Reconciliation: Re-weaving a Social Fabric that Heals

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In Search of Reconciliation

In the market place of ideas, the concepts and language of *reconciliation* have become quite popularized and at the same time diluted. Coming out of the turmoil of the South African political transition of the 1990s, it became abundantly clear to me that the term reconciliation was easily 'hijacked' to serve the particular interests of any number of socio-political groupings. For some reconciliation was used to describe the political process of *power-sharing* as represented in the Government of National Unity. For others it referred to a new political and legal dispensation governed by the 'rule of law' and democratic reform that allowed former enemies to live together without killing each other. Still others would have used the term to describe a "*good working relationship*" on the job or in the community with persons of another culture or race. While all of these notions have linkages to genuine reconciliation, they are only parts of the whole. Authentic reconciliation requires us to move beyond mere social tolerance or political coexistence it is concerned with repairing the *harmony* in the life of a community or nation. By harmony, I mean the restoring of *meaningful relationships* (relationships of dignity, trust and collaboration). Harmony also infers at least two other aspects: a collective concern for the *common good*[i] of all (corporate well-being), and a *shared future view* that gives hope and motivation to the idea of unity.

The Pathways and Patterns of Reconciliation

There are volumes of published literature on what reconciliation is and how it is accomplished. John Paul Lederach refers to reconciliation as a journey – one that entails initial separation, then a turning point followed by various encounters with self, God and others, reparations, and finally full human recognition of the 'enemy' other.[ii] International Alert defines reconciliation at a national level as a four-step process consisting of: acknowledgement, restitution, political and economic reconstruction, and lastly reconstruction of relationships.[iii] Hugo van der Merwe breaks down the actual components of reconciliation in the picture of an iceberg or a pyramid. At the top of the triangular shape he places our visible *"patterns of interaction"* which involve the type and extent of communication, exposure to others' way of life, and social and workplace interaction. Below that level are the *"attitudes towards the adversary"* which involve the issues of trust, understanding, myths, prejudices and stereotypes. At yet another deeper level is the *"values regarding interaction"* which involve human rights culture, tolerance, relationship and cooperation. Finally, at the foundation level is the *"identity"* which involves the over-arching, possibly common or divergent values, philosophies, religious beliefs and ideologies that govern life.[iv] All of these levels impact and intersect with each other in the process of reconciliation. The key point here is that the most visible levels are probably the easiest to address. Behavioral transformation is the most measurable type of change. However, transforming attitudes, values and identities, can be a much greater challenge.

Ron Kraybill outlines a cyclical model of reconciliation that starts with relational injury, followed by withdrawal, reclaiming identity, internal commitment to reconcile, restoration of risk, negotiation to meet present needs and back into relationship.[v] Similarly, Russian psychologist, Olga Botchavora has developed a cycle of reconciliation that poses the following steps:

1. Act of Aggression
2. Injury / pain caused
3. Realization of loss
4. Expressing grief / mourning
5. Accepting new reality
6. Understanding the motive of the "enemy"
7. Choice/commitment to forgive
8. Re-writing a joint history
9. Establishing justice
10. Reconciliation[vi]

Tools for Agents of Reconciliation

From this brief overview of some of the reconciliation literature in the Field, there are at least six critical elements to the reconciliation process that need to be considered either at an individual or collective level. With each of these elements there are corresponding skill-sets that can be developed.

Essential Elements in Reconciliation Process:	Skill-sets required for particular elements:
1.)Psycho-social Support and Trauma Healing *Violence causes disempowerment and disconnectedness; reconciliation aims at the exact opposite – empowerment and connection.[vii]*	Trauma awareness and education, trauma debriefing and counseling skills
2.) Personal and Public Grieving or 'Lament' *In the process of identifying, naming, and grieving their losses the wronged and the wrong-doer need a safe space to tell their story and a public space where society 'bear witness' to the harm that has been caused.[viii]*	Same as above
3.) Awakening Empathic Responses *Recent brain research on empathy and attachment theory indicates that the human brain is biologically 'hard-wired' to make human connections and to build community through social networks.[ix]*	Active listening, paraphrasing, summarizing, nonviolent communication and basic counseling skills
4.) Facilitating Forgiveness Transactions *"Evil acts create chains that lock perpetrators and victims together, usually in unconscious ways, producing a double history of effects which must be taken into account in reflecting on the nature of*	Same as above

forgiveness. An act of forgiveness must be understood as a complex process of unlocking painful bondage, of mutual liberation. While the perpetrators must be set free from their guilt (and its devastating consequences), the victims must be liberated from their hurt (and its destructive implications)."[x]	
5.) Re-writing Historical Narratives *Learning how to "remember rightly in a violent world"[xi] entails dealing with the national-patriotic narratives, the historical memories, the lived experience and the current events.[xii]*	Group facilitation, negotiation, mediation, appreciative inquiry, sustained dialogue skills
6.) Engaging in Reparative / Restorative Justice *Restorative justice asks what harms have been committed, what needs have been generated, and who is obligated to make things right.[xiii]*	Victim-Offender mediation, Family Group conferencing, circle processes

In sum, the end-goal of reconciliation is like a horizon on the landscape; it provides us with the vision, inspiration and moral guidance on what harmonized relations could look and feel like. On the other hand, the skill-sets attached to conflict management, resolution and/or peacebuilding provide us with the necessary instruments or tools (the means) to arrive at reconciliation.

Endnotes:

[i] Catholic Social Thought has provided a foundational guiding light in terms of defining the values, actions and ethics that should drive this kind of thinking and living; see: The Goedgedacht Forum. (1999). *South Africa's Common Good – A Voters' Guide to 1999 General Election*. Cape Town, SA.

[ii] Lederach, J. (1999). *The Journey of Reconciliation*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press.

[iii] International Alert. (1996). *Resource Pack for Conflict Transformation.* London, England.

[iv] From a presentation by Hugo van der Merwe at Wilgespruit Fellowship Centre, South Africa. August, 1998.

[v] Kraybill, R. (1992). "The Cycle of Reconciliation", *Track Two*, a quarterly publication of the Centre for Conflict Resolution in Cape Town, South Africa, November Issue.

[vi] Botchavora, O. (2001). Implementation of Track Two Diplomacy-Developing a Model of Forgiveness, in Helmick, R. and Peterson, R. (eds.) *Forgiveness and Reconciliation-Religion, Public Policy and Conflict Transformation*. Philldelphia/London: Templeton Foundation Press.

[vii] Herman, J. (1997). *Trauma and Recovery – The aftermath of violence from domestic abuse to political terror*. New York: Basic Books.

[viii] Katongole, E., & Wilson-Hartgrove, J. (2009). *Mirror to the Church: Resurrecting Faith after Genocide in Rwanda*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan.

[ix] Early, C. & Early, M. (2011). Neuroscience of Emotion – Attachment Theory and the Practice of Conflict Resolution. *ACResolution Journal*. Summer.

[x] Muller-Fahrenholz, G. (1996). *The Art of Forgiveness.* WCC Publications, Geneva, Switzerland, p. 25.

[xi] Volf, M. (2006). *The End of Memory – Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*. Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

[xii] Lederach, J.P. (2005). *The Moral Imagination – The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, Inc.

[xiii] Zehr, H. (1990). *Changing Lenses*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press.