa, and other regions. The central question to be explored is how we can best support the arduous process of social healing for all of those involved in mass violence, whether as victims, perpetrators, or by-standers.

Those of us who have not directly experienced the utter anguish and devastation of genocidal violence can hardly understand its profound and lasting consequences. While there has been an increase in the theoretical literature on the practices of post-conflict social reconstruction, we must remember that monstrous atrocities do not lend themselves to formulaic responses. Healing, if such a concept can be applied, is often irregular and episodic. In a sense, “no response can ever be adequate” (Minow, 1998, p. 5). Nonetheless, we must learn from those brave souls who have survived the outer edge of human experience and courageously returned to teach us how to rebuild lives on the remnants of all that has been lost.

### **Defining Reconciliation in Divided Societies**

The meanings and demands of reconciliation vary according to each individual’s experience during mass violence. Victim recovery frequently commences through tangible acknowledgements of their distress. Violators may feel an inner calling to atone and repent. Political leaders and their minions may be intent on revenge, denial, or blame, and the international community may choose to stabilize, politicize, criticize, or ignore,

thereby helping or hindering the whole complex process. A national reconciliation process may become a creative vehicle for substantive exploration, healing, and change, or be manipulated to promote self-serving narratives and power struggles. Ethical leadership within and beyond the communities in conflict can guide the reconciliation procedures toward wisdom and compassion, using moral persuasion to encourage safety and justice and to restrain vengeance and retribution. We have seen striking moral leadership emerge in post-apartheid South Africa and lamented its absence in the years following the Dayton Accord that ended the wars in the former Yugoslavia (Tutu, 1999).

Reconciliation in divided societies, like conflict itself, is fundamentally about relationships, perhaps especially an encounter between the shattered past and the envisioned future. Reconciliation, from the Latin root *conciliatus*, which means drawing together a council, is a sustained process that, at its best, rekindles community and restores harmony where violent conflict has set people against each other. Reconciliation also requires intentionality and perhaps even generosity. Of all the steps in peacemaking, inter-communal reconciliation may be the most demanding. It requires those who participate to surrender hatreds passed on for generations, release chosen narratives, relinquish fantasies of vengeance, and re-establish relations shattered by betrayal and brutality.

### **Approaches to Reconciliation**

Communities must approach reconciliation through an interconnected social, psychological, spiritual, legal, and political web that supports truthfulness, acknowledgement, justice, protection, compassion, repentance, and restoration. In societies divided by mass violence, reconciliation is too multifaceted for a one-

dimensional response. Each aspect of the process reflects and affects the other dimensions. Reconciliation without compassion, for example, could be legal and dry, whereas reconciliation without justice would offer no hope of official protection to victims or prevention of future harms. Similarly, acknowledgement of wrong doing by perpetrators without genuine repentance may seem formulaic, and justice without reparations would seem dismissive and disrespectful. Inner and outer healing is interdependent, as are psycho-social and structural approaches to reconciliation.

Legal processes alone do not create social transformation, yet they are essential for successful reconciliation, in that they provide a framework of legislation to protect victims and authorize the range of acceptable behaviors. If legal institutions fail to strongly condemn the appalling acts of violence, the perpetrators may believe they have the upper hand, leaving victims to feel vulnerable to further attack. In post-conflict circumstances, it is critical that political and legal mechanisms offer safety, communicate very clearly that there will be zero tolerance for further perpetration, and usher in a new era of sanctuary under the law (Minow, 1998).

For national or inter-communal political reconciliation, Amnesty International spells out four main tasks that must be accomplished: establish the truth; strengthen the rule of law; build on a foundation of maximum participation and transparency; and include the moral right to compensation and reparation (Bronkhorst, 1995, p. 150). These four requirements have become cornerstones in national reconciliation processes in countries such as South Africa, which embraced all aspects of the healing process, including legal, psychological, and spiritual dimensions. Legal amnesty was offered to perpetrators in exchange for complete truth, which was needed both for the historical

record and for families of victims. Although reparations remain a contentious issue, they were promised in the TRC structure. No national reconciliation process to date has matched the scope, size, drama, visibility, and integrity of the TRC, partially due to the moral leadership provided by TRC Chairperson Archbishop Desmond Tutu and then South African President Nelson Mandela (Tutu, 1999).

Victims must draw upon extraordinary reservoirs of psychological resilience following communal atrocities, far beyond what is needed in recovery from common experiences of grief and loss. In mass violence, trusted neighbors or religious leaders, and sometimes even family members, have betrayed the very foundations of psychological security. All of these betrayals occurred in Bosnia and Rwanda, leaving emotionally shattered adults and children whose difficulties challenge us to question the limits of healing possible in fragile post-conflict environments (Neuffer, 2001). The cycles of violence that repeat themselves generations after generation between victims and violators are caused in part by unhealed distress transmitted to their descendants. The result is cyclical revenge rather than reconciliation. Without deep transformation of the attitudes, behaviors, and social institutions of those involved in mass violence, the dangers of renewed violence lie in waiting, with the descendants of both perpetrators and victims caught in the wounds of their ancestors (Minow, 1998).

Illustrative of the psychological struggle to restore humanity and surrender hatreds is a dialogue group called *One by One* ([www.one-by-one.org](http://www.one-by-one.org)), composed of second generation survivors of the Holocaust and second generation descendants of the Third Reich. These mostly Boston and New York area American Jews and Berlin area Germans have been meeting together in dialogue for more than ten years, facing their

ghosts, staring down their ancestors, and dueling with the wrenching history and internal messages that keep them apart. Although these are dialogues among the adult children of survivors and violators, they carry the rage, pain, and shame of their parents' generation, so that fear of encounter, mistrust, and misapprehensions remain strong. Using tools of structured dialogue, they and similar groups from other historic conflicts have made tremendous breakthroughs in the process of re-humanization, understanding, and befriending each other against all odds. For those who persist, discourse and relationship are within reach, and reconciliation is visible on the horizon.

The range of human behaviors and psychological responses to trauma is so vast that there are no formulas for recovery or healing. I have seen remarkable transformations of those whose lives have been shattered, and witnessed others enduring similar tragedies with much less resilience and capacity to cope. Individuals bear loss and sorrow differently, even within comparable circumstances. Some victims are able to use their suffering in service to others, becoming what mental health professionals call "*wounded healers*," a term first coined by philosopher Henri Nouwen (1972) to describe those in ministry to others who identify the suffering in their own hearts as the starting point of their healing assistance. I know victims whose history leads them to struggle for peace and justice, and I have seen others lost in bitterness, recrimination, self-destruction, and fantasies of revenge. A comprehensive reconciliation process offers many avenues for victims to reshape their lives, mend their broken hearts, and serve their communities.

### **Spiritual Perspectives in Reconciliation and Forgiveness**

For victims, there can be an element of sacredness in the journey toward reconciliation and forgiveness, with its internal triumph over emotional impulses toward

unending hatred or bitterness. It takes a spiritual mastery to forgive the unforgivable. “Forgiveness does not overlook the deed,” TRC commission and psychologist Gobodo-Madikizela (2003) writes, “It rises above it. ‘This is what it means to be human’ it says. ‘I cannot and will not return the evil you inflicted on me’” (p. 117). The capacity to let go of fantasies of revenge and to remove the toxins of hatred from the heart signifies a level of ethical and spiritual development that serves as a moral compass, illuminating a path for others to follow.

For some victims of mass violence, the desire to forgive arises through the powerful practices of community worship or inner contemplation. Forgiveness is frequently an inward spiritual decision made by a victim to let go of the burden of pain and hate, not in order to forget, but to release heart-constricting grief and loss. Forgiveness and reconciliation require courage, commitment, and compassion. Each step in the passage entails deliberation and reflection, and cannot be rushed or demanded by others. Forgiveness, which promises no exemption from punishment for the perpetrator, can remove a crippling burden of hatred carried by the victim and offer release as well to the violators and community.

In my practice as a peacebuilder, I meet ordinary yet extraordinary individuals who have been aided in their reconciliation journey by spiritual practices. Eddie, a Rwandan workshop participant, recounted his intention to kill 23 Hutus, because Hutus had murdered 23 members of his Tutsi family. However, he found a healing church and became an active peacebuilder instead of a victim in search of revenge. Vahidin from Bosnia, a young Muslim imam, thought he would never speak to a Serb again, and yet several years later, through his religious exploration as well as through our structured

dialogue experiences, he was partnering with Serb colleagues in shared programs of healing their fractured communities. Jaya, a Sri Lankan Tamil involved in a violent struggle for rights, described a spiritual awakening about the harm he was inflicting through violence. He now works as a leading peacebuilder in his region, encouraging active nonviolence. In these young lives, forgiveness has been in the end a solitary and brave decision, in each case going against popular opinion in the community, yet resulting in a renewed and rewarding life of service, purpose, and vision. Under certain circumstance, spiritual teachers or community leaders model and teach forgiveness, as illustrated in the following stories.

#### South Africa

Archbishop Tutu (1999) developed his conviction about forgiveness from the South African concept of *ubuntu*, which translates roughly as “a person is a person only through others” (p. 31). This orientation implies that we are not solitary, but interdependent; our humanity is caught up in each other’s existence. Dehumanization of others inexorably dehumanizes the self, and the act of forgiveness ultimately serves the self and others, extends out to the community, and sets an example for all of humanity.

Archbishop Tutu (1999) reflected that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission testimony made him realize “... that there is an awful depth of depravity to which we can all sink, that we do possess an extraordinary capacity for evil” (p. 110). Yet somehow, sitting through overwhelming testimony on the extent of these brutal crimes, a number of victims and their families sought forgiveness. The Archbishop believes that without forgiveness we are chained to the past, victims to our victimization. He closes his *No Future without Forgiveness* (1999), with these words: “Our (South African)

experiment is going to succeed because God wants us to succeed, not for our glory or aggrandizement but for the sake of God's world. God wants to show us that there is life after conflict and repression—that because of forgiveness, there is a future” (p. 230).

### Tibet

In Tibet, many of the monks imprisoned by the Chinese emerged from long years of privation and torture without hatred for their Chinese captors. Remarkably, the monks felt compassion for the circumstances that led the Chinese to behave so brutally, believing that their vicious behavior would haunt their destiny in this life and the next. The Dalai Lama often commends the monk Lopon, who was imprisoned and tortured for eighteen years, and yet remained gentle and loving. Lopon informed the Dalai Lama that his only fear while imprisoned was losing his compassion for the Chinese (2004). Like Archbishop Tutu and the other peacemakers mentioned above, the monk Lopon refused to surrender his moral compass or to sink in the miasma of hatred and revenge. Lopon's extraordinary capacity for compassion and forgiveness enabled him to preserve his moral integrity and protect his spiritual fidelity under drastic circumstances.

### Rwanda

Joseph Sebarenzi, the former Speaker of the Parliament of Rwanda, a former student, and currently a colleague, uses his own experiences to teach about the potency of forgiveness (June, 2006, personal communication). Sebarenzi's losses in the genocide were tragic beyond imagining, including the murder of his parents and almost all his siblings and their families. He now lives in the US, where he speaks publicly about the long process that took him from anguish, rage, futile denial, and feeling betrayed by God, to practices of prayer and compassion, and finally to reconciliation and forgiveness.

Reflecting on his journey toward forgiveness, Sebarenzi believes that he gained a shift of perspective some years after the genocide by visiting prisons and observing the dismal conditions where accused perpetrators were held. Through this exposure to the suffering of others, he felt the stirrings of compassion, which opened what he calls “*the endless grief*” in his heart. As his emotions surfaced, Sebarenzi became aware that culturally conditioned prohibitions on displays of emotions for Rwandan men constricted his rage and sorrow. He saw that his inability to express his rage and grief became increasingly detrimental to his physical and mental health, and also harmed his children. He called on his deep Christian beliefs for guidance in releasing emotions and letting go of hatred, which led to an interior process of forgiveness that brought peace to himself and his family. Sebarenzi believes that reconciliation and forgiveness are not signs of weakness but of strength; they are his gifts to himself, his children, and future of his country.

### **Meaning-Making in Reconciliation and Forgiveness**

The human story is comprised of narratives mined from observation, experiences, beliefs, and legends, transmitted and embellished through the generations. We are meaning-making creatures and order our lives through these collected wisdom teachings, which provide us with coherence and behavioral guidelines. Tutu and his church, for example, emphasize the practice of forgiveness as a path to healing for grieving victims. The Dalai Lama encourages compassion toward those responsible for violence and destruction. Approaches to reconciliation and forgiveness emerge through these collectively held teachings, and in turn the experiments with reconciling and forgiving reshape the living narratives. Experiences of war and chaos frequently involve changing

one's beliefs about the world and the self, resulting in new meanings about life (Park, 2005). Meaning-making thus remains interactive and highly contextual, sometimes adding more layers of nuance and complexity leading to reconciliation, and at other times reducing and simplifying events to rationalize hatred and revenge.

Sebarenzi discovered that culturally acquired prohibitions about male behavior in the grieving process intensified his pain. Observing the suffering of the perpetrators in prison shifted his thinking about revenge, moving him to a more nuanced and complex story about forgiveness. In this way his narrative was enlarged and his fundamental understanding of meaning opened up, allowing for a new range of attitudes and ultimately of behaviors. His re-interpretation of the traumatic events is now his legacy to those around him, even those who harmed him. Because Sebarenzi is currently a teacher and public speaker, his capacity to forge new meaning from the ashes of genocide impacts many others, and his new story ripples out into his community.

Massive crimes against humanity such as experienced in the Holocaust, South Africa, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Tibet can destroy normal structures of meaning. Religion provides a powerful source of meaning, especially in drastic circumstances that interrupt the coherence of one's prior experiences and beliefs about safety in the world and trust in others. In crisis situations, even victims not familiar with spiritual teaching may turn inward in their search for understanding (Silberman, 2005). Religious narratives, while enduring, are not necessarily permanent, but rather adapt to changing times and circumstances. Spiritual teachings and practices of reconciliation and forgiveness serve as a feedback loop, offering meaning, changing meaning, and being changed by experience and observation. Tutu's inspirational leadership and his plea for forgiveness for the sake

of the future has no doubt influenced and changed religious teaching and the reconciliation and forgiveness paradigm. The Dalai Lama likewise engages the spiritual dimensions of meaning-making in reconciliation, teaching people how to tame hatred and to practice compassion and forgiveness. These practices of forgiveness and compassion benefit both self and others, enriching meaning in one's own life and restoring humanity to others, even so-called enemies.

Perhaps the most famous commentator on meaning is the well-known author, Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (1984), who wrote in *Man's Search for Meaning*: "We who lived in the concentration camps can remember those who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from us but the last of human freedoms...the freedom to choose our spirit in any circumstance" (p. 86). Frankl alleges that meaning can be maintained in the most seemingly meaningless existence, and in fact may serve as a lifeline to sanity in a world gone insane. Starving concentration camp prisoners who offered their bread to others must have preserved an internal dignity, an active compassion for the suffering of others, and an unfathomable humanity, all of which may have offered meaning to fellow victims as well as some measure of internal coherence.

Restorative justice, as we shall see below, also requires expanding the narrative of meaning, from the common practice of punishing wrong doers to achieve revenge and restore honor, to the practice of rehabilitating and then reintegrating wrong doers back into the human community through a new, reconciling social vision.

### **Restorative Justice as a Reconciling Process**

Restorative justice aims to reinstate the humanity of offenders, to repair rather than punish, to rehabilitate rather than incarcerate, and to mend social connections so that broken communities can renew relationships. Reparative approaches help to build bridges between victims and those who harmed them. Restorative justice may require symbolic or economic reparations as well as acknowledgement and contrition. Fueling the restorative justice movement is the insight that the injustices and abuses embedded in our social structures contribute to anti-social and criminal behavior. At the deepest level, restorative justice calls for social reform to eliminate the sources of violent crime.

Illustrative of restorative justice in its relationship to reconciliation and forgiveness is the story of Amy Biehl, who was a US university student volunteering in the Black townships of South Africa during the apartheid years (in Tutu, 1999, pp.118-121). She was murdered by a small group of young men from that township. Rather than spend their years in bitterness, her parents found the courage and compassion to turn this tragedy into a remarkable story of restorative justice. They established the Amy Biehl Foundation, met the men who murdered their daughter, sought clemency in their sentencing, and helped rehabilitate and develop employment for these men and others in their community. The Biehls believed that acts of restorative justice best honored the legacy of their daughter and offered a model of hope and reconciliation for all those caught in the legacy of apartheid in South Africa.

Similarly, over three hundred families whose children have been killed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict meet together as the Bereaved Families' Forum ([www.mideastweb.org/bereaved\\_families\\_forum.htm](http://www.mideastweb.org/bereaved_families_forum.htm)). Members recognize the pull of revenge, but relinquish vengeance in favor of sharing their grief with

families from all sides of the conflict who have lost children. This organization has had an impact in Israel and Palestine, where there are currently very few circumstances for shared mourning and endless opportunities for blame and recrimination. Likewise, Families of Peaceful Tomorrows ([www.peacefultomorrows.org](http://www.peacefultomorrows.org)), a group of Americans who lost loved ones on September 11, 2001, extends support to Afghan and Iraqi citizens. Their members have turned loss and bitterness into acts of reconciliation, receiving in turn greater meaning and new purpose through their losses. They take their name from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's reflection that "*Wars are poor chisels for carving out peaceful tomorrows*" (Families for Peaceful Tomorrows).

The restorative justice demonstrated by the Amy Biehl family, the Bereaved Families Forum, and the Families of Peaceful Tomorrows rejects punishment and revenge as a response to violence. Members of these groups convert their suffering into the service of peace, promoting awareness of our common humanity and the futility of retribution.

### **Expanding the Circle of Compassion**

In the Amy Biehl story, the parents of their murdered daughter grew in compassion toward her murderers and their families, recognizing that these young men and their community were victims of the apartheid regime. Sebarenzi's story of visiting Hutu prisoners accused of genocide likewise awakened his compassion, opening him to a renewed life of forgiveness and reconciliation. Lopon, the imprisoned Tibetan monk, maintained compassion for his Chinese jailers and tormenters. Compassion, the capacity to feel the suffering of others, may serve as the gateway to reconciliation and forgiveness, opening the heart to new dimensions. Although the ability to feel compassion for one's

torturers is a rarified phenomenon, requiring an almost transcendent state of mind, compassion itself can be consciously cultivated and nourished.

In the CONTACT (Conflict Transformation Across Cultures) Summer Peacebuilding Institute that I direct at the School for International Training in Vermont, each year in June we gather 60-75 participants from around the world for a month of exploring the causes and consequences of peace, war, and reconciliation (Green, 2002). Many of our participants have witnessed or personally survived communal violence, frequently directed at their particular religious, ethnic, racial, or national groups. Some have been victims of mass violence, enduring great loss. Others belong to groups who committed atrocities; some were bystanders or, less frequently, rescuers. Many arrive filled with hatred for the identified “*other*,” and hold stereotypes and prejudices against Americans, Muslims, Christians, Africans, and many others who they have never met and toward whom compassion would seem impossible.

However, within a few weeks these participants are approaching what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. frequently called “*the beloved community*,” full of empathy, understanding, and joy in each other’s presence. CONTACT shapes new insights into the reality of multiple and overlapping identities and the value of tolerance and diversity. Students absorb powerful lessons about cycles of revenge and the disasters that result from generations of endless prejudices and injustice. Differences in historical context shrink in the face of overwhelming evidence of a shared human bond. Profound personal changes and shifts in worldview ripple through the learning community. Group members expand their loyalties from their own identity group to the global commons, including even those who have caused them harm in the circle of life. An environment that affirms

both the distinctions of identities and the universality of shared humanity helps nurture compassion and reconciliation.

Granted, these participants are not in direct competition for scarce resources or positions of power, nor do they command armies or votes. None are current warriors, although some have seen combat. Nonetheless, their experience stands as testimony to the power of personal witness and exchange in the reconciliation process, where the capacity of one to forgive motivates another who is not yet ready, leading to increased change through mutual encouragement, example, and inspiration. Group members who have risked and encountered each other at deep levels, celebrated and grieved together, and experienced a reconciling community, have savored an undreamed-of reality. A vision of another world has been touched, one that will guide their future choices and actions as peace leaders in their communities (Green, 2002).

### **Stages in the Journey of Reconciliation and Forgiveness**

In regions suffering from recent violent conflict, an atmosphere of silence frequently prevents any public conversations about mass violence and its traumatic legacy. Because speaking of the past feels dangerous and may indeed be life threatening, particular skill and sensitivity is essential for those who are invited to help a community move toward recovery and future reconciliation. In the next section we will explore a social healing program in Bosnia, undertaken at the invitation of Bosnian Muslims just a few years after the 1995 Dayton Accord that officially ended the war in Bosnia.

Working as a peacebuilder in war-torn societies, I have been humbled by the daunting tasks confronting both the wounded and the aggressors in binding their own pain as well as finding repair, justice, and healing for their communities. From 1997-

2002, I taught conflict transformation and facilitated dialogues for educators from two cities in northern Bosnia: Sanski Most and Prijedor (Green, 2000). This region of Bosnia, formerly of mixed ethnicity, became an epicenter of agonizing ethnic conflict between 1992-95. Betrayal by neighbors and colleagues shattered basic human trust, caused profound trauma, and left the victim community of Bosnian Muslims devastated.

Karuna Center was invited by some courageous Bosnian Muslim residents to guide the first steps in the social healing process, first with women and later with educators. There were few building blocks upon which to establish relationships and restore any semblance of community, and introducing the vocabulary of reconciliation and forgiveness would have felt like an inappropriate affront to their reality in those first postwar years. With our Bosnian colleagues, we created a program of inter-communal dialogue for educators called *Projekt Dijakom*, the Project for Dialogue and Community Building in Bosnia. As outsiders, we provided a safe connection between Muslim and Serb communities for coexistence measures and trust to emerge slowly and in keeping with participants' readiness and comfort. After six years of facilitated dialogue and training, the Bosnian participants established their own peacebuilding organizations.

#### Acknowledgement

The first and most critical step in reconciliation, as I observed in the Bosnian process, is acknowledgement from the perpetrator group to the victims that wrong has been done. Acknowledgement is the cornerstone upon which apology, remorse, reparations, and reconciliation can be built. While extremely difficult for members of perpetrating communities, acknowledgement is essential for victims, allowing them to feel that violators and by-standers at least recognize their losses and grief. The Bosnian

educators' group was composed of both Muslim victims of the 1990's genocide and Bosnian Serbs, whose community carried out the genocide. Although none of the Serbs in our group had been directly involved as perpetrators, the Muslim survivors needed the Serb participants to acknowledge the genocide committed in their name. To the extent that Serb participants did not directly and fully acknowledge the 1990's genocide or rationalized it as a response to past wrongs, progress in the dialogue remained thwarted.

Complicating the circumstances in Bosnia, there is a long history of mutual oppression and mistreatment, with the result that perpetrator groups confounded the past and the present, in a sense taking refuge in historical grievances. Others have documented this tendency to merge the past and present and thereby cast blame rather than accept responsibility. "What seems apparent in the former Yugoslavia is that the past continues to torment because it is not the past....Reporters in the Balkan Wars often observed that when they were told atrocity stories they were occasionally uncertain whether these stories had occurred yesterday or in 1941, 1841 or 1441" (Ignatieff in Minow, 1998, p. 14). In the struggle against painful acknowledgement of wrong-doing, recalling one's historic victimhood displaces more recent realities and serves as psychological protection against the atrocities committed in one's name.

For the Serb educators, acknowledgement evoked shame and guilt about their own bystander status and the war crimes committed by their ethnic group. Serb group members thus frequently attempted to equalize responsibility for the genocide among all ethnic groups. Gobodo-Madikizela (2003) writes about the same pattern in post-apartheid South Africa, and I have observed this phenomenon in the Caucasus and other Balkan countries. I believe this behavior springs from a desire to distance from those parts of

one's identity that have been shamed by the debauched behavior of members of one's ethnic, religious, or national reference group.

Perhaps one specific case can illustrate the enormous hurdle that acknowledgement can present. During three days in 1992, 58,000 Muslim residents had been forcibly expelled from their homes in their previously well-integrated city. Many were killed and some raped; many were taken to camps, others put on busses at gunpoint for points unknown, their homes exploded or torched behind them. Eight years and many structured dialogues later, when we were training an advanced group to become peacebuilding facilitators themselves, one of our more skilled Serb participants spoke of the expulsion of the Muslim community as the time the Muslims *left*, or *migrated*. Her choice of words, misrepresenting and denying the Muslim experience of expulsion, had serious consequences within the group. The failure to acknowledge the misfortunes of the Muslim community created a wall of separation between participants, each group retreating behind its particular wounds. Although they worked long and hard to overcome the damage of that moment, the breach could not fully be repaired.

We can see this same need for acknowledgement on the part of many women who have been battered at home or raped on the streets, through Holocaust survivors in the One by One dialogue groups, and with family members who have been hurt by each other emotionally. In the US, there has never been a presidential acknowledgement or sufficient national dialogue on the evils of slavery or the genocide of the Native Americans (Minow, 1998). In its absence, the histories and suffering of descendants of victims remain unrecognized. A classic example is the Ottoman Turkish Genocide of Armenians, mentioned elsewhere in this volume. Despite consistent Armenian organizing

and protest, the Turkish government has not yet acknowledged the reality of this early 20<sup>th</sup> century genocide, a denial that harms descendants as well as the international community in its quest to establish truthful accounts of the past.

As the leader of South Africa's TRC, Archbishop Tutu has learned more than most human beings about the journey toward national and communal healing. He writes powerfully about the role of acknowledgement in the reconciliation process, and of the forgiveness and compensation that may flow in its own time if acknowledgement is present:

If we are going to move on and build a new kind of world community there must be a way to deal with our sordid past. The most effective way I know is for the perpetrators or their descendants to acknowledge the horror of what happened and the descendants of the victims to respond by granting the forgiveness they ask for, providing something can be done, even symbolically, to compensate for the anguish experienced, whose consequences are still being lived through today (Tutu, 1999, p. 226).

As members of perpetrating groups acknowledge the atrocities committed in their name or by their fellow community members, relationships between perpetrators and victims become more authentic. When the acknowledgement comes from religious or political leaders, the impact increases. "To give the vocabulary (of reconciliation) greater permanence and lend it a multiplier effect throughout the larger society, it needs to be reinforced at the level of political leadership" (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003, p.132). Unfortunately, political leaders accountable for the decisions leading to communal violence seldom accept responsibility for the consequent mass atrocities. Additionally, the admission and possible apology offered may be more expedient than heartfelt, and may carry no obligations. Genuine acknowledgement of wrong doing by political and

religious leaders should be encouraged, as it sets a behavioral example, assigns responsibility, and may promote a moral tone for the reconciliation process.

### The Role of Apology

In the best of circumstances, apology would follow acknowledgement. Sincere apology expresses regrets or remorse for the injury done and responsibility for one's own role either as violator or bystander. Truth is such a relief, for both victim and for violator, setting the stage for apology and enabling the individual or the community to look back together at past suffering and its causes. In our inter-personal relationships, genuine apology allows love to flow again; it releases both parties from the gloom of withholding love while nursing our private hurt. It seems to me that apology is a two-way gift; we benefit both when we offer and receive apology.

In Rwanda's *gacaca* (ga-cha-cha, or grassroots) process of community justice, some prisoners offer what seem to be lightweight apologies in hopes of gaining release from prison, but these pseudo-apologies are roundly rejected by the community of victims, who sense the presence or absence of genuine spiritual remorse, sorrow, and repentance (Neuffer, 2001). In our Bosnia dialogues, Milka, a Serb educator, broke ranks with her ethnic group, challenged the silence, and offered sincere and repeated apologies to the Muslim group members, who in turn expressed their profound gratitude and extended their hands in friendship. The Bosnian Muslims could reach out to Milka because they trusted the earnestness of her apology. Ties between Milka and the Muslim participants have remained strong because of this critical experience; relations between the other Serbs and the Muslim participants never reached such a high level of trust, as there had been no full, remorseful, and direct apology.

Apology, in a way, is a mysterious process. All of us have given and received apologies for various wrongs. Apologies play a role even in small hurts, touching the heart and melting the distance created by the offense. After mass violence, any apology is inevitably inadequate and can in no way match the scale of the suffering and humiliation experienced by victims. And yet, even in extreme circumstances, the spirit of apology matters, and may help the healing journey. “Apology speaks to something larger than any particular offense and works its magic by a kind of speech that cannot be contained or understood merely in terms of expediency or the desire to achieve reconciliation” (Tavuchis in Minow, 1998, p. 91).

Apology is relational, requiring an offering and a response. The victims must acquire and retain the power to accept, reject, or otherwise respond to the apology (Minow, 1998). There is much debate in the professional field of reconciliation about the viability of apologies from the second generation of violators to the second generation of survivors. Some argue that the apology-forgiveness process can only occur between victims and their aggressors while others recognize the efficacy of even belated, next generation apologies, as they attempt to right the historical record and speak for the larger community. In the One-by-One dialogue group discussed earlier, second generation apology seems to have had a significant impact. “Members of the victim side often hear the profound apologies they have waited a lifetime to hear, and members of the perpetrator side often meet descendants of victims for the first time and hear from them that they are not to blame for atrocities committed by their parents, grandparents, and countrymen” ([www.one-by-one.org](http://www.one-by-one.org)).

My own observations from years of inter-communal teaching in postwar communities is that silence in the face of atrocities is both offensive to the victims, in that they continue to feel unseen and insignificant, and dangerous for the society, as there is no moral standard for righting wrongs. Belated, sincere apologies, it seems to me, are better than never speaking of a shameful past.

### Commitment and Action

After apology, then what? Is that the end of the story? In mass violence, apology is essential but does not signify the end of the process. What will prevent the perpetrators from repeating the crime? How do we know this community remorse is genuine? What would help to restore trust in the other side? After apology must come attention to the rule of law and commitment from the aggressor side not to repeat the transgression. In Bosnia, for example, war criminals remain on the loose, and Bosnian Muslims fear that when the UN peacekeepers and human rights monitors leave, which will happen someday, they will once again be unsafe (Neuffer, 2001). This fear is more than the voice of trauma speaking; it is the voice that has known international neglect and local deficiency in both political will and economic resources. The lack of acknowledgement, the absence of remorse, the failed commitment to a new future, and the inattention to the rule of law leave Bosnia divided, fragile, and dangerous. None of the four recommendations cited earlier in this chapter by Amnesty International has been accomplished: the truth has not been established; the law is weak; processes are not transparent; and there is no right to compensation.

During the Israeli-Palestinian dialogues in the Oslo years of the 1990's before the second *Intifada*, I observed another challenge of inter-communal restoration (Green,

2000). For the Palestinians, dialogue was an instrumental activity to help their community attain freedom and human rights. As such, they expected their Israeli dialogue partners to join them in their political struggle for justice. For the Israelis in the group, on the other hand, dialogue was an inter-personal process that helped them build relationships with Palestinians and partially assuage their guilt as part of a society that oppressed Palestinians. The Israelis resisted public demonstration of political solidarity with Palestinians, which greatly frustrated their Palestinian counterparts and reduced their faith in the Israeli group as partners in the struggle. Acknowledgement and apology by the aggressor group, without action and visible commitment to redress injustices, can seem insufficient and relatively empty to communities who feel oppressed.

Victims expect the aggressor community to probe the causes of the genocide or mass violence and deal with its war criminals. They must feel partnered in the restoration of justice, and observe that spiritual and political leaders on the aggressor side are engaged in a full process of introspection and repentance. In the former Yugoslavia, this has not yet happened, leaving the victim communities unsettled, anxious, and certainly mistrustful (Neuffer, 2001).

A major study directed by Croatian peace psychologist Dr. Dinka Corkalo (in Stover and Weinstein, Eds, 2004) investigates three formerly well-integrated cities in the former Yugoslavia: Vukovar in Croatia, and Mostar and Prijedor in Bosnia. (As the reader will recall, Prijedor is one of the cities where the Bosnian dialogues described earlier took place). The Corkalo study found that ten years after the mass atrocities in these cities, there is almost no re-integration of populations and great resistance to the restoration of inter-communal relations. Corkalo observed sharp divisions along ethnic

lines among former friends and neighbors, with superficial relations replacing multicultural friendships. Deep distrust appears to have created insurmountable barriers to social recuperation. The process of acknowledgement and repair has barely begun and victims do not feel protected by any legal mechanisms. Corkalo observes:

The three most apparent forms of group self-deception among our participants were denial of what happened during the war, biased memories of the events or embellishment of particular historical episodes, and the downplaying of war crimes committed by members of their own national group. These manifestations of group self-deception offer fertile ground for building national myths instead of national history (Stover and Weinstein, Eds, 2004, p. 149).

For any change to occur in this frozen post-conflict condition, Corkalo recommends that four levels of social reconstruction be planned and monitored to occur simultaneously from the top down and bottom up. These should include individual recuperation from trauma; renewal of communal networks; new civic and economic initiatives; and the establishment of the rule of law with guaranteed security (2004, p. 159). Absent these measures, there is little hope for healing in the Balkans.

#### Reparations in the Reconciliation Process

Economic or symbolic reparations serve as a vital chain in the process of social rebuilding after mass violence. Victims have rights of compensation, which in no way should close the books on the issue or block further examination of the moral and legal implications of the violence. Avoidance or engagement to reparations reflects on the commitment of individuals and their governments to express remorse and redress past wrongs. Some leaders may resist offering a national apology for fear that it would lead to demands for reparations, which many people believe to be the case in the US lack of apology to descendants of slaves and to Native Americans (Minow, 1998).

In Rwanda, reparations take the form of communal services performed by released prisoners who have confessed their sins at community *gacaca* trials. Prisoners are returned to the very place where they participated in the genocide: they build homes for families devastated by genocide, construct schools and health clinics, or work the land (Neuffer, 2001). In Germany, reparations have been paid to individual Holocaust survivors or their descendants, as well as to the Israeli government. Not every government or institution agrees to offer reparations. Swiss banks, for example, have contested reparations to Holocaust victims. Many European countries, including some who fought with Germany, have not compensated victims or their families. Bosnia has no structural process for addressing this issue, nor do the other former Yugoslav states. It took Japanese-Americans thirty years of legislative battle to receive compensation from the US government for the loss of their homes seized in WWII when they were interred, and the compensation was considered quite inadequate by survivors (Minow, 1998).

Compensation is complicated. No compensation ever repairs the loss and betrayal, the suffering and endless nightmares, the lifetime spent without loved ones or trust in humanity. Mental and physical health often cannot be restored. And yet, reparations offer a token of care and connection, of economic or psychological help, especially in the context of remorse and contrition, and with assurance that the violence will never be repeated. Compensation allows victims and their descendants to feel visible and “*to walk between vengeance and forgiveness*” (Minow, 1998, p. 106).

Compensation demanded of descendants of perpetrators can fuel resentment and embitter future generations. Why should second or third generation post-Holocaust Germans pay for the sins of previous generations? Why should today’s white Americans

compensate African-Americans for slavery? We can look at the negative responses to affirmative action, a form of group compensation in the US for denied opportunity, to see both the need and the challenges of delayed reparations. In South Africa, monetary compensation has not been forthcoming to victims as pledged, causing anger among young generations of victim families. In most cases, victims have asked for modest financial redress, such as for medical or educational expenses, yet these requests are often denied. The refusal to grant even such a token gesture has soured some survivor families to the reconciliation process.

Symbolic reparations also aid the restorative process. Museums, monuments, memorials, public literary and artworks, days of commemoration, new historical narratives, and revised history books all can play a role in re-humanization and national healing (Minow, 1998). I find it revealing that the most visited monument in Washington DC is the haunting Vietnam Memorial Wall, symbol of America's brokenness and unhealed national wounds. I shudder to think about Iraq in the context of the Vietnam Wall, yet someday the painful lessons of the Iraq War will also need to be acknowledged and memorialized.

#### Forging a Joint Future after Mass Violence

So far we have reflected on acknowledgement, apology, atonement and remorse, restorative justice, tangible commitment to not repeating the offense, and reparations in responding to mass violence, all steps in the long journey toward reconciliation and forgiveness. There is one final stage: forging a joint future after mass violence. Both victim and aggressor groups must cooperate to establish a just and mutually satisfying relationship. The victims, or their descendants, for this often takes many generations, are

ready to re-engage with the perpetrator group or their descendants. For the victims, this signifies that the apologies and atonement, the reparations and commitments, have been sufficiently genuine and trustworthy. The victim group must firmly reject attempts to avenge the deaths of their ancestors. For the aggressor group, re-engagement requires their pledge to be trustworthy to those they have harmed.

Most groups must live side-by-side after mass conflict, as there are no empty spaces on this planet. We see the suffering that ensued in Palestine from believing that there was empty land to be dispensed to people who had no safe homeland. To live together as neighboring countries, such as in the former Yugoslavia, or as one country such as in South Africa, Rwanda, or Northern Ireland, enemy groups must become collaborators in sharing land, water, borders, government, and citizenship. Fairly administered programs of justice, equality, and reconciliation effect stability and promote peace. Where there is no full restorative process, no re-humanization or rapprochement, the lack of healing may lead over time down the dark path of counter-revenge, where victims and perpetrators, in the same or reverse roles, re-engage in communal violence.

Reconciliation is fragile and post-conflict mistrust lives on in the narrative of victims and their descendants. Similarly, fear of revenge remains in the minds of aggressors and their descendants. Trust must be given and earned by every generation. Mutual regard must be repeatedly expressed and demonstrated. Human relations must be cultivated actively lest we slide into greed-driven or fear-driven separation fueled by the ambitions of ruthless leaders tugging on the sentimental walls of nationalism and ethnic identity. Each of us is vulnerable to the seductions of demagogues and to the illusion of separateness. Our task as a human family is to monitor our own fallibility, to recognize

that each of us is both victim and violator, and to acknowledge that the journey of reconciliation and forgiveness always awaits us. “Our survival depends on a significant portion of the human race accomplishing a change in worldview, from patriotic and tribal loyalties to loyalty to life itself” (Green, 2002, p.105).

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