

Healing our Broken World: Paths to Peacebuilding and Reconciliation

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Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia, endured a siege of 1425 days between 1992-96. Serb forces assaulted the city from the surrounding hills, compelling residents to risk their lives in search of food, water, or medicine. 14,000 were killed during the siege, the longest in history.

In returning to Sarajevo after an absence of twenty years, I noticed that the bullet holes in the buildings had been repaired. My Bosnian colleague said, “we know how to patch our buildings, but we cannot seem to patch our broken hearts.” How could I, called back to facilitate workshops for the mixed ethnic groups whose parents’ generation had experienced that war, offer any wisdom or insight that might shift their laden hearts? What heals, I asked myself, what adapts, and what remains of scar tissue to serve them as wounded healers? What legacy from Joanna’s lustrous teachings could help me?

In Afghanistan, the circumstances for women in the workshops and on the streets were so dire that I could barely maintain my own equanimity. I remembered Joanna proclaiming that our troubled historical moment is a great time to be alive because we are so needed for the turning of the world. That phrase would come to mind as I struggled to be responsive, enabling me to support a group of brave women political leaders for their role in turning their exceptionally troubled world toward the light. “Don’t give in or give up,” this transmission from Joanna says to those who are ready; “you are required, essential, and significant.” I watch the reaction such a message evokes. I know it matters.

Life guided me toward international peacebuilding. It points me in the present moment of grave dangers to my own country to bring those teachings home to the United

States. But first I had to go forth. I merged my academic background in psychology and intergroup relations with my spiritual home in Buddhism and my passion for peace and justice to become an international peacebuilder. I served in many regions of the world, leading seminars, facilitating workshops, and encouraging dialogue between those whose communities had waged war in the hopes that together they could learn to wage peace. Most importantly, I sought to plant seeds that the next generation would water.

In the years when Joanna was carving out her path as a workshop leader who would synthesize Buddhist teachings, systems theory, deep ecology, and social activism, I was reordering the ingredients of my own professional life to combine Buddhist teachings, humanistic psychology, intergroup relations, and peace and justice activism. I immediately recognized Joanna as a guide and exemplar to my own future: a prophetic teacher, expansive thinker, and revolutionary synthesizer. I was fortunate to have stumbled into Joanna at that formative stage of my life, and even luckier to find such a powerful woman role model.

Transformative Pedagogy

In all my work, in Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Mid East, Joanna's inspiration, courage, and creativity as a teacher and facilitator stayed with me. I adapted many bold and dramatic exercises recorded in her books *Coming Back to Life* and *World as Lover, World as Self*. The processes and meditations I shaped from her teaching proved healing for many whose minds and bodies were ravaged from the impact of violence and catastrophe. In the early days I carried *Coming Back to Life* with me, seeking exercises that would fit my purposes of gently supporting group members to

release their pain, recognize the fragility and broken hearts of those they were taught to hate and fear, and discover the source of empathy within themselves. I learned to evoke Joanna's positivity, engaging it to carry hopefulness for my participants from war zones until they could believe in hope themselves. Sometimes that carrying felt almost literal and absolutely necessary. There are times when we cannot turn on the lights by ourselves.

In the context of postwar peacebuilding, the possibility of shifting one's energies from despair to empowerment can open a way forward for those whose lives have been flattened by armed conflict and feel permanently in despair. Guided by Joanna's genius at brilliantly designed experiential activities, I sought to convert words and theories into arrows of hope to go directly into the hearts of participants. I often think of her approach as a call of consciousness to move from protected anxiety for the small self to expanded concern as a member of the collective Self.

In Joanna's work, concepts are not delivered by words alone, or even by words predominantly. The intellectual underpinnings are acted out, so that bodies, minds, and spirits inhabit first the despair and then the journey to awakening and finally to empowerment. This radical approach to workshop pedagogy, developed so artfully by Joanna, comprises the journey from theory to practice, and from understanding to activism. Compelling exercises encourage people to express their pain for the world, discover or recover their power, learn to reframe it as compassion, experience the solidarity of group courage, and arouse their dedication on behalf of life. The scale of one's vision can encompass the globe or the village, however appropriate to one's scope and distress.

My own experience confirms that this is a superb method for transformation. Participants in peacebuilding workshops share the anguish of experiencing their communities and nations becoming battlefields. They discover very importantly that no one wins in war, that victim and perpetrating communities are both wounded, albeit differently, and that creating peace on the ashes of shattered hopes takes enormous courage, will, and trust of the other. One Sri Lankan participant, recognizing the truth that all parties are harmed by war, remarked, “we are all in one great pot of suffering.”

Like Joanna, I believe in the power of groups as precious and essential islands in time, correctives for the hyper-individualism of modern life. Groupwork enables us to recognize that we are not alone in our fear and fragility, that others will partner with us along the path of healing and restoration, that so-called “enemies” can become colleagues in the struggle for peace and justice, and that we find our generativity and bravery through our collective efforts.

In 1994, the international community stood by as genocide destroyed Rwanda, where close to a million people of the Tutsi ethnic group were murdered by members of the Hutu ethnicity in a period of just one hundred days. One year later, I entered the region as part of a group invited by the churches to begin a process of healing that has continued unabated for twenty-five years. I witnessed extraordinary courage in subsequent programs as Hutus and Tutsis, slowly over time, rediscovered each other’s humanity through rituals that evoked the ancestors, reawakened positive past memories, and cast images for a possible shared future. Engaging their shared cultural and religious traditions, they sang, danced, and worshipped together, voices harmonizing as they began the hard, almost endless journey of reestablishing trust and safety. Many of these former

participants now serve as wounded healers, continuing the process of mending all that had shattered.

In Myanmar, formerly Burma, my history goes back to the founding of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists in Thailand, through which I was asked to be a member of a delegation investigating the results of a 1988 military crackdown on protesters seeking freedom and human rights. Over the decades I engaged frequently in the country, both in leading workshops and in accompanying groups seeking to respond to the oppression and marginalization of activists and minorities. Most recently, colleagues and I facilitated group members representing the four alienated and misunderstood religions of their country, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and Christians, as they encountered each other face to face for the first time. We and they were astonished by the bonds and reciprocal care emerging through circle exercises, meditations, role plays, team games, and more -- all of it inspired by Joanna's practices to reconnect our lives, our world, and especially our hearts.

For the past twenty years, I have led a program for peacebuilders called CONTACT, an acronym for Conflict Transformation Across Cultures held each summer on the campus of the School for International Training in Vermont for a fully internationalized group. More recently we have added another program in the winters in Kathmandu, Nepal for South Asians, as many can no longer obtain U.S. visas. Imagine these groups of 50 to 60 each from perhaps twenty different countries, half dozen religions, all colors, sizes, shapes, cultures, ethnicities, a Tower of Babel's worth of languages, and all of them traumatized by war. We spend two to three weeks together in a residential learning community, plunging into undreamed of spaces of encounter while

we discover what it means to be an upstanding, responsible, resilient, compassionate human being ready to transform hatred and despair into a new world of hope, possibility, and light.

Perhaps our most creative adaptation of Joanna's rituals is a daylong investigation of the cycles of revenge and reconciliation. Participants place their bodies on a room-sized circular replication of the stages of revenge, which is surrounded by another circle representing the stages toward reconciliation. Walking slowly in silence to the sounds of a shakuhachi flute, these war-impacted participants tap into their deepest honesty to situate themselves on anger, revenge, guilt, grief, confronting losses, meeting the other, promoting tolerance, and more. All day we tell stories, comfort each other's tears, build caring relationships to replace enemy images, and begin to repair the broken world. By day's end, a community woven of empathy and generosity emerges, holding all suffering in a common thread and acknowledging that we have enlarged the boundaries of our compassion.

Buddhist Teachings as Tools for Transformation

Much of my work as a professor of peacebuilding focuses on unpacking the multiple and bewildering drivers of violent conflict. While integrating numerous theories, I also introduce Buddhist insights into the root causes of suffering from which all harmful actions spring. The three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion cloud and sway the mind. Greed, anger, and the mistaken belief in otherness afflict the mind and result in unskillful behaviors that cause unending harm and violent conflict. Greed expresses itself as desire, envy, craving, lust, clinging, and entitlement, including the desire for land, water, oil, and

other goods and resources, thus fostering control and dominion. Hatred manifests as anger, all the “isms” of prejudice, abhorrence, dehumanization, and the arrogance of false superiority. Delusion, or ignorance, references the mistaken notion of separateness or separate self, enabling the fallacy that one can harm others without harming oneself. In workshops, we identify where these mind states manifest in our own behavior and in our societies. Beyond the endless words written to grapple with the roots of violent conflict, this 2500 year-old analysis from the Buddha stands out as a coherent and accessible framework.

All humans have basic human needs that vary little over centuries and circumstances. When individuals and communities cannot meet their basic survival requirements through any available means, they commonly resort to violence rather than succumb to death. Marginalized groups who are denied any channels to obtain water, food, or land cannot survive. Communities that are threatened by lack of security and safety cannot protect their members. Those whose identities are vilified by media or manipulative leaders cannot satisfy the need for belonging and basic dignity. When demagogues representing dominant countries or religious groups make decisions from minds filled with the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion, irreparable harm and suffering occur. Interpersonal violence and the organized violence of armed conflict arise.

Incorporating Joanna’s strategy for experiential learning in our workshops, we engage in role-plays and other exercises to internalize these conditioned mind states and their consequences. Our imaginations and our moving bodies experience how it is to be victimized and also to be those creating the victimization. We viscerally learn, as Walt

Whitman said, that “we contain multitudes.” Thich Nhat Hanh echoed this insight in his poem *Please Call Me by My True Names*: “I am the twelve-year old girl, refugee on a small boat who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate. And I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.”

As group members engage in exercises to vivify these toxins, their destructive potential becomes obvious, as do the antidotes to each of the three poisons. We recognize that there can be generosity rather than greed, kindness rather than hatred, and interconnection instead of separation. Each can be kindled in the heart, habituated in the mind, and become a pathway for personal responsibility and healing. Understanding the mind states as a cause of suffering and of violence help empower the learner, the learning community and those beyond to recognize how human conflicts arise and how we can endeavor to more skillfully manage our impulses and reactivity. These insights into our behavior help answer the question, articulated by Bosnian group participants, to understand how “we who lived and intermarried together so well could have destroyed each other in armed conflict so thoroughly.”

The core Buddhist teachings on interdependence and impermanence also inform my teaching and enrich my relationships. In workshops I sometimes adapt Joanna’s meditation on the *Web of Life* to share the insight of interdependence. This meditation, garnered from systems theory and Buddhist tradition, helps us experience our inter-existence and our essential, nonnegotiable need for one another. For those among the millions cast aside by hate and conquest, this meditation brings comfort and belonging. If each is a jewel in the vast net, each has value and dignity, respect and honor. For those

who have not been discarded, here is an opportunity to widen their own net for greater inclusion, to offer love and safety to the marginalized, where it is most needed.

Because so many of those I encounter have been harmed by warfare and its consequences, the sorrowful present can feel permanent and unchanging. In the *River of Life* exercise, participants use art materials to draw and map their lives thus far and in sharing them with others, to explore how experiences, whether valued or feared, continually arise and pass away. That which is present, no matter how painful or glorious, will not last. Experiencing its temporality awakens hope and helps those who are wounded by circumstances to envision a future, which can then be added to their river of life drawing. Like a river, everything changes and flows; joys, sorrows, and wars are all impermanent.

In this work and the work of so many others, we are reweaving the shreds of respectful, ethical, interdependent communal life. Our common bonds tear further apart at our peril. As hardships multiply on our fragile planet, our need to act together with generosity and loving-kindness on the home front and world stage will increase. Joanna's deep-seated hope in the Great Turning offers an invitation to choose life, to join and expand an impassioned experiment in radical inclusion and visionary effort to create a sustainable civilization. What better tribute to her long decades of labors than to encourage future generations of healers and peacebuilders to "Go forth on your journey, for the benefit of the many, for the joy of the many, out of compassion for the welfare, the benefit, and joy of all beings."