Recasting Reconciliation through Culture and the Arts

A Virtual Collection

Positing a Theoretical Framework

By Cynthia Cohen with Lesley Yalen

A set of questions inquiring into the relationship between the arts, culture, and reconciliation was at the foundation of the 2003-2004 Brandeis International Fellowship and informed the Fellows' year-long reflections on their peace building practices. These questions, along with an initial theoretical framework were put forth in the call for fellowship proposals and expanded upon and discussed at the first institute. The framework is not a static assertion or a rigid prescription. It is, rather, an evolving and flexible description of the ways in which aesthetic experience generally, and engagement with specific artistic and cultural forms, may be uniquely suited to support the work of reconciliation in communities and regions damaged by violence. This description is based on years of facilitating and observing arts-and-culture-based peace building projects as well as on an analysis of literature on reconciliation and on the aesthetic domain. It continues to become richer, more complex, and more precise as we observe and learn about more practices in the field. In turn, arts-and-culture based peace building practices evolve and become more effective as the description - the theory - illuminates the concepts and relationships underlying the work.

What we present here, then, is the theoretical frame articulated at the beginning of the fellowship program, as it has been considered, discussed, challenged, and expanded upon in an ongoing dialogue of theory and practice. It begins with and stems from particular notions of reconciliation and aesthetic engagement, which we define and discuss here. (For a more in-depth discussion of this theoretical framework, as well as more examples of peace building practices that draw on culture and the arts, read Cynthia Cohen's article "Creative Approaches to Reconciliation," which was written during the course of this fellowship program.)

What is Reconciliation?

While practices of and attitudes toward reconciliation are and must be different in different personal, cultural, religious, professional, and political contexts, it is possible to articulate a widely accepted, general understanding of the concept. Reconciliation, in this inquiry, means more than simply the absence of violence or the establishment of grudging coexistence between parties. It means more, indeed, than symbolic handshakes...
and exchanges. Reconciliation, here, refers to a set of deep processes designed to transform relationships of hatred and mistrust into relationships of trust and trustworthiness. Processes of reconciliation almost always involve former adversaries in culturally inflected versions of at least some of the following tasks, not necessarily undertaken in this order:

1. Appreciating each others' humanity and respecting each others' culture
2. Telling and listening to each other's stories, and developing more complex narratives and more nuanced understandings of identity
3. Acknowledging harms, telling truths and mourning losses
4. Empathizing with each other's suffering
5. Acknowledging and redressing injustices
6. Expressing remorse, repenting, apologizing; letting go of bitterness, forgiving
7. Imagining and substantiating a new future, including agreements about how future conflicts will be engaged constructively.

Reconciliation, in this framework, involves a great deal of learning both about ourselves (and our own community) and about "the other." It requires learning on at least two different levels: we learn content, including the worldviews, histories, and personal stories of others, and we learn (or re-learn) skills or capacities such as listening and empathizing - skills that enable us to better engage with and learn new content. In addition, there is often much "unlearning" taking place, as we begin to question and challenge ideas and feelings that we previously held to be true.

Neither the content nor the skills that must be learned in the process of reconciliation can be learned by simply reading a book or hearing a lecture. If one has experienced violence, for example, simply being told about the perspective of one's violator is not likely to change one's feelings from anger and alienation into acknowledgment and trust. Rational discussion alone may not be enough to help people who have been at war with each other to begin to imagine a different and more peaceful future.

Rather, the learning required for reconciliation must be felt, must take place on the levels of the body and the spirit as well as the mind. A reconciliation process consists of learning not only about the other, but to respect the other; learning not only about past losses, but to mourn for them. Such learning often requires the strengthening of our capacities to listen, to empathize, to communicate, to receive, to hope, to imagine, to trust, and to act compassionately.

For people who have lived through the trauma of violence, violation, and war, these capacities may be severely compromised or damaged. The focused and receptive presence required for listening, for example, might not readily arise, and the ability to trust may be diminished. In such circumstances, the learning processes of reconciliation cannot be a strictly rational or intellectual process; they must also engage people emotionally, physically, and spiritually.
Why Engage with Culture and the Arts?

Rational processes alone cannot transform relationships of enmity or indifference into relationships of acknowledged interdependence and trust. Rational processes alone cannot nourish or restore the capacities required for reconciliation among people who have experienced trauma and protracted violence.

Many of these required capacities can, however, be nourished, revitalized, and restored through aesthetic experiences, complex phenomena that generations of philosophers and scholars of the arts have been working to define. Here, we define an aesthetic experience as a profound and pleasurable transaction between a human being and certain cultural and artistic forms. The pleasure arises when there is an alignment between the organization of the elements of the form and the perceptual preferences of the perceiver. An aesthetic experience may arise when a person paints a canvas, reads a novel, embroiders a traditional scarf, watches a dance performance, or participates in a drumming ceremony. Aesthetic experiences may arise from interface with forms associated with the art world as well as interface with folk expressions and rituals; they may arise when a person steps into the role of creator, composer, audience, participant, or performer.

Three features of experience demarcate the aesthetic domain. They are:

1. An integration or simultaneous stimulation of the sensory and cognitive faculties
   During an aesthetic experience, both our cognitive and our sensory modes of knowing are acknowledged and engaged. We are allowed to perceive, process, and express complex experiences through a greater portion of the faculties that comprise us, drawing on our senses of sound, rhythm, movement, touch, color, shape, and pose, as well as our rational minds.

2. An engagement with forms bounded in space or time
   An aesthetic experience requires engagement with a form that is bounded in space (such as a painting on its canvas, a poem on its page, a monument on a historic site) or in time (such as a song, a dance, a lighting of ritual candles). It is the boundedness of the form that allows composition and communication to occur, allows a composer, a musician, or a music listener to give an expressible and comprehensible shape to a feeling, perception, or experience.

3. A mediation of the tensions between order and chaos, tradition and innovation, the individual and the collective
   Every artistic and cultural form has to find its own particular balance between order and chaos, tradition and innovation, the individual and the collective. A piece of music, for example, may be purposefully discordant (chaotic), while still employing some elements of order - repetition, patterns, familiar refrains. A poem might be innovative in its structure, use of syntax, and punctuation, but also have within it tonal echoes of the cultural and literary traditions in which the poet has been immersed. Finally, a drumming ceremony may be a collective process and have significance for a whole community, but still be a spontaneous and individual creation and expression for each drummer. One of the defining characteristics of an aesthetic experience is a sense that, for the duration of a
person's engagement with the form (as creator, perceiver, participant, etc), the tensions between these opposites are being mediated. This is not to say that the tensions have been resolved - tension is not eradicated from the form - but rather that they are acknowledged by and held within the form. The form brings these "opposites" into some configuration that does not wholly reject one or the other.

These defining features make aesthetic experience a uniquely powerful resource for supporting the learning required for reconciliation. The simultaneous stimulation of the sensory and cognitive faculties, for example, nourishes people's capacities for empathy in a way that purely cognitive engagement cannot. Through the stimulation of both faculties, people are able to not only think about but also feel for another person's suffering or sorrow.

The bounded nature of artistic and cultural forms can be particularly important as people begin to acknowledge harms, tell truths, and mourn losses. We can feel safe to approach and grapple with painful memories and feelings, knowing that the form will give a defined shape and structure to the feelings, and that the form will be limited in space and/or time. Within the context of the forms, the feelings do not pose a threat, as we can disengage from the form if the feelings become too painful.

The mediation of tensions between tradition and innovation support people, for example, as they begin to imagine a new future. Because artistic and cultural forms can acknowledge and draw on the past while simultaneously forging something new, they can help people to maintain powerful ties to their personal and cultural histories while establishing previously unimagined relationships, social structures, and intercommunal dynamics.

Importantly, these defining features of aesthetic experience allow for reciprocity to arise between the artistic or cultural form and the sensibilities of the person engaging with the form. In an aesthetic experience, neither the person nor the form controls or manipulates the other; instead, each regards and acknowledges the other. The form has been designed with the sensibilities of a perceiver in mind, and the perceiver approaches the form with an openness to the world of resonances and meanings within it. This does not mean that the form (the play, the ceremony, the painting) has to be pleasing to the perceiver, nor does it mean that the form has necessarily been created with the goal of communicating to a specific audience. What it means is that an aesthetic experience will arise for a particular person if the form being engaged with resonates, in some measure, with that person's sensibilities and modes of perception. This co-incidence, this state in which both form and perceiver are other-regarding, enlivens the perceiver and can awaken in her special qualities of presence, such as heightened receptivity, intense focus, and meditative surrender, which are critical for reconciliation.

It is important to note that not all interfaces with artistic and cultural forms constitute aesthetic experience. One might, for example, spend a few minutes in a museum looking at and appreciating a painting, but hardly have the time, space, or openness to allow the painting to tap into one's sensory faculties. One might think about the painting for a few
minutes ("When was that painted?" "Is this one of his best pieces?") and move on: no aesthetic experience. One might listen to a piece of music, but find that the sound is too chaotic for one's perceptual inclinations and soon tune it out: no aesthetic experience. Similarly, one might go through the motions of a cultural ritual, but feel bored and distracted. Having done the same ritual hundreds of times, one might feel that innovation has been completely subsumed by (rather than being in productive tension with) tradition: no aesthetic experience. There are many ways in which we may interact with artistic or cultural forms without having an aesthetic experience; this is common and is not necessarily either a negative or a positive thing.

In this inquiry, however, we have focused on the conditions in which aesthetic experience can and does arise through engagement with artistic and cultural forms, and we have explored the benefits of such experience for the work of reconciliation. In the galleries that follow, the Fellows describe their work, articulate the goals and premises behind it, and analyze its effects. In doing so, they confirm and revise, build upon and redefine the framework presented above. In reading their work, we gain a more concrete understanding of the ways in which engagement with artistic and cultural forms can contribute to the work of reconciliation.

- Aesthetic experiences can also take place in the transaction between a human being and a natural form.
- For a more in-depth discussion of the aesthetic domain and reconciliation, see "A Poetics of Reconciliation: The Aesthetic Mediation of Conflict" by Cynthia Cohen.