

An Essay
Listening As A Durable Model For Peace
Just Peacemaking

Just Peacemaking asks Pacifists to fulfill what their name implies (peace making) and calls Just War theorists (often miss-identified as hawks) to identify what must be tried before “last resort” of engaging in war and define “intention” of use of violence to restore a just and lasting peace.¹ Such a model as prelude to a model of listening is based on several ingredients: desire for mercy; a vocation of humility; responding out of compassion (willingness to engage suffering honestly); doing justice as an act of love for the other (seeking to restore victim and victimizer in new relationship); inviting; seek to be concrete and particular; and seek to understand the historical formational contexts.

I am reminded of a question once asked: *What profit is there in gaining the world if you lose your soul?* I do not believe this question lifts up soul over worldly affairs but calls all to remember that these two are not mutually exclusive and that to diminish one is to diminish the other, and to understand that when spoken of here, soul is both personal as well as corporate (soul of community). Recent commentaries coming out of the total devastation of New Orleans following hurricane Katrina speak of the surviving presence of the soul of the evacuated city; yet how is this possible in the aftermath of the shredded social fabric and when all the people are gone?

This paper is a “think piece.” Unlike a writing of analytical character and form, this paper proposes that any durable model for peace, whether it is in the historical Balkan region, hurricane devastated Gulf Coast of the United States or the tsunami ravaged section of the Indian Ocean Basin, must begin first with intentional and compassionate listening, a listening process that refuses to make judgments and accepts what is said. Only then, and with great humility can the thought of analysis be considered. I begin with an example.

I entered a room to meet with a small group of war-gamers. And sitting down next to a man, I was captivated by his intentional focus on a small tree like shrub in a pot. He sat silently and every now and then slowly lifted his hand and carefully pinched off a small sprig. “What are doing, sir?” I asked. After a while he responded, “I am listening.” Several minutes passed, “What are you listening to?” “To the tree.” “Oh,” I responded. To which came the reply, “I am listening to the tree for it will tell me what needs to be done for it.”

If there is to be a durable model for peace it must come from the people who will be required to live it. It can never be forced on them. This I learned through great failure as a pastor in a local parish – where I was newly sent to lead them through change. I failed to listen to them, believing I had the truth that would answer their problems. This came to me, to late, on the evening of one of our last community meetings. Driving to the meeting

¹ *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices For Abolishing War*, edited by Glen Stassen. The Pilgrim Press, 2004. Page 13.

I hit a squirrel that tried to cross the road. It came out of nowhere and I was unable to avoid it, killing it instantly. When I awoke that morning, I did not intend to run over a squirrel with my car sometime during the day, and I am sure that the squirrel did not set out to have a collision with my car. Even so, it happened. Over the course of two years, both my parish and I would collide day after day, even though we never intended this as our goal when we awoke each day.

Listening as a particular approach to the subject of peacemaking in the Balkans intentionally points to the need for creating a safe space for listening to occur ... a space where all parties can safely explore the possibilities for healing without first having to “lay their very particular wounds” (becoming vulnerable) before a tribunal of sorts. Such a sanctuary of safety affords each party caught in injustices (whether real or perceived and whether victim and/or victimizer) an opportunity to explore more deeply the ways in which each is caught up in the same human condition. Even so, the healing process in all contexts begins with questions that are often open-ended.

For example, I once asked a man what peace looked like to him. He responded saying that to ensure peace we needed to build more walls. As I listened, it came to me that what this man needed was security and that for him any conversation about peace could come only after he no longer feared for the life of his family. Learned here is the need for carefully crafted processes that link peace to security – with the hope that analysts first start with the desired end states (effects) of peace before defining the means to achieve the effects.

When peacemakers conduct needs assessments (not unlike above example) they are practicing listening. My spouse led a team of volunteers to the hurricane-ravaged section of southwest Florida to conduct a needs assessment of the people living there. In the process, she learned that what the people needed more than anything was the opportunity to tell their stories of suffering and loss and that in doing so discovered that they were not abandoned and that someone indeed cared about them and their losses.

What do the people in the Balkans need (needs assessment as an action of listening) before they can follow a road map to peace? Are the completions of political and material requirements alone sufficient for acceptance into the European Union? Is their need for peace more internally focused on competing demands for autonomy and self-determination? Or, is it more basic, like the need to be healed from the trauma wrought by the ravages of violence, such as brokenness of hearts, abandonment by the source of their identities, loss of trust, or guilt ridden hating of what they once might have been related to (their neighbors – and loss of ability to love again what was once loved)?

At the heart of this think piece is the belief that the “fall down get up again” hard work of peace is a spiritual as well as a material matter and that to eclipse the first in doing the second may lead to some form of stability but will never achieve the desired effect of a durable peace. In fact, failure to consider the spiritual dimension ultimately makes a material abstraction of the people. Do not be surprised if hostility, anger, resentment, and hatred prove to be the greatest stumbling blocks to the beginning of any peace initiative.

These are spiritual matters even though they may be initiated and / or fed by material means.

Why are these considered the greatest stumbling blocks? Because human beings long to connect and to taste love, joy, and peace while the fruits of hostility, anger, resentment, and hatred prick the souls of people, communities, cultures into an awareness that startles and confuses. Such confusion results in a tightening of the circle of relationships, the building of walls, and the actions of separation that divides and cut off. When this happens, spiritual death of the community is not far off and sets the time-table for material or corporeal death as well – or loss of the entire nation.

The losing of soul of a people precedes communication failures, and soon communication is “walled” off. Not to communicate communicates the message that the other no longer exists. This is true even if one should approach communication from neutral ground. To communicate from neutral ground signals a lack of desire to relate (no vested interest). No relationship, no need to communicate. Yet, suffering makes us realize how critical it is to communicate.² Such is the essence of life! But, the lack of desire to communicate makes an abstraction of the other and shows no concern, either sorrow or joy, or compassion. This is why the art of listening is crucial to begin the work that leads to peace.

Some examples of listening (a form of communication) and actions taken to communicate a desire for conversation follow. Consider the “mothers of the disappeared” from El Salvador. Government death squads had taken the husbands, fathers, and sons from their families and “disappeared” them. When the women of these families approached their religious leader Archbishop Oscar Romero for help, he advised them that he could do nothing directly to help them but suggested he would support them by standing with them in their gathering in the square and street corners when they began to read the names of their “disappeared” loved ones – not unlike a mother calling for her children to come from work and / or play. These women communicated their grief while also calling for an accounting for their loved-one’s disappearances. In a similar fashion, Cindy Sheehan standing outside the entrance to President Bush’s Crawford, Texas ranch is acting out this desire to communicate and to call for an accounting.

The reading of names in El Salvador did not come without persecution (conflict). A call to accountability (justice) pricks the conscientiousness of society and initiates struggle. Frederick Douglas, speaking in 1857, said. *If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation...want crops without plowing the ground...rain without thunder and lightning. The struggle may be a moral one, or...physical...but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without demand; it never has and it never will...*The struggle is in the relationships and the need to communicate-- without struggle relationships never evolve into a more meaningful state. It is power struggle of give and take -- a communal act of sharing.

² Wolff, Pierre, *May I Hate God?*, Paulist Press, 1979.

Consider the situation on the Korean Peninsula. The Two Koreas were created out of military action, the peace has been kept by military force, and still the nation is divided -- essentially, the "Korean War" has not yet ended.

Fifty years have gone by and still no healing for the nation. To date, time has been used to build barriers to hearing, narrow barriers designed to separate "sanctuary" from "sanctuary" - leaving no room on the stage for relational work. Today, Korea remains in the image of its creators -- divided. The Northern brother will soon possess the power to fully act out his anger on the family system -- which includes the U.S. and other nations in the region.

There is still hope for these two brothers. Each brother must have a say in creating the sequels of a story -- their image of a united Korea. It is this script that is outlined at this point.

The idea of the storyline begins with a Korean farmer. The farmer has completed the harvest and is gathering together the many beehives scattered over the hillsides. As the hives are located closer to one another the bees in the neighboring hives begin to kill each other. The farmer's son asks, "Father, if we leave the hives like this, we will have no bees next summer!" The father replies, "Son, collect the tissue paper in the wagon, punch four small holes evenly spread across the paper, and place it between the hives as I connect the hives together." "Father, what good is the tissue paper?" the son asks. "The paper will separate the hives. Over time the families of bees will come to know and trust one another, and realize that there is enough honey to winter them all."³

The DMZ is a sheet of iron that will not allow "the bees to cross over" for cultural, economic or trust building exchange programs. It is an impermeable barrier of steel and millions of landmines and youthful soldiers that punish would be border-crossers. The script writing will require a collective interpretation of how to make the DMZ like the tissue paper between the beehives -- inviting hospitality as sign-action (symbol) that invites the possibility for communication.

Hospitality is as much a symbolic act as it is physical. Consider a North Gate into the City of Seoul? City gates have played major roles in the politics of city-states. Much pride and energy is poured into maintaining city gates. Currently, Seoul maintains three gates -- never having had a north-gate. Imagine the powerful symbolism of a newly constructed north gate to the city with its doors wide open to the North saying, "Welcome."⁴

³ I am grateful to The Reverend Hae Hok Lee, Presbyterian Pastor in South Korea for his vision of "what a unified Korea might look like."

⁴ A word of caution here: The North Gate has had a negative connotation in Korean culture. The North Gate was the place the Koreans carried the bodies of the dead -- possibly a burial ground. This might mean that the North Gate of Seoul is not nearly as important or symbolic as the other gates to the city. However, it is possible to elevate its importance by reclaiming it as a symbolic act to remember the many ancestors who have gone before. The South's act of building the North Gate as a tribute to all Koreans (North and South) can become an important first step in the healing process.

Examples of effective communication of this story must begin with the southern brother writing a script that communicates to the northern brother that he exists for him. Following is a list of ways the script might begin to take form:

1. South Korea open the North Gate to the city of Seoul.
2. North Korea and South Korea commit to a time-line for healing that includes all regional international powers.⁵
3. Build trust by forming a covenantal relationship and avoiding harmful language.
4. Write into the script the removal of landmines and relaxation of border defenses.
5. Agree upon no uninvited border excursions
6. Identify a five and ten year plan for the withdrawal of foreign-national armed forces from the Peninsula.
7. Begin the long-term process of writing the story of a unified Korea -- North and South principle partners.
8. Facilitate honest hearing by all parties -- develop a rule for respectful dialogue that all parties agree to.

These are but a few examples that demonstrate how the power of listening to the “tree” of the social context can result in lasting and affective solutions. Listen to the people of South Africa as they dismantled racist Apartheid along with the help of the other world nations. Listen to the leaders of the 1950s and 60s civil rights movements in the United States, or simply listen to the non-violent actions taken by leaders for democratic reform in what is now Serbia.

The people in the Balkan region have suffered immense tragedy and profound loss. The damage done is not only material but deeply spiritual as well. A war of terror has reopened old and created new wounds, planted new seeds of fear, uncertainty, loneliness, profound sadness, pain, and feelings of loss, mistrust, and abandonment. This has stolen from the people any sense of belonging, generates feelings of being disconnected from established social and cultural reference points that grounded them in an ordered life, as well as taken from them the ability to say, “This place is mine.”⁶

Brcko seems to be the link to war and / or peace in the Balkan region where any zero-sum solution defying the principles of Just Peacemaking will ensure more violence. Therefore, required is a “both-and” set of solutions that over time will restore neighbor-to-neighbor and country-to-country. A “both-and” solution will result in returning people to their homes, restoring their identity (who-ness) and / or sense of belonging to a particular place. Just peacemaking solutions will work to address the fear that tends to remain with people by helping people to let go of the rage they carry inside them. “Both-and” solutions will provide for opportunities for symbolic sign-actions by all communities

⁵ Remember, neutral powers fail to communicate a real desire for relationship; this is why regional powers are so important to the process. Japan’s role of restitution for centuries of colonization of Korea can be a large step in the healing process.

⁶ Psychologist Rosa Lopez in, *Faith in the Americas*, made similar assessments of the spiritual wreckage done in the Americas by more than 30 years of criminal behavior of international, regional and local governments (vol. 6, no. 2, Summer 1998, p.9).

designed to provide sanctuary for grieving, story telling, forgiving, and eventual restoration of trust and faith that had been stolen from them. Victim and victimizer will be given a chance to reconcile and live together again.

Already the possibility for this to happen in the Balkans is being played out in a media that seeks to tell the truth about the disappeared sons (and husbands). What is missing is the carefully thought out strategy to help those in grief, having experienced such enormous loss, from turning anger into hatred and hatred into retributive violence. This is spiritual concern. Hatred quickly becomes walls of self-defense that will assure the spiritual death that occurs long before the heart ceases to beat. But not only have mothers lost sons and husbands and daughters lost fathers and brothers (and let us not forget the sexual violence as well), whole communities have lost the bedrock of their identity (who-ness). This loss of “who-ness” is also represented in the material desecration and / or destruction of significant cultural and religious sites (more than 341 reported accounts)⁷ all representing the ground of ordered life for respective communities.

Such immense loss to both individuals and whole communities must be carefully reconciled if real peace (Just Peace) is to have a chance. From the perspective of listening, it becomes critical to enlist the spiritual leadership (both laity as well as cleric) in working out the processes of healing such that respective faith traditions can become conduits of grace for the greater community as a whole. One possible way is to employ the tactics of the mother’s of the disappeared described above. Not only can the particular names of lost sons and husbands be named in ritualistic vigils but so too can the names of the many mosques and cultural sites be named, as well as a call for accountability so that the greater community is awakened to the wrongful loss exacted on all people. Being confronted by such terrible loss of innocent life can bring the whole community to look into “an abyss” and will lead them to stop so that listening can have a chance. This can begin the process for healing – giving people the opportunity to “do something” meaningful in addressing their grief as well – and most importantly afford the opportunity and permission to grieve.

It will be naïve for this author to say that the above ideas will automatically bring peace to the region, for the wreckage wrought by the unchecked violence early on has left deep, deep wounds. Needed is an analysis grounded in a listening process that will penetrate the context. Such a proposed approach is to gather a wide range of subject matter experts to assess the desired effects that will result in a more lasting just peace – a just peace that saves the current generation from despairing of hope and that provides a future that is healed for the next generation. Industry, governments, and non-government benefactors and religious leaders will need to invest in the effort by creating space, providing time, funding and the infrastructure to build real peace in the region.

⁷ State Commission for Gathering Facts on War Crimes in the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, bulletin no. 1., Sarajevo, October 1992.