

# Transforming the Legacies of Conflict, War and Genocide Through Dialogue

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## Introduction

My thanks to the coordinating committee of One By One for organizing this conference on such a remarkable topic: Transforming The Legacies Of Conflict, War and Genocide Through Dialogue. I deeply believe that one should not question the power of dialogue in transforming the legacies of conflict, war, and genocide. And I agree with former US President Jimmy Carter who recently said, and I paraphrase, that the ill-advised thing a government can do is to refuse to dialogue. He was talking about the refusal by the Bush Administration to have direct talks with North Korea about its nuclear weapon program. So again, I thank the One by One organizers of this most relevant conference.

I first came to know One by One in the summer of 2001 at the School for International Training. I was attending a course on conflict transformation. Among the participants were some members of One by One who are here today: Karen Brown, Suzanne Schecker, and Marga Dieter. They introduced themselves and shared that One by One was an organization composed of the descendents of Holocaust victims and of the descendants of the Nazi perpetrators or fellow German bystanders during the holocaust. After listening to their stories and efforts towards understanding and reconciliation, I thought to myself, if these people can do it, then my people, the people of Rwanda, can do it too. If these people, as descendents of those caught up on both sides of the Holocaust, can undertake voluntarily without a push from their governments, the process of grappling with such vicious hatred, then my fellow countrymen, the Hutu and Tutsi communities, can surely benefit from this model of transformative dialogue. This first encounter with One by One reinforced my growing commitment to peace and reconciliation. Some months later I completed the Master's Degree at S. I. T. My capstone thesis was on reconciliation. The topic was to propose a truth and reconciliation commission for Rwanda. One of my conclusions was that Hutu and Tutsi should be given the opportunity to tell and listen to their respective sufferings - the painful stories related both to the genocide of Tutsi and to the human rights violations committed against Hutu; and that they should discuss and put in place mechanisms to prevent future violence. In writing this thesis, I

not only drew upon my own first-hand stories as a Tutsi who grew up in post-colonial Rwanda, but also my adult experiences as the former Speaker of the Parliament of Rwanda. Throughout my teaching experience with CONTACT and research in conflict transformation, I came to believe in the crucial necessity for all human beings to recognize that all humanity must support each other rather than destroying each other. This is the essence of dialogue between opposing groups, and I believe such a process can help in transforming the legacies of conflict, war, and genocide into ongoing commitment for peaceful co-existence.

As you know, the legacies of human violence are beyond understanding; there are essentially three types of these legacies. One is violence itself. The endemic violence between Israelis and Palestinians is the result of the violence used by each side. The longstanding conflict between Tamil and Sinhala in Sri Lanka is a result of the violence committed to each other for the last 20 plus years. The escalating crisis in Iraq has been fueled by coalition forces invasion and by centuries of sectarian violence. Martin Luther King said it well: "Violence multiplies violence making darker a night already devoid of stars." Those who think they can overcome violence with violence are mistaken, and as long as we don't understand that violence begets violence we will have hard time to overcome the legacies of conflict, war, and genocide.

A second legacy of violence is obviously the huge number of human beings killed in conflict, war, or genocide throughout history. Think of 6 million Jews killed during the World War W II or 800 thousand Tutsis killed in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Think of more than 200,000 people killed in Darfur, Sudan and 2.5 million others displaced since that round of conflict began in February 2003. Think of more than 2800 US soldiers killed in Iraq, more than 21, 000 wounded, and close to 100,000 Iraq civilians killed since the war began on March 19, 2003. Think of Vietnam, Cambodia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The list goes on and on, to our collective shame. Today, using 2005 data, there is an estimated 10 million refugees worldwide and internally displaced population. As one author wrote, "there is nothing on the planet-absolutely nothing-which does more to create refugees and to spread hunger, starvation, and disease than war...."

The third and least spoken legacy of violence is trauma - yet it is the most insidious, and often lies beneath the surface. There are millions of people suffering from trauma around the world following war and other forms of violence. Trauma is defined as an emotional wound or shock that creates substantial, lasting damage to the psychological development of a person,

often leading to neurosis. <sup>(Note 2)</sup> Today it is common to speak of "post traumatic stress disorder" or PTSD, as an inevitable part of the human condition. Not only does trauma alter the psychological equilibrium, it affects the biological, spiritual, and social well-being of individuals exposed to dreadful experiences. I wonder who among my fellow Rwandans is not traumatized, as we all have been exposed to the terrible events of before, during, and after the 1994 genocide. As human beings, we all have been exposed to dreadful events as victims, perpetrators, bystanders, or all of the above, or we have inherited the scars of our ancestors.

Fortunately, it has been observed that , "Throughout history, some people have adapted to terrible life events with flexibility and creativity, while others have become fixated on the trauma and gone on to live traumatized and traumatizing existence." <sup>(Note 3)</sup> In the process of experiencing terrible traumas on both personal and communal levels, I discovered I had some innate capacities to adapt and to process these experiences. However, tragically, one of the consequences of trauma is that affected individuals and communities are predisposed to revenge. Even when they don't have opportunities to take revenge, they tend to pass on the memory of persecution and the desire for revenge to future generations who may grow up all too eager to avenge what happened to their families, tribe, or ethnic group, if the conflict continues to fester and if is not transformed.

In the face of these legacies of conflict, war, and genocide in terms of trauma, the number of people persecuted, and the violence itself, we need to ask ourselves how to respond - with flexibility and creativity -- to any devastating situation. The victims more than anybody else - and I speak from my own experiences - need to ask themselves this question. And in my view, they have two choices: between revenge and reconciliation, between death and life.

### **Responding to violence with revenge**

Responding to conflict with revenge or with violence is the wrong choice! It is however sadly and tragically the most popular choice - yet what is popular, is not necessarily right. Responding to violence with violence is unethical, expensive, and ineffective.

The ethical question that revenge or war or violence raises is that such impulses seek to right the wrong with wrong; to overcome evil with evil. When you harm the one who harms you, you are not being different; you are not seeking the higher ground of stopping the forces of destruction. You are being shaped by your offender's behavior. And when revenge reaches the level of

war, it destroys life, thereby working against the fundamental commandment of every religious tradition. That is, "You shall not kill." During this past century, millions of people were killed as a result of war, and many more will continue to die until we understand the message President Kennedy gave more than 40 years ago: "Mankind must put an end to war, or war will put an end to mankind."

Furthermore, revenge in terms of wars is expensive. Think of the war in Iraq; it has cost so far more than 300 billion dollars; these are US dollars - not Zimbabwe dollars! Finally, war is just ineffective. Instead of resolving the conflict, it makes the situation worse. I have seen this in my country of Rwanda. The conflict between Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda started in 1959 with very limited casualties, deteriorated into large-scale violence in the 1960s and again in the early 1990s, which brought on the genocide in April of 1994. Each side thought war was the best way to achieve peace. And now every Rwandan - in a way or another - has been affected by our ethno-political. War is not only in the best interests of none but also it is ineffective. We have to learn from Dr. King that "darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that; hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that".

### **Responding to conflict with dialogue**

Responding to conflict with carefully constructed dialogue is the wise choice. It has become the only choice. Quite simply, it's the right thing to do; it is cost effective, and it is a powerful tool to transform the legacies of violence. I don't think I need to discuss how dialogue is the right thing to do or how it is cost effective. This is obvious based on what I just said about responding to conflict with violence. Let me just say a few words on how dialogue is a powerful tool of conflict transformation.

As an open conversation between people in a conflict situation, structured dialogue is a win-win process, a learning process, and a relationship-building process. In dialogue parties accept the imperative to come together to explore honestly how to meet the needs and interests of each other, how to overcome fears and concerns of each other. A win-win outcome is a lasting solution while a win-lose outcome is unstable and short lived at best. In addition, by accepting to come together and listen to each other, the protagonists have the opportunity to learn from the process. You may learn what drives yourself and the other to violence; you may discover alternative ways to resolve the conflict - alternative you may have never thought of; and most crucially, you may discover that your enemy is not evil but a fellow human being struggling to satisfy his or her fundamental human needs. Once you embrace the principle of win-win, and once you learn through engaging your whole being in the process of dialogue, you inevitably place yourself in a constructive

relationship-building. You and the other participants forge a non-violent partnership - no longer enemies who seek to defeat each other. You are, in fact, embarked on the path towards reconciliation, which is the ultimate goal of dialogue. The farther and longer you travel down that road, the harder it becomes to return to old ways, to destructive patterns of behavior.

## **Reconciliation**

What is reconciliation? According to Jean Paul Lederach <sup>(Note 4)</sup> who is an authority in conflict transformation, reconciliation represents "a point of encounter where concerns about both the past and the future can meet. For this to happen, people must find ways to encounter themselves and their enemies, their hopes and their fears". Reconciliation is therefore a joint process with two methodologically strategic components: confronting the past and focusing on the future.

### **Confronting the past**

Confronting the past is to talk compassionately about - and deal with - past human rights abuses. It is to give voice to all the victims - on both sides. This should not be interpreted as equating the abuses suffered by each side. Each abuse stands alone! The only thing abuses have in common is that they all are wrong.

The obstacle to such an approach is that people naturally don't like to talk about their shameful deeds. No one is comfortable talking about his/her wicked past. That is why perpetrators and governments generally deny their past atrocities. I am not surprised whenever I hear some Hutus denying the genocide of Tutsi in Rwanda. Nor am I surprised when I hear some Tutsi denying the crimes committed against Hutu. I am not surprised when I learn

that the government of Turkey continues to deny the genocide of over 1,5 million Armenians; that the government of Sudan persists in arguing what is happening in Sudan is not genocide. This is a normal psychological reaction; an unconscious self-protection mechanism. People naturally hate talking about their offenses to others, but they enjoy talking about the offenses done to them.

In any case we need to confront the past. As Audrey Chapman maintains, "establishing a shared truth that documents the causes, nature, and extent of severe and gross human rights abuses and /or collective violence under antecedent regimes is a prerequisite for achieving accountability, meaningful reconciliation, and a foundation for a common future." <sup>(Note 5)</sup> For this process to succeed there are requirements for both the victims and the perpetrators. For the perpetrator, it requires first acknowledging the wrong done, then apologizing, then resolving not to repeat the wrong, and finally to make

reparation - to the extent possible. On the other hand, the victim is required to forgive and to commit to not take revenge. Without these steps, on each side, reconciliation is unlikely and even impossible. Ultimately, by engaging in this process, the perpetrator and the victim are helping each other to heal, thereby contributing to the transformation of the conflict.

In South Africa, blacks and whites engaged in dialogue; they agreed on the creation of a truth and reconciliation commission (TRC) - among other things. One aspect of the TRC mandate was to look into all human rights violations - those committed by the apartheid regime and those committed by Nelson Mandela's movement - ANC. The victims across racial lines were given a safe space to tell their stories, and the perpetrators were equally given the opportunity to disclose their awful acts and to apologize. This process was not perfect, but it was a great example of confronting the past.

### **Focusing on the future**

The second approach is focusing on the future. This means putting more energy on building peace for future generations. The premise here is that the past is past; we don't have control over it, but we do have some control over what is next. This requires a thorough examination of the root causes of the conflict and to put in place appropriate mechanisms to transform the legacies of conflict.

### **Inner dialogue**

When you recognize the importance of confronting the past and focusing on the future, you realize that you have taken hold of powerful tools to begin transforming the legacies of violence, war, and genocide. However, throughout the course of human history this is proven easier said than done.

Through my own experiences as a Rwandan Tutsi, I have come to believe that people, individual by individual, need to undergo transformation at personal level through a dialogue with self. Such an inner dialogue may help individuals to discover that their best interests lie in reconciliation - not in revenge or in any other type of violence. Marianne Williamson sums it up quite succinctly: "In every community there is work to be done. In every nation, there are wounds to heal. In every heart there is the power to do it."

After the Rwandan genocide of 1994 - in which I lost my parents, seven siblings, and numerous relatives - I suffered the inner monologue where I kept thinking and obsessing as to why my loved ones were murdered. I was angry and sad. Gradually with time, I came to realize that dwelling on the past was harmful to me; I discovered that my best interests were in reconciliation - not

in remaining stuck on depressing thoughts. Let me share with you the three reasons why I chose the path of reconciliation:

### **Peace for future generations**

Thinking and working towards peace for future generations is more important than thinking of the loved ones killed. There is absolutely nothing I can do to bring back my loved ones, but there is something I can do to build the foundations for peace for those who survived; for my children; for my grandchildren. In this way I can honor the memory of those I lost. I need to do everything in my power to ensure peace for future generations of all Rwandans. A Rwandan proverb cautions that, "unwise parents pass on problems to their children." Engaging in revenge does just that; it transmits and perpetuates the cycle of violence, while reconciliation breaks the cycle.

### **My spiritual integrity**

The second reason why I chose and continue to choose the journey toward reconciliation has to do with my personal spiritual beliefs. I realized that my Christian spirituality - like any other spirituality I know of - teaches reconciliation - not revenge. The Bible instructs us "not to take revenge, not to be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good" (Romans 12: 17-21). One of the great messages from Jesus to his followers was, "you have heard that it was said, 'eye for eye and tooth for tooth'. But I tell you, do not resist evil by evil...." (Matthew 5: 38). I therefore believe that if we truly respect our spiritual teachers and if we uphold the best in our religious traditions, we need to embrace reconciliation and reject revenge.

### **My physical and emotional well being**

The third reason why I ultimately chose the journey toward reconciliation is quite simple and basic -for the care for my health, my well-being. As you may know, anger and resentment are the great enemies of physical and emotional well being; these destructive emotions are corrosive; they are the greatest enemies of happiness, the greatest enemies of good relationships between friends, comrades, and neighbors. I've learned that forgiveness is just as important to my health as eating the right foods. I am not trained as a psychologist or a physician - however, as a layman I needed to discover this God-given secret to good health.

One scientist wrote: "If you hold resentment, bitterness or anger, you are crippling yourself and rendering yourself ineffective" (Beverly Flanigan). You cannot sleep well with resentment in your heart; you cannot enjoy a good relationship with your partner if your mind is full of negative thoughts. You can even develop all kinds of illnesses, such as stomach ulcers, high blood pressure, or even a heart attack. Not only engaging in resentment -- and

eventually being consumed in revenge -- damages your health, but also cripples you to the point of becoming a perpetrator, and you become the very sort of person you profess to despise. Revenge is like adding salt to a wound, and guilt to victim hood.

Ladies and Gentlemen, to conclude, these three reasons - physical and emotional health, spiritual integrity, and peace for future generations, have become my guiding inspiration; they should be our guiding principles. After all, what can be more important than one's health, one's spirituality, and desiring peace for posterity! Once each of us does the hard work of embracing transformation at the personal level, then we can genuinely help others find ways to transform themselves; one human soul at a time, one by one.

Thank you and God bless you.

Note 1: Joseph Sebarenzi is the former Speaker of the Rwanda Parliament. He lectures at the School for International Training, and does Public Speaking on peace, reconciliation, and restorative justice. He is a genocide survivor.

Note 2: Webster

Note 3: Van Der Kolk, B., McFarlane, A., "The Black Hole of Trauma" in Van Der Kolk, B., McFarlane, A., Weisaeth, ed., Traumatic Stress: The effects of Overwhelming Experience on mind, body, and Society, New York: The Guilford Press, 1996, pp. 1.

Note 4: Building Peace, Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1997, P. 27

Note 5: Aundrey R. Chapman. (2002). Forgiveness and Reconciliation. P. 260-261