

Chapter Thirteen

Engaging with the Arts to Promote Coexistence

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Understanding an enemy is like understanding a poem.

In what sense might this be true? And if it were true, what implications might it have for the educational processes inherent in facilitating coexistence between former enemies?

In this chapter, I will first argue for the important similarities between the understanding of enemies and of poems and the relevance of this comparison to the challenges of promoting coexistence. Then I will illustrate how practitioners of coexistence and reconciliation effectively use a variety of artistic forms to address some of the central challenges for promoting coexistence in historically divided societies.

Starting Points

To apprehend something poetically means to be receptive to it, to open ourselves to the reverberations it creates in our beings. According to the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, poetic images “react on [our] minds and in [our] hearts, despite all barriers of common sense. . . . At the level of the poetic image, the duality of subject and object is iridescent, shimmering, unceasingly active in its inversions. . . .”¹

To understand a poetic image, we must pay attention to how it reverberates within us. Our attention “shimmers” back and forth between our own response and the image, constructing new meanings out of those reverberations. The image in the poem allows us to experience, perceive, or understand something previously unknown about ourselves. Conversely, it is by attending to what is evoked within us that we are able to understand the poetic image. Understanding a poem can alter a reader who enters into a state of receptivity to the poetic image, to its resonances and reverberations within the reader, and to the “unceasingly active” inversions between them. Bachelard refers to this kind of understanding of self and other through each other as “trans-subjectivity.”²

The deepening of relationships between former enemies also involves a kind of trans-subjectivity, an epistemological interdependence that results from the features of enmity. Political psychologists theorize that children’s sense of ethnic or national identity is created in part through the “externalization” of pleasurable and wholly good impulses onto symbols of the in-group. In a parallel process, unpleasurable phenomena or impulses labeled as “bad” are attached to symbols associated with the enemy. Vamik Volkan writes that “since our enemies . . . serve as a reservoir of our unwanted selves, they are unconsciously seen to some extent as being like us, although on a conscious level they should not seem to be the same as us since they contain our unwanted aspects—those characteristics we vigorously reject.”³

To maintain an “enemy system,” both adversaries are “locked into a permanent ‘dance’” in which their apprehension of each other “is largely governed by projection.”⁴ Especially in cases of overt aggression, the stereotyped enemy is devalued through demonizing and dehumanizing attitudes and behaviors that allow us to avoid feeling guilty about inflicting injury and destruction. To justify our violence, we convince ourselves that the enemy is not only subhuman but also threatening—a force from which we must defend ourselves. Single

incidents are taken as evidence that the total fabric of the enemy group is demoniacal. These beliefs are supported by members of our own group—family, friends, media, and political leaders⁵—with whom we are intersubjectively linked.

How is it possible to overcome this polarization? The psychological anthropologist Howard Stein writes that “transcendence of group-isms can only be accomplished, and always incompletely, as we are able to relinquish and integrate the inner splits between ‘goodness’ and ‘badness’ that have led us throughout history to dichotomize between idealized and disparaged groups. . . . Only by grieving over our own imperfectability and mortality can we begin to permit ourselves and others to be ambivalently, more fully, ‘human, all too human,’ and not people the social and supernatural world with saints and demons. Liberation begins with an understanding of what we need and use our indispensable enemies for.”⁶ Because enemies become receptacles for the negatively valued attributes of ourselves, to perceive our enemy more completely necessarily entails revising our understanding of ourselves as well. Shifting between self and other to remake images of each, the work of overcoming an enemy system mirrors the shimmering attention between the poetic image and our own response.

Because of the similarities between the qualities of presence inherent in aesthetic encounters and the sensibilities required of former enemies who seek to understand each other, the arts can be crafted to encourage the kind of movement between self and other that can help former adversaries overcome the challenges of forging relationships. The examples of coexistence intervention described later in the chapter demonstrate how engagement with the arts can encourage the intellectual and emotional attitudes and proclivities—such as receptivity, creativity, vitality, respect, and imagination—that are required for the difficult work of coexistence and reconciliation.

Why are these attitudes required? Let’s take coexistence to refer to the point on a continuum of intergroup relations between the extremes of war, slavery, and apartheid, predicated on utter disregard for the other, and cooperation, characterized by recognition of interdependence. Coexistence refers to a threshold point where the individuals or groups shift from reciprocal hatred and injury to rudimentary, even grudging respect and then all further movement in the direction of cooperation, understanding, and reconciliation. Thus coexistence implies mutual participation in determining the degree and quality of interaction. Because intergroup relations can cascade backward in the direction of intolerance and violence, coexistence requires nourishing the attitudes, values, and capacities people need, not just to cease violence, but to build respect, understanding, and cooperation over time. This work of nourishing attitudes, values, and capacities—which could be viewed as educational work in the broadest sense—must focus on restoring and enhancing individual and collective capacities for intellectual, social, emotional, creative, and spiritual life. These capacities, often impaired by violence, are vital to sustaining both individual well-being and intergroup coexistence over time.

In conflict and postconflict situations, coexistence workers face several difficult challenges in engaging people in conversation or the planning of cooperative projects with their enemies or former adversaries. Many challenges result from the traumatic effects of violence. One difficulty is the mismatch between people’s need to tell their stories and express their suffering and their former enemy’s capacity to listen. In most cases of violent conflict, people on all sides have been traumatized in ways that limit their capacity to listen. A related challenge, especially in cases of extreme trauma or long-standing oppression, is that the experiences that most need recounting may not be readily accessible to language. Nondiscursive modes of expression may be the only route available to people as they seek to construct meaning from and gain power in relation to the violations they have experienced.

Other challenges involve the ways in which the dynamics of the conflict have become insinuated into the discourses of the various communities. The categories through which people perceive each other and articulate their experiences are likely to have become

embedded within the stereotypes that have fueled reciprocal dehumanization. The constructs people use to discuss historical, geographical, and cultural phenomena are likely to be unacceptable to each other. Therefore, the most readily available modes of communication—the discourses of each community’s regular conversation—can often exacerbate misunderstandings and perpetuate processes of reciprocal, symbolic injuring. Sometimes participants in coexistence activities sense this risk and become very polite. They thereby minimize the risk of injuring each other but also avoid addressing the issues that divide them.

Resistance to the learning required for coexistence can also arise because people often defend themselves against facing the suffering of their own communities and the suffering of others—suffering caused by actions in which they or the institutions of their country may be complicit. Normal tendencies to avoid confronting pain are exacerbated by the proximity in time to people’s own traumas as well as feelings of shame, guilt, and rage.

People also bring to coexistence efforts defenses against learning ideas that can shatter their worldviews and compromise the meaning of symbols they hold sacred. Because in enmity relations, all positively valued qualities tend to be attributed to one’s own group, the processes of rehumanizing an enemy often involve simultaneously acknowledging the shadow sides of oneself and one’s group. These lessons come at a high price, not only in disruptions to the infrastructure of one’s intrapsychic world but also in disruptions to relationships with cherished family members and friends. It is no wonder that people are resistant to such changes. The educational work of coexistence must reach beneath people’s defenses but do so in respectful and gentle ways that support people to configure new patterns of meaning as old patterns become obsolete. Indeed, the work must be able to reach people whose worlds have been so shattered that they have lost faith in the potential benevolence of human creativity and lost the capacity or willingness to trust or even to discern when trust might be warranted. Finally—and this might be especially true for children who have grown up knowing only violence—many whom we seek to engage in coexistence efforts find it difficult to imagine another way of being. They don’t have memories of the “time when we all got along.” Overcoming or circumventing these challenges is a daunting task.

However, in artistic forms and processes, many coexistence practitioners find resources that are uniquely well suited to address them. Art—from paintings viewed by solitary museumgoers to participatory rituals of dance and drumming—can support movement toward coexistence for a variety of reasons:

Art is pleasurable and enlivening. If people are depressed, singing or creating with colors can provide energy for expression and engagement. If people are disoriented, the forms of rituals can provide support to sustain interactions and focus in spite of uncertainties. By engaging the senses and cognitive capacities, art can reach beneath people’s defenses, circumventing the incompatibility of existing discourses.⁷

Art invites reciprocity. It involves people in reciprocal relationships of sensitivity toward others. A work of art is inherently other-regarding in a way that is rarely the case in political discourse or debate.

Art invites creativity. People tend to perceive the world through the categories of preexisting conceptual frameworks; artists, however, generally take the elements they apprehend in the world and bring them into relation in new ways. The ability to “see the world with fresh eyes,” or imagine new configurations of the elements, needs strengthening in virtually every society, especially in societies where the sense of possibility has been blunted by violence.

Artists can serve as mediators. In divided communities where violence has impaired people’s capacities to listen, artists can use the qualities of receptivity to facilitate expression, healing, and reciprocal understanding. The qualities of listening associated with aesthetic attention—alert but calm, emotional but cognitively aware, engaged but

detached—are precisely the kinds of presence that can help people put their experiences into words. Also, artists’ listening to those who have been traumatized by violence can begin to restore a victim’s capacity and willingness to hear the stories and experiences of the other.

Contributions of the Arts to Coexistence Efforts

Both the arts and coexistence efforts are difficult to evaluate, yet it is possible to document the kinds of responses and conversations that are nourished by the creation, rehearsal, production, and witnessing of the work. The following examples focus on particular kinds of artistic expression: ritual, folk and traditional arts, music and cultural work, visual art, drama, and oral narrative mediated through art forms.⁸ This very small sampling of the thousands of arts-related coexistence programs that exist in conflict regions and multiethnic societies illustrates the distinctive qualities of a range of approaches that use art to promote coexistence in postconflict societies.

Ritual

Structured within a framework of traditional symbols, participants in rituals enter moments when they are released from the normative demands of cultural scripts and where they enjoy the freedom associated with play. As Clifford Geertz puts it, ritual allows the “dreamed of” and the “lived in” orders to fuse.⁹

In the Tamil community of Sri Lanka, ritual is the focus of work used to help people, traumatized by violence and dislocation, develop or regain the communicative capacity to share their stories and join in a dialogue with their Sinhalese counterparts. A Tamil colleague from Sri Lanka, who is a drummer, healer, and lecturer in theater at Jaffna University, uses processes of ritual and theater to work with the Tamil community in the northern part of the country to help its members overcome trauma so that they are prepared both to express themselves and to listen to their enemies.

His example is instructive for several reasons. The work it describes relies on an adaptation of an expressive form—in this case, ritual—that is indigenous to the region and familiar to all parties involved. It illustrates the power of incorporating into coexistence efforts the expressive forms that are or were thriving in the communities involved in the conflict.¹⁰ Also, this work takes place almost exclusively with people from only one of the communities in the conflict. Very often preparation for intercommunal exchanges—especially when it involves some degree of healing from trauma—is best accomplished in uninational or unicommunal sessions. In this instance, the ritual was designed to help participants overcome the trauma of violence and displacement by acknowledging and expressing their feelings. As people supported each other to enact their most frightening images, a community of trusting relations was built. As a result of the working through of feelings, the shared experience of the ritual, and the support people felt from each other, the participants developed the capacities for expression and for listening that they would need to participate in coexistence dialogues. My colleague, Kandasamy Sithamparanathan, explained:

In the early 1990s, our theater group conducted workshops in a very interior peasant village. We were not sure about these workshops, but when we began, people cried and expressed their feelings. At last they told how they found a different life here. We experienced very close relationships with these people. Our theater group recognized that the people themselves have inner energy and suppressed feelings. Henceforth, rather than use our theater skills to perform propaganda dramas (as we had earlier), we constructed rituals that invited people to express their feelings and thus build on their human resources.

The rituals take place in houses. It is as if the house has a life and a vibrancy of its own, and people can feel the house as they enter it. A lot of reverence is paid to the place. Flowers are brought in and placed on

a white design. People remove their slippers and touch the ground. People have said that after entering this area, they have felt the house responding to them.

There are drummers inside the house. As people enter, they dance to the music and sway from side to side. As the music continues, people begin to dance faster. The dancing can become very frenzied and emotional. People manifest themselves in very different ways. One person was so rigid that he was frozen in place. Some people cry; others scream. People hit things.

The forms are similar to traditional rituals, although traditional rituals deal with supernatural powers. We believe in human leaders and the power of human interaction.

Sometimes people in the workshop see images involving someone else who is there. I might have a vision of you running up into a spiral, being chased by many people, and you would have no place to go. It's an aspect of the unconscious that manifests these images of other people. After these images come up, people sit together and talk about the images and what they have seen. After that, they act out what they have envisioned.

One girl saw an image of a ghost chasing her. The ghost had a torn mouth. She chose to express this using four or five people to show that one ghostly figure, because she didn't feel one person could adequately represent the ghost. She still had problems expressing the torn mouth. Usually, we use other materials like masks, but this girl, who was a senior in high school, felt she couldn't in any way express the torn mouth. This vision related to the political situation. Another time, a man described a vision in which the army was burning a couple's children right before their eyes. He was actually remembering an incident from when he was nine years old.

The rituals can go on for six days. People stay overnight, and we cook together. There are sessions for meditation. People talk among themselves and perform for each other. There is a closeness and intimacy that comes out of these interactions—a closeness that they have never felt before. In our culture, men and women don't touch each other, but after these workshops, there is no such inhibition, and people hold each other and support each other. Emotions are very intense—not sexually but in another way. We might start at seven in the morning and go until eight at night. The last day does not end. They don't go to sleep, staying up from Friday morning until Saturday morning, and then they leave for home.

People who participate in these workshops leave feeling stronger and more courageous. They come out with the feeling that they have been a part of a family. They are not ready to accept oppression or to oppress others. Going to a workshop like this gives them courage, and so they speak without fear. The change takes place because the people express themselves at a very deep level. They are given the tools to express themselves and to bring forth all that they are holding inside. The workshops are a deliberate process through which they are able to bring their suffering, their fears, and their hopes out into the open.

In our theater group, we are all friends. Although there is a big age difference, we are all equals. We don't have that much schooling, but our minds are very clear and powerful, and our people are very energetic. Dancing and acting skills come to us very easily, but we have to develop the inner mind. We experience a very good life in our theater group. We offer something to everybody, and we enjoy that, even amid the chaos and oppression and everything. One of the major issues in Sri Lanka is that the Sinhalese people don't know what the Tamil people want. So now we have a project to get the Tamil viewpoint out. After Tamil people have participated in our ritual workshops, they are better able to express themselves.

Our goal is for the people on both sides to become better listeners. First, we develop listening skills through theater activities, working with each group separately. Then, using the new listening skills, we bring the two groups together for dialogue. Through participation in theater, people's minds are broadened. They begin to form a collective voice for peace. They become more willing to listen to Sinhalese people and

their perspectives. This allows everyone to hear the other side and how people on that side perceive the situation. This is what we hope will happen in the exchanges we are planning.¹¹

Folk and Traditional Arts

Many coexistence projects build on the folk arts and other traditional expressive forms of communities. Strengthening intergroup relations through folk arts makes sense for several reasons. Even when material resources are scarce, people still have their songs, stories, cooking styles, children's games, and perhaps gardens. These resources exist within the community, and community members themselves are the experts. Artists and folklorists who work with community lore can find ways to honor and dignify the knowledge that exists within communities, thereby strengthening people's confidence in their ability to reconstruct their lives and their relationships with others. They can also construct opportunities for people from different communities to come to know, respect, and begin to understand each other as they share aspects of their communities' knowledge and as they build on that understanding to create together songs, plays, quilts, festivals, and museums.

One particularly impressive folklore project is called Traditional Creativity in the Schools, run by the Centre for Creativity in Education and Cultural Heritage based in Jerusalem, under the direction of folklorist Simon Lichman. Using schools as the vehicle, its target population is Arab and Jewish school communities, including the children in each participating class, their families and teachers, and eventually the communities at large. According to Lichman's project description: "Through the folklore project we facilitate ongoing communication and the building of positive relationships between neighboring peoples. Our ultimate objective is that groups of Jews and Arabs (children, families, teachers), having worked together creatively for several years, develop a climate for coexistence, tolerance, and mutual respect. Arab and Jewish children learn more about their own folklore while receiving a window into each other's daily life and traditions, with family members helping to create a mosaic of community history and cultural heritage. Participating school staff are trained to run the program and become a working partnership."¹²

The program consists of weekly classwork on folklore and coexistence, conducted separately in paired Arab and Jewish schools in Israel. Each pair of schools participates for as long as eight years, with particular classroom pairings lasting at least two to three years. Students collect information from their own parents and grandparents, exploring their own community's traditions in play, food, oral history, and music. Parents and grandparents from both communities are thrilled to be asked to share this sort of knowledge, which is seldom reflected or acknowledged in the formal educational system and which children had previously tended to dismiss as irrelevant to modern life. Every six or eight weeks, the program sponsors a "joint activity day" in which participants from both Arab and Jewish communities are invited to the school in their roles as culture bearers. On one day, for instance, Israeli and Palestinian Arab and Jewish grandparents demonstrate different styles of hopscotch; on another day, different techniques for pickling food. Over the course of two or three years, the project facilitates cross-cultural, multigenerational social ties between people as individuals, as members of families, and as members of communities. The program is multifaceted, including teacher training and photography and multimedia exhibitions in each community, so that parents who are unable to participate in school-day activities can still become familiar with the project and have opportunities for social interaction. Children visit each other's houses of worship and learn about each other's holidays. "Unlike many folklore projects that focus on the preservation of tradition, this project shows participants how the wisdom of tradition, transmitted as ongoing and dynamic, can facilitate social cohesion."¹³

The approach of the Centre for Creativity in Education and Cultural Heritage is unusual because of the staff's sustained commitment to entire school communities. Here is Lichman's own assessment of the project's impact, written in light of the increased violence that has characterized the region since October 2000:

Despite the radical disruption of normal contacts and the enormous strain of mutual suspicion, fear, and pain since the outbreak of violence in October 2000, the center continued to work intensively with the children and school staff in the Arab and Jewish Israeli schools separately. The first set of joint activities between the paired Jewish and Arab classes was postponed and rescheduled for after Ramadan, Hanukkah, and Christmas. We concentrated on the collection of folklore and on the way in which researching and understanding our own heritage and traditions influences our respect for, and sensitivity to, one another. In the Palestinian and Israeli communities, we have only been able to maintain telephone contact. In both the Palestinian-Israeli and Jewish and Arab Israeli programs, the teachers focused on developing their pupils' communication skills, encouraging them to see that dialogue, not violence, is the only way forward.

Keeping the channels of communication open has been a primary task for the center. We have provided a forum for thinking through the devastating experience of this ongoing tragedy, offering support and guidance to parents and children in the communities as well as to the teaching staff. The children, parents, grandparents, and teachers worry about each other as the violent events unfold. During the first few months, we carried messages of goodwill between children, their families, and school staff in the Israeli Arab and Jewish communities; thus points of view and alternative perspectives could be expressed and heard. Many individuals regularly telephoned each other, and in response to the adult population's urgent need for direct contact, we set up meetings between Arab and Jewish parents and grandparents while their children could not travel to each other's schools.

It is precisely in times like these that the project's long-term, community-oriented approach has been paying off. While suffering the consequences of what is happening all around us, these paired Jewish and Arab communities have people on the other side whom they have come to know on a personal and positive level. For them it is harder to be carried along with so large a proportion of the population into stereotyping generalizations about "Jews" and "Arabs."

Even though the situation in the country has not yet settled, it has been possible to resume regular meetings between children in the Jewish and Arab Israeli schools because of the confidence they have in each other as partners working toward creating a safe society based on equality, dignity, and mutual respect.¹⁴

Music and Cultural Work

According to the philosopher Suzanne Langer, music is a kind of expression that makes apparent the forms of human emotions. We only need to watch a television show or a movie with the audio track muted to realize the extent to which music can be used to communicate the emotional significance of an interaction or the inner feelings of a character.

Music is perhaps the art form where the qualities of harmony, balance, and rhythm can be most readily apprehended. When elements appear in harmonic relationship to each other, we perceive unity in diversity. Just as musical expression can be used to mobilize people in the service of national interests and military readiness, it can be crafted to reveal and express commonalities across differences. When diverse groups of people—in some cases former adversaries—work with artists and facilitators to compose songs that give voice to their common aspirations, the processes of generating and performing the songs can offer the embodied experience of an imagined unity in diversity even before it is realized in politics or institutions.

One educator who draws on the educational potential inherent in music expression is the African American cultural worker Jane Sapp, now a senior fellow at the Center for Reflective Community Practice at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a visiting artist at Brandeis University's International Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life. Educated as a musician and folklorist, Sapp works to strengthen communities by helping groups of people become aware of their shared knowledge and how to use it as a source of strength for creating a future together. She refers to her interaction with communities as "cultural work," which, as she puts it:

... focuses on what the community has, rather than what it does not have. People have their songs, stories, histories, cooking styles, and ways of being together. My work has been to take all the ways in which people have fashioned a life together and use it as a mirror. People can look in this mirror, look at themselves, and say: "This is the way we have created our lives together. Can we not continue to do that today? Can we not continue to be active participants in our own lives?" ... People can know how to take that knowledge and recognize in it the building blocks for the future and for change.¹⁵

For twenty-five years, Sapp has worked in disenfranchised communities, including many African American communities in the poorest counties in the American rural South. Since 1989, Sapp has been based in Springfield, Massachusetts, where she directs several multicultural choruses and leads music workshops with young people deemed to be "at risk." She uses her art to bring people together and draw them out, and to engage them not simply in artistic expression but in a critical evaluation of the social and cultural issues that affect them.

In 1996, Sapp created Voices of Today, an after-school program that uses the arts to encourage teens to express their visions, hopes, and dreams for the future. She works with a multiracial group of low-income middle school students, many of whom were silent or disruptive in class. Sapp encourages the children to talk about their families, their schools, poverty, racism, and other pressing issues. She then sets their spoken and written words to music and teaches the children to sing their songs. In many cases, the children have gained a sense of self-discipline and direction that spills over into their academic work and their planning for their futures.

Several of Sapp's projects have, as a core component, the strengthening of intergroup relations. Recently, she directed a ten-day institute at Brandeis University, launching the Global Partnerships for Education project. Community-based educators from Haifa (Israel), Grenada, and refugee communities in Boston were linked with Brandeis faculty and students to experience and learn Sapp's approach to cultural work and then fashion projects in their three communities. Through storytelling, visual art, poetry writing, the construction of timelines, and oral history interviews, participants explored their communities' cultural resources. They looked at these resources in terms of community, family, historical, intellectual, and aesthetic inheritances. Discussion focused on areas of disagreement and difference among participants as well as on commonalities and shared values.

Over the course of the ten days, in the context of this intensive community-building experience, each participant became more openly expressive. Conversations became deeper, more serious, and filled with more humor. The Haifa team, which included both Arab and Jewish Israelis, was able to draw on that reservoir of creativity and energy as they confronted their very different ideas about how to adapt the cultural work approach to a coexistence project in Haifa.

Toward the end of the institute, Sapp led the participants in the composition of a song that reflects and celebrates the ideas that had been generated by their time together.¹⁶ She discusses her goals for the institute and the songwriting activity in particular:

I have people compose a collective song so that they have a sense of what is possible. A key goal of cultural work is to look at what is possible, to remind ourselves that there are always possibilities. There are no dead-end streets in terms of our having the will to create a new world and change in our community. As my grandmother used to say, as long as you're living and breathing, there's possibility. Another reason for the song is to encourage creativity, to oil the imagination. This ensures that we don't reach a dead end, that we imagine something beyond the obstacles that we think we see, either in quality of life or changing relationships in our community. The ability to imagine that things can be different is very important.

When you work with relationships and openly share your knowledge in a safe place, at some point people come together. Even with their differences in inheritances and experiences, people find a common humanity, a common will. When you listen to that song, you see that collective will, that collective vision, that common humanity that comes forth. We could not have done the song on the first day, and we couldn't have done it on the third. It was after the process that people came together and saw each other in different ways.¹⁷

Visual Arts

Like music and other performing arts, the two- and three-dimensional visual arts also create harmonies and rhythms through the interplay of disparate elements within bounded forms. In visual arts, elements are organized in space, each symbol replete with layers of meaning, enhanced by the relationships among them and by the resonance they evoke in their viewers. The beauty of a visual form—a sculpture or painting, a building or garden—can invite viewers to become aware of images and to linger as they are supported to encounter, reexamine, and reconsider symbols and their own processes of making meaning.

One artist who has explored the possibilities for reconciliation inherent in public art installations is Wen-ti Tsen, a Chinese American muralist, graphic designer, and sculptor. On the occasion of the millennium, he was given the opportunity to work with the Allied Arts Council of Yakima Valley, Washington, to create a public work of art that would bring together all segments of the community to “reflect on the last thousand years and to view the next thousand.”¹⁸ During early conversations between the artist and his local counterparts, the idea emerged for a project that would create a “sculptural plaza” for downtown Yakima that would bring into relationship the historical narratives, grievances, and contributions of the region’s substantial European American, Native American, and Mexican communities, as well as its African American, Filipino American, and Japanese American minorities. The plaza would focus on the theme of water.

Relations among groups in the region exhibit signs of alienation and strain. For instance, tensions between the European American orchard owners and two waves of Mexican American laborers, only some of whom enjoy legal immigrant status, have resulted in a city that is ethnically segregated. The Native American community also remains quite separate from the city proper, with most members living on a reservation that represents one-tenth of their original land, established in a treaty signed in the 1830s. The local Japanese community was uprooted as a result of the Internment Act during World War II; a small portion has returned to work as truck farmers. A small black community came to the region to work in coal mines. According to the artist’s report on the project, the plaza was to be created in such a way that it would be felt “owned by many people. Stories about lives would be told. Ways would be found that they could be heard.”¹⁹

During 1999 and the first half of 2000, Tsen made three preparatory visits to the Yakima Valley. These visits, ranging in length from a few days to two months, introduced him to the city, region, economy, and landscape. He worked at county fairgrounds and in community colleges to produce murals depicting the people of the region. He also attended social events, Rotary Club meetings, city and town councils, schools, and art colleges. He

was presented to the Yakama Indian nation in a powwow and did interviews with various media.

Tsen describes the creation of the installation:

The installation is called "The Water of Life." At one edge of the plaza are four large basalt blocks, from six to eight feet tall, each weighing four to seven tons, forming an arc. A sheet of water trickles on the face of each. This represents the elements in their natural state, water coming from the mountains. Viewed in a primary way, the piece refers to the irrigation water flowing from the Cascade Mountains, providing the life source for the agricultural economy of the Yakima Valley. A six-foot-high bronze case contains a glassed-in tank of water, with a bronze sculpture of a segment of the Cascade Range on top. This represents people's abilities to tap and transform nature into resource. The bronze sculpture that represents the Cascades is in direct alignment with the actual ridge toward the west, on which it is modeled.

Two concrete walls that slope from eight feet to six feet zigzag on two sides of the plaza like reaching arms. Set in the walls are thirty-six cases, twelve by twelve inches each, glazed on both sides. Each case holds a "power object" created by an artist or a community person in order to "redeem the past, reconcile the present, or imagine a good future." A selection committee of ten thoughtful and very articulate people from various cultural backgrounds chose the items to be represented in these "community walls" from ideas solicited from the community. They chose the forty pieces in a half-dozen congenial and provocative sessions. I wanted this to provide a process for the reclamation of something, a moment to rethink the past, assess the present, and take action toward the future.

Eight basalt columns sit around the open space in the middle. Seven columns serve as the pedestals for bronze casting of actual objects, tools used in the valley. The objects are a Singer sewing machine, a Yakama Indian basket with berries, a GI helmet, an irrigation crank, an apple-harvesting bag, a saddle, and a farmworker's short-handled hoe. The last column has an inscribed circle with a spring of water flowing from the center; this installation represents the spiritual.

In the front of the plaza, aligned with the Cascade water tank, is a two-by-two-by-four-foot bronze-plated box with a three-spout water fountain in front. A bronze sculpture of an apple orchard is set on the top. The size of the box replicates an apple harvest bin. The fountain is suitably sized for a child to romp in. A ring of light made of fiber optics with changing and circulating colors sits over the plaza. The movement and rhythm simulate those of the circular "friendship" dance at a powwow. It represents a coming together of the people and a healing of the nations.²⁰

Throughout this project, Tsen understood his role to include a large measure of listening. In cases where different groups in the community did not respond to general requests for participation, dialogue sessions were established, set up at a place where people would feel at home. These visits meant that the project was informed by the ideas, experiences, and sensibilities of a broad diversity of the community, including nuclear waste scientists at a nearby plant and incarcerated teens. "The artist must subsume himself to what others want to say," Tsen explained. "The artist becomes others' tongues."²¹

Tsen also understood that his role was that of a mediator. He consistently stressed the importance of the process and the installation itself being fair to all of the different cultures of the region. In the context of a project sponsored by the nearly all-white local arts agency, this meant building up trusting relationships through small preliminary projects and through many conversations.

The original planners of the project envisioned the installation as celebrating water. From a white European perspective, they conceived of water as an economic resource.

Through the development of irrigation systems, they had transformed water into wealth. The Native American community, however, referred to water in spiritual terms, as a God-given blessing, to be ritually sipped before meals. Tsen explained his role in relation to this difference in the following way:

Without arguing, we could add more layers of meaning to the symbolic representations in the public plaza. While being true to the original planners' desire for a public art installation of the highest quality, and celebrating water as a resource, we could create something cohesive around the idea of the circular movement of water. We could honor the Mexican community's contributions by focusing on labor, on actions, rather than on the products of that labor. And we could honor the Native American sensibilities by emphasizing nature itself. As an artist, I came with no dogma. I always sought to incorporate each new perspective, layering meaning upon meaning and representing the ambiguity of things. The installation as a whole and its various elements must be attractive enough to catch the eye of those who pass by, but the viewer must bring himself or herself to it. The more people engage with it, the more they get out of it.

The work conveys a quality of acceptance and fullness. Each person's and each community's feelings were accepted and valued. In this sense, there is a quality of forgiveness in the piece. Each element is viewed differently because it is in the context of the others, held within a series of concentric circles marked by the objects and by a path with benches that surrounds them.

The flowing water can be taken as a cleansing agent that could salve the splits and disdain the hurt that has inscribed the relationships among the communities of the region. In this sense, it is a symbol of reconciliation. The possibility of reconciliation is something that the artist must imagine. The form of the artwork must hold all of the elements in relation, and then it must become invisible so that people aren't noticing the form but perhaps just focusing on the object within one window. Because of the spirit of the piece, barriers are opened up. And because of the intensity of effort that has gone into the creation of the work, viewers can grasp the meaning with a relatively small amount of energy.²²

Drama

One of the most important capacities required for coexistence and reconciliation is the ability to imagine the experiences of the "other" and in particular to empathize with the suffering of one's enemy. In Western literary and philosophical tradition, the correlation between drama and literature and the development of the human capacity for empathy is long-standing, having been articulated by Aristotle in his *Poetics*.

Drama (and literature) can be crafted to help us understand ourselves and our adversaries and the reality of our interdependence, in part because of the emotional space created by our awareness that we are viewing a "representation" of events and not the real events themselves. This space, which has not only emotional but also cognitive, psychological, and spiritual dimensions, is created when we apprehend a situation having stepped back from our own interests and purposes. Artists can make use of this space to help us understand things we have resisted knowing and to comprehend in ways that lead to ethical action.

The International Playback Theatre Network (IPTN) is an organization that uses the resources of theater to promote understanding, community, and coexistence. Lesley Yalen, program assistant at the Coexistence Initiative at Brandeis University, describes an IPTN workshop held at Search for Common Ground:

Our group consisted of about fifty conflict resolution and coexistence practitioners from around the world—Burundi, Angola, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Macedonia, Ukraine, the Middle East, and the United States. The theater troupe consisted of five actors. The actors asked if anyone had a story to share. A young man from Burundi who did coexistence and reconciliation work with youth in Bujumbura raised his

hand. He came up and sat in the “storyteller’s seat” next to one of the actors. The actor asked him, “How does your story begin?”

He told us about the work he had done to bring peace and reconciliation to his country. He talked about the delicate and tenuous nature of the relationships that had been built between Hutu and Tutsi. He told us about the day when there were rumors that the market in Bujumbura had been set on fire and that it was an ethnically motivated act and another round of conflict was likely to break out. He said that he wanted to check it out for himself; he was afraid that all of his hard work was collapsing before his eyes. Almost breathless, he described how getting to the market was very difficult because parts of the city were blocked off. When he arrived at the market, it was in flames. His mother called him on his cellular phone and cried, “The market is burning, the market is burning. Come home! There will be trouble!”

However, he was determined to learn what was really going on and eventually discovered that the fire was not set as an act of ethnic hatred: some thugs with no political agenda had set it. Immediately he began calling the network of Hutu and Tutsi with whom he had been working. One by one, he spread the word: “The Hutu did not do this. The Tutsi did not do this. This is nothing more than a common crime. Do not retaliate.” To both sides, in a frenzied state of urgency, he did his best to stop the rumors’ dangers of ethnic nationalism.

While the young man was telling his story, the actor from the theater troupe listened intently, prompting him with only one question: “And how does your story end?” The young man responded: “My group of Hutu and Tutsi youths did not fall apart.” After he finished speaking, without any consultation, the theater troupe began to dramatize his story. The actors portrayed this story with a beautiful blend of literalism and abstraction. It was literal enough that we recognized everything we had just heard—the emotion, tone, pitch, and events. We saw the whole process, from the reconciliation work to the news of the fire to the frantic search for the truth to the panicked call from the mother to the realization of the truth and finally to the urgent attempt to stem the rising tide of anger and to stop the cycle of violence before it began.

The dramatization was also abstract in that it took the man’s story to a deeper and more symbolic level. We recognized him in their portrayal, although he was not played by a man for the entire skit. We recognized the market and the city, though they only had five people with which to construct it. They did things symbolically—focusing on the essences of characters and events—but were true to the emotions he expressed. The audience was even brought into the scene as the fire. On cue, we raised our arms and made whooshing and crackling noises as one of the actors ran among us in fear and despair.

I am sure that everyone in the room was deeply moved. The most powerful part of this experience was observing my Burundian colleague as he watched the actors depict his story. He sat on the edge of his chair the entire time. His eyes were wide open and his mouth agape. He looked completely in awe. Afterward, when they asked him how it had been for him to watch their performance, he nodded his head and said: “You got it, exactly.”

It was amazing that by listening, these actors were able to symbolize and artistically express his experience for him. They were able to dramatize it in a way that did not retraumatize him or call his decisions into question. Rather, they validated his experience and allowed the rest of us to experience a day in the life of a peacemaker in Burundi.²⁵

Oral Narratives Mediated Through Art Forms

Eliciting oral histories is another way to facilitate communication across differences and to strengthen communities. During the 1980s, I directed a community organization devoted to strengthening intergroup relations through the processes of oral history and the arts. Our projects were based on the theory that through a sharing of life stories, community people would come to feel a sense of pride in their own cultures, appreciate their commonalities,

and acknowledge (and perhaps begin to address) the dynamics of racial oppression and ethnic hatred that kept their communities divided from each other.

Artists, scholars, educators, and community people collaborate to make murals, drama, and curricular projects in multiethnic American neighborhoods, prisons, public housing developments, and teen empowerment programs. Our program was adopted by a rural women's association in Belize to strengthen a coalition of poor, rural Mayan, Garifuna, and Creole women involved in craft production and small-scale sustainable development projects. Adult literacy workers in Toronto adapted the model, and I used it in coexistence sessions with Arab and Israeli teens at Seeds of Peace.

The model emphasizes the importance of listening. Training sessions in oral history focus on helping people develop the quality of listening that is necessary to help people tell the stories they need and want to tell. By telling stories, cultivating thoughtful listening, and deploying artistic symbols that reach beneath people's defenses, oral history can help people reclaim dignity, imagine the possibility of forgiveness, and perceive the humanity of others.

As a community oral historian, I once joined Jane Sapp as part of a team of cultural workers leading a weeklong cultural camp for children and teens from the African American, Vietnamese, and white communities of Biloxi, Mississippi. The intention of the camp was to strengthen the community and to address racial tensions that were emerging as the African American community watched the Vietnamese newcomers leap ahead of them economically, supported by financial assistance for refugee resettlement from the U.S. government. The mornings were spent sharing songs and listening to tradition bearers from all three communities. We visited a Vietnamese shrimping boat, for instance, and listened to members of the African American clergy describe their experiences in the civil rights movement. It was my responsibility to lead a daily story-sharing session for the teenagers, all of whom were African American. Their Vietnamese and white agetates were busy at summer jobs, opportunities denied to them by patterns of racial discrimination in employment.

Twelve teenage African American residents of Biloxi shared stories with each other about being mistrusted or humiliated by white teachers at school and also about incidents in stores owned or operated by either white or Vietnamese adults. On the last day of the camp, before an audience of their parents and community leaders, the teens presented a dramatic scene based on their stories. It was set in a public school classroom. Each of the twelve performers wore a sign indicating the race of the person he or she represented. Kim, who portrayed a white teacher, set the scene by instructing the class to take out papers and pencils for term exams.

The teens portrayed five incidents in which the teacher discriminated against the African American and Vietnamese students in the classroom, all of which were based on their stories. In the first incident, the teacher invites the students to move around the classroom to do anything they need to do prior to the test. After allowing a white girl to get up to discard some trash, the teacher admonishes Dandrea, a black student, for being out of her seat. She demands that Dandrea retrieve her paper from the trash. "I ain't no trash digger," Dandrea refuses. "Now you go and sit down," instructs the teacher. In an aside to the audience, Dandrea holds her own: "I'm sitting down because I *want* to." In another incident, the white teacher accuses Darius of cheating. She tears his paper and sends him to the office—all enacted while two white students are visibly and audibly comparing answers with each other without consequence. Darius's body jolts with a frustration that is all too real. As Darius marches offstage, the teacher offers help to a white student while denying it to a Vietnamese student and then allows a white girl extra time to complete her exam, making excuses for her when the other students complain.

In the final moments of their presentation, the students portray a scene that was not anticipated. Through an invention of their imagination, they collectively confront the teacher, pointing out the unfairness of her prejudicial attitudes and racist behavior. And then, with large generosity of spirit, they imagine the white teacher as someone capable of

reconciliation. She apologizes to Dandrea in front of the class and offers Darius the opportunity to take the exam again. She ends the play promising, “In the future, I’ll treat everyone equally.” As the teenagers leave the stage, Darius says under his breath, “We should take this play to the school board.”

Before the cultural camp, the African American teenagers in Biloxi understood the dynamics of racism that pervaded their lives. They were also impressive storytellers, exploiting the vibrant colors and syncopated rhythms of African American vernacular to full advantage. What they were missing was support to take each other’s stories seriously and the opportunity to understand their stories as part of a larger whole. The dramatic scene provided a structure that called for a resolution and an adult audience capable of and willing to take them seriously. Had their performance been part of an ongoing program or even a monthlong program, perhaps Darius would have led his friends in performing for the school board.

In any case, these teenagers from Biloxi now have in their repertoire of imaginable responses to the racism they encounter in their daily lives the possibility of supporting each other to confront racist behavior firmly but nonviolently, even when they experience it at the hands of an authority figure. They and their audience also have an image of a white person capable of apologizing, of committing herself to changing her racist ways. Hopefully, these constructs of their imaginations will serve them well in the future and enhance the quality of coexistence they are able to construct with their white and Vietnamese neighbors.

Reflections

The examples cited in this chapter illustrate how engagement with artistic forms and processes can help members of communities transcend narratives of powerlessness, imagine the experiences of the other, create expressions of their common humanity, and begin to develop metanarratives that can embrace particularities in a coherent and accepting whole. Yet the work can be difficult and trigger miscommunication and intense feelings.

In 1988, I collaborated with Feryal Abbasi Ghnaim, a Palestinian American colleague, fabric artist, and collector of Palestinian embroidery patterns. Together we created a project we called *A Passion for Life: Stories and Folk Arts of Palestinian and Jewish Women*. It was designed to use the Oral History Center’s model to strengthen relations between the Jewish and Palestinian diaspora communities in the greater Boston area. The project involved interviewing eight folk artists and tradition bearers from the two communities and creating an exhibition of their artwork (embroidery, family photographs, children’s toys, ritual objects, and the like) accompanied by written excerpts of their stories.

It proved to be more difficult than Feryal and I ever could have imagined at the outset. Sometimes it seemed to be little more than a snarl of ethical dilemmas, miscommunication, demanding relationships, and intense emotions. We struggled over language—terms like 1948, Holocaust, Israel, and Palestine. Holocaust stimulated long and difficult discussions. We sometimes hurt each other in spite of our best intentions. At times both Feryal and I felt pressured by members of our families and communities to withdraw from the project. Key people from both communities chose not to participate or, in a couple of cases, backed out at the last minute. When I look back, it seems like a miracle that we ever managed to bring the eight women’s stories under one roof, even for just a couple of months.

As I look back over *A Passion for Life*, I see an enormous landscape, still partly clouded by fear and confusion. It seems that what we were attempting was actually impossible. But all along, there were moments when the terrain would shift, creating new contours of possibility. These openings enlarged our imagination and deepened our yearning for reconciliation. These were the moments that sustained us in our work. One time Feryal and I were presenting at an open house. She showed her beautiful tapestry of a Palestinian

woman, dressed in a traditional embroidered dress, holding aloft a large white dove. In the bird's beak is an envelope, carrying the following message:

Women of the world: Women love peace to raise their children in, so why don't you make peace your number one goal? I as a Palestinian know intimately that there are two kinds of peace. (1) Peace that is built on the bodies of those brutalized and murdered to silence their calls for their just rights; (2) peace which comes from understanding a people's suffering, sitting down with them to genuinely solve and resolve their problems, so that justice and equality can be the code of the land, not death and suffering. Why don't we, women, raise our voices high and strong in the service of true peace to preserve our children, our future as human beings? I ask you to support my call for true peace for my people.

We are not subhumans. We are people with history and civilization. We are mothers and fathers and children. We have had enough killing and diaspora. I smuggled my dreams in my hidden wishes and crossed the ocean in hope for peace, for my Palestinian sisters who lost their children in wars and who have been widowed at an early age. I ask you for true peace for my people.²⁴

I followed Feryal by reading an excerpt from the autobiography of Heda Margolius Kovaly in which she recounts the events of her life in Prague from 1941 through 1968:

Three forces carved the landscape of my life. Two of them crushed half the world. The third was very small and weak, and, actually, invisible. It was a shy little bird hidden in my rib cage an inch or two above my stomach. Sometimes in the most unexpected moments the bird would wake up, lift its head, and flutter its wings in rapture. Then I too would lift my head because, for that short moment, I would know for certain that, somewhere beyond the line of my horizon there was life indestructible, always triumphant.

The first force was Adolf Hitler; the second was Iosif Stalin. They made my life a microcosm in which the history of a small country in the heart of Europe was condensed. The little bird, the third force, kept me alive to tell the story.²⁵

When I finished reading Kovaly's words, Feryal leaned over and pointed to the dove in her tapestry. "You see," she whispered, "it's the same bird."²⁶

Notes

1. G. Bachelard, "Introduction," *The Poetics of Space*, trans. M. Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), pp. xviii–xix.
2. Bachelard, "Introduction," p. xix.
3. V. Volkan, "An Overview of Psychological Concepts Pertinent to Interethnic and/or International Relationships," in V. Volkan, D. Julius, and J. Montville (eds.), *The Psychodynamics of International Relationships*, Vol. 1: Concepts and Theories (San Francisco: New Lexington Press, 1990), p. 38.
4. H. Stein, "The Indispensable Enemy and American-Soviet Relations," in Volkan, Julius, and Montville, *Psychodynamics of International Relationships*, p. 71.
5. R. Moses, "Self, Self-View, and Identity," in Volkan, Julius, and Montville, *Psychodynamics of International Relationships*, p. 53.
6. Stein, "Indispensable Enemy," pp. 86–87.
7. People's aesthetic sensibilities have been shaped by engagement with different expressive forms. In designing coexistence efforts, consider the aesthetic sensibilities and symbolic references of the cultures involved.
8. I have not included examples of film and media projects, although they also lend themselves to coexistence projects. Readers may consider *Peace of Mind*, in which Palestinian and Israeli teens document their communities on video (information available at <http://www.global-action.org>), and *Long Night's Journey into Day*, an intimate inquiry into South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (information available at <http://www.irisfilms.org/longnight>).
9. C. Geertz, "Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought," *American Scholar*, Spring 1980, pp. 165–179.
10. The importance of this point can hardly be overstated. Further elaboration on the importance of linking coexistence efforts to local knowledge and local cultural practices can be found in the work of John Paul

Lederach, who emphasizes the importance of “elicitive strategies.” This is also emphasized in the work of Search for Common Ground, a conflict resolution organization based in Washington, D.C. See J. Marks and E. Fraenkel, “Working to Prevent Conflict in Macedonia.” [http://www.sfeg.org/Info/Articles/macedonia_negotjrnl.htm].

11. Kandasamy Sithamparamanathan, interview, Nov. 1998. To my knowledge, the exchanges with Sinhalese counterparts described at the end of this passage have not taken place. However, the sessions as planned would have drawn on one of the particular attributes inherent in various art forms: communication by means other than the use of verbal expression.

12. Simon Lichman, personal communication, Aug. 2002. For further information, see “Building Bridges: The Experiential Approach.” [<http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/bridges/bbcontent.html>].

13. Simon Lichman, personal communication, Aug. 2002.

14. Simon Lichman, personal communication, Aug. 2002.

15. J. Sapp, “Global Partnership for Education,” International Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life, Brandeis University, Waltham, Mass., 2001, p. 7.

16. The song, “If Only We Believe,” was written by participants in the Global Partnership for Education Institute, Brandeis University, June 2001, with direction from Jane Sapp. The lyrics are as follows:

The sky is full of dreams
The ground is full of struggle
Our voices set us free
If only we believe

The nightmare seems endless
And shadows fill our hearts
But we reach for possibility
And the courage to break free

CHORUS:

THROUGH STRUGGLE WE REACH THE SKY
TOGETHER WE DREAM OF JOY
WITH COURAGE WE GIVE OUR VOICE
FOR JUSTICE! FOR PEACE! FOR LIFE!

Within us all we have the power
To make a better future
To go forward for our children
We can learn! We can grow! We can love!

CHORUS

The sky is full of dreams
The ground is full of struggle
Our voices set us free
If only we believe . . .
If only we believe . . .
. . . If only we believe . . .

17. Jane Sapp, personal communication. For a detailed description of the application of Sapp’s model in three different communities, see International Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life, “Global Partnership for Education,” Sept. 10, 2001. [http://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/publications_resources/publications/GPE.pdf].

18. Wen-ti Tsen, “Artist’s Report on the Project,” unpublished report, Dec. 2000, p. 1.

19. Wen-ti Tsen, “Artist’s Report on the Project,” p. 1.

20. Wen-ti Tsen, personal communication, Feb. 2002.

21. Wen-ti Tsen, personal communication, Feb. 2002.

22. Wen-ti Tsen, personal communication, Apr. 2002.

23. Lesley Yalen, personal communication. For further information about IPTN, go to the Web site at <http://www.playbacknet.org/iptn/index.htm>.

24. Courtesy of Feryal Abbasi Ghnaim.

25. H. M. Kovaly, *Under a Cruel Star: A Life in Prague, 1941–1958*, trans. H. Epstein and F. Epstein (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1996), p. 5.

26. A detailed account of *A Passion for Life* can be found in Cynthia Cohen, "Removing the Dust from Our Hearts: A Search for Reconciliation in the Narratives of Palestinian and Jewish Women," *NWSA Journal*, 1994, 6, 197–233.