

Finding Common Humanity

Focusing on one aspect of
Reconciliation

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COEX 250

The process of reconciliation includes the following steps...

Finding common humanity ←

Telling, listening to and revising stories

Mourning losses

Empathizing with other's suffering

Acknowledging and addressing injustices

Letting go of bitterness

Imagining and substantiating a new future

**How do you find common
humanity?**

What do we find when we recognize common humanity?

(Essentially, what makes us human?)

laughter

desire

frustration

tears

forgetfulness

love

smiles

anxiety

sadness

humility

excitement

compassion



What does it do for the reconciliation process?

Finding a common humanity aids in the break down of emotional and political armor. It forces both sides to accept that when they look at their enemy they see pieces of themselves reflecting back. In many cases of conflict one group has been de-humanized by the other group. By finding a common humanity the de-humanization transforms into re-humanization for both sides.

The necessary steps toward recognition...

*Theory and practice: Looking through the
work of John Paul Lederach and Kate Gardner*

John Paul Lederach: *a theorist, peace practitioner and author of The Moral Imagination*.

In his book Lederach writes of four elements essential for reconciliation.

Recognizing the centrality of relationships

Understanding the interconnected world in which we live

Practicing paradoxical curiosity

Imagining openly and freely

Providing a space for the creative act

Creating safe places for exchanges and connections

Having a willingness to risk

Trusting in yourself and others

These four elements while applicable to the greater goal of reconciliation, can also work on the smaller level to find common humanity.

Kate Gardner: *the creator of BrooKenya! a multinational collaborative project using soap opera and improvisation techniques to bridge borders and connect communities.*

Through her work, Gardner pushes the potentials for play and laughter in peace work. She stresses the importance of providing a space for creativity where play can be used as a common human language.

"In particular, we employ the **developmental learning activity of performing**—the kind of play that is widely encouraged in young children. We have found it to be an extraordinary tool for **freeing older children and adults from the rigid assumptions and prejudices so that they can develop new understandings of themselves and the "other"** — understandings that impact on the young children who are busy creatively imitating them. Within this framework, *BrooKenya! Live* (and the larger *BrooKenya!* project) is an example of **performance — not as merely an aesthetic activity — but as the innate human ability to perform (as young children do) beyond what we already know how to do.**"

(Gardner)

In a playful, creative environment, individuals can shed their protective armor, and explore what it means to work collaboratively, communicating with a common language.

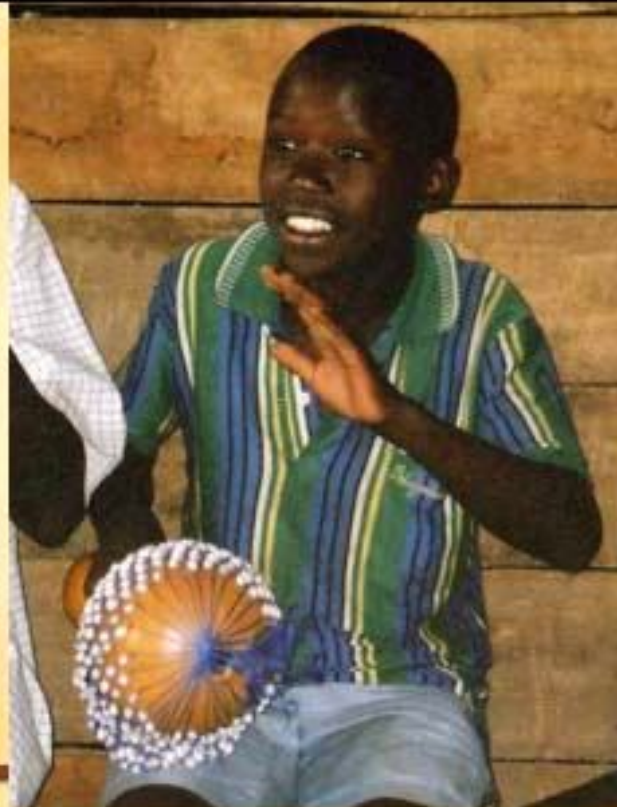
How do you use a common language once it is realized?

One example of this is a story from Burundi....where drumming, an art form that bridged the divide between warring tribes, linked enemies and ultimately re-humanized both sides...

Nicholas Kotei Djanie: *A Brandeis International Fellow who documented his peace work with the Hutu and Tutsi tribes in Burundi in 2003 and 2004.*

“ Drumming and dancing has been used for many centuries in the communities to bring people together, having fun, communicate, breaking barriers of differences, creating a common ground for people to tell stories as well as their own, and to connecting them to their ancestors. ”

(Djanie)



“

The drumming restores the culture of the people, and when the culture of the people is being restored it helps them to see humanity; it brings humanity. If I am to stick to my culture, I place my nose on your nose and greet you and share the same breath. If we can do that every morning, the feeling of humanity grows and it is not easy for us to go back into conflict because every morning I know I have to share breath with you. If we get more people involved with drumming, we can see how valuable it can be for them as a way to connect to their culture.

In Ghana we eat together from the same bowl. In Rwanda and Burundi, they drink from the same pot, when they are drinking their local beer, they drink from the same pot. This is part of their culture, which links many people to drink in one thing. So the drumming restores the culture which helps the people to have more humanity among themselves.

”

(Djanie)

Long Night's Journey Into Day: *A film that documents the many sides of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa.*

One story from the film particularly reflects the process of finding common humanity. The film shows two families from either side of a murder; one is the family of the woman who was killed and the other is the family of the man who killed the woman.

The two families decide to meet. During their meeting it becomes clear that the mothers share a great deal of love for their respective children as well as a need to forgive. Through their bonds for their children and their understanding of familial love they can connect on a level of common humanity.

For more information regarding this film: www.irisfilms.org/longnight

Remaining Questions

Many of the examples we have read about have been in pre-conflict or post conflict stages. How do you find common humanity in the middle of a conflict?

Why is it so difficult to acknowledge an enemy's humanity?

I struggle with the thought that members of Al Qaeda share a common humanity with me. It's much easier to simply label them 100% evil than to recognize the potential for a human soul within them when soulless creatures are so dispensable. When I think about being in the middle of a conflict and looking straight into a soldier or suicide bomber or rapist's eyes to find their soul, I'm totally afraid. It would mean giving that person the gift of recognizing his or her own humanity.

But what would happen if I did?

If I imagine the existence of a soul beneath the armor...

Sacrifices

I have to be willing to accept the existence of my enemy's humanity. Not only about me recognizing the other's humanity, it's about helping the other to recognize his or her own humanity.

Reminding someone that they have a heart, a conscience.
This means I have to believe that my enemy has a soul.

Maybe it's buried.
And we can get it out.

In attempting to wrap my head around the intensity of the process of finding common humanity I wrote the following poem.

Did it come from a womb?

I've been told
in blood soaked photographs
of frightened faces and gasping guttural explosions
of heat
of flames licking through newsprinted words
on screens on lips on eyes as they twitch and blink
sending messages of serious, confident, absolute, factual, information
in black dots in lines in perfect quadratic equations

I've been told
To open my ears
To the falling cinders
Smoking rubble dust choked air
Burned out blasts
out squish squashed
out stamped out
Banged on plexiglass windowpanes

I've been told
to use my library voice my indoor voice my soft sweet kind voice
And now
Bloody needles thread chapped pink lips over encrusted teeth
Because something died today
Several times
Timing their explosions to beating hearts
And what I want to know
is if that fireball robot bomb-made man had a heart shaped organ that pumped red liquids
through its metal arms and legs

because if
if
my mind whispers
if he might have possibly could have
then?

I've been told
Of a fungus crawling gray shriveled mass sleeping inside his body.
To believe anything more
To trespass through territories of squirming souls
To recognize a sunflower
No. not here.
It can't happen here.
If I see him if I see inside
If I let go
I'm afraid
I might
lose
everything

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Sources

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