Recasting Reconciliation through Culture and the Arts

A Virtual Collection

The peace builders and artists whose work is featured in this collection were all selected for the 2003-2004 Brandeis International Fellowship Program: Recasting Reconciliation through Culture and the Arts. The goal of the fellowship program was to develop a community of inquiry among peace building practitioners, artists, and cultural workers who were, in their ongoing work, exploring the intersections of reconciliation, culture, and the arts. Because the work of strengthening relationships in war-torn countries and divided communities is relentless, practitioners rarely have the time or resources to step back and reflect on their work, to explore the challenges and ethical dilemmas they face daily, or to nourish themselves by exchanging ideas and strategies with colleagues. The 2003-2004 Brandeis International Fellowship provided a forum and structure for this type of exchange, reflection, dialogue, and investigation.

The Fellows whose papers, portfolios, and creative projects you can access here have worked in South Africa, Burundi, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, and New Zealand, among other places. Some of them were born and raised in the country or community where they practice; others work far away from the cultural setting in which they were raised. The Fellows have a range of perspectives on the meaning(s) of reconciliation and a range of practices for working toward it. They are painters, printmakers, actors, drummers, filmmakers, and writers, as well as teachers of these and other art forms. Within the great variety of the work they are doing, the common thread is that they are all invested in and investigating the transformative power of engagement with artistic and cultural forms and the ways in which such forms can be resources for reconciliation.

Two week-long institutes at Brandeis University bookended the fellowship program. At the first institute the Fellows, along with the artists and peace builders of the fellowship staff, explored definitions of reconciliation and of aesthetic engagement, and considered a possible theoretical framework for understanding and nourishing the relationship between the two. The Fellows presented their work to each other, gaining insight into their practices by seeing them in light of the theoretical framework, and, conversely, challenging and revising the framework in light of their own practices. After the first institute, the five two-person teams of Fellows spent a year doing action/research; that is, reflecting on, documenting, and writing about a particular aspect of their work while doing the work, using the evolving theoretical frameworks discussed at the institute as a basis for thinking critically about their practices.
At the culminating institute, the Fellows shared what they had learned over the course of the year, and the ways in which their work had illustrated or challenged the theories and definitions previously discussed. They engaged in conversation with leading peace builders, scholarly practitioners, and cultural workers, and also responded to first drafts of each other's papers and portfolios, the revised versions of which comprise this collection. For an in-depth description of the fellowship program and the process of facilitating it, read "Recasting Reconciliation through Culture and the Arts: Strengthening Peace-building Capacity through the Brandeis International Fellowship Program" by Cynthia Cohen, the program's director.

“Recasting Reconciliation through Culture and the Arts: A Virtual Collection” consists of an introduction, five "galleries," and a synthesis of what we have learned. The introduction provides a succinct analysis (and links to more in-depth discussions) of the theoretical framework that was the basis for this inquiry. Here, the concepts that the Fellows explore, illustrate, and challenge in their working papers, portfolios, and creative projects are articulated.

The five galleries (one for each team of Fellows) are the spaces where the results of the Fellows' action/research are exhibited. Each gallery contains its own unique set of materials, as each team conducted the fellowship's work of implementation and documentation differently. Some teams collaborated on documentation, while others designated one primary documenter. Some of the Fellows chose to write working papers - rich descriptions of, reflections on, and analyses of their teams' work. Others chose to create portfolios - multi-media, multi-modal displays, including images, text, and in one case sound - which do not need to be read in a linear fashion, but instead can be entered and explored as an art installation. One gallery consists of synopses of the films produced by the two team members and links to where you can access those films. The papers, portfolios, and creative projects within these galleries vary widely in style, tone, structure, length, and theme. Altogether, they point to the common needs of communities that have been devastated by conflict as well as the unique resources and challenges that emerge from each specific historical, social, and political context. Perhaps most importantly, each gallery, in its own way, illustrates the particular peace building practices of its creators. Each one highlights the unique potential for art and culture to play a significant part in peace building, but also discusses the challenges and dilemmas of this work and raises important questions for further exploration.

In our synthesis, we discuss and integrate the major learnings that have emerged throughout the fellowship. We highlight the insights that were most relevant to each team, with a focus on those insights that crosscut several of the teams and seem to have relevance for the broader field of reconciliation. In this section we also pose a set of questions and dilemmas for readers - particularly for other artists, cultural workers, and peacebuilding practitioners - to consider. These are questions and dilemmas that arose out of and were grappled with during this fellowship. They are in many ways at the core of reconciliation work, and they require ongoing consideration and investigation by practitioners. Finally in this section, we offer a set of recommendations for policymakers and funders who are interested in promoting reconciliation in places that have been
damaged by violent conflict. We hope that you find this collection to be relevant to and meaningful for your studies, your work, and your life. Please send any feedback or questions to coexistence@brandeis.edu.