

Reconciliation in Divided Societies

Finding Common Ground

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Foreword

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A reconciliation movement is taking place throughout the world. People are beginning to see that there is a way out of the bloodshed and fighting and violence. They are beginning to see that if they try to understand one another, try to see the humanity in every person, then they can learn to get along, or at least live in peace with one another.

This reconciliation movement did not start in South Africa; people have been trying to reconcile for centuries. But in South Africa, it became a centerpiece of our transition to democracy. And it did not start with an announcement by President Mandela that a commission would be named. It started in the hearts of millions of people who wanted to build the new South Africa on pillars of love and understanding and redemption. At the end of apartheid, as in the aftermath of all kinds of oppression throughout the world, many people didn't want to be vengeful. They didn't want to commit crimes against those who had committed crimes against them. They didn't want people to languish in horrible jails just because that is what had been done to them. But they also knew that they could not just ignore the past. They couldn't pretend that the pass laws, the banning, the arbitrary arrests, the daily degradations had never happened. Because they did happen, and they left indelible marks on every person who suffered under apartheid. But the people who inherited the new South Africa did not want to perpetuate the anger and hatred that had been directed against them. They wanted another way out. They needed to deal with the pain in their hearts, but they wanted to transcend it. They wanted nurturing for themselves not punishment for others.

Reconciliation was the way out. It is a way to transform individuals, and the whole of society. It is a way to look at perpetrators of human rights abuses and see brothers and sisters. A way to look at the victim in oneself and see a survivor. Through reconciliation, we can see the fluidity of everything in the universe: how the past influences the present and the future; how punishment is just the flip side of redemption, how the religious and the political are inseparable, how we are all victims, perpetrators, bystanders, everyone part of the same family of humanity. Reconciliation embodies the idea of the oneness of everything.

But reconciliation is not just a spiritual idea, though it is that. Reconciliation is a mass movement. Everyone can get involved in it. Everyone can do his or her part to help move things along the path of peace and non-violence. Reconciliation can not be imposed by law, or ordained by the government. The government can help it along, but for it to be truly successful people have to believe in the capacity to transform. They have to believe that it is possible for someone who did horrible things under horrible circumstances to do good. They have to believe,

as the Quakers say, that there is that of God in everyone. Reconciliation is not about closure. It is about new beginnings.

In many different countries, people have taken up the call to reconciliation. Some countries have established commissions, similar to ours in South Africa. In many other countries, individuals have come together in small groups, and sometimes in larger groups, to help people reconcile.

In one way, reconciliation is a very simple idea. It is what a married couple does instinctively after an argument: they talk about what happened, one or both spouses apologize, they recommit their love for each other. They don't have a commission to organize it; they know in their hearts how to reconcile. Reconciliation is the most natural thing in the world. But it is also a complicated thing. And it gets more complicated when we are talking not about a husband and wife, but about a nation, with a long history of oppression and abuse and violence. How can we expect victims to forgive their torturers? How much truth is enough? How much is too much? As each country goes through its own transition, each must develop its own way of helping people to reconcile with one another.

Erin Daly and Jeremy Sarkin survey the landscape of the reconciliation movement. They reveal reconciliation in its multiple dimensions be it as a spiritual idea, as a psychological need, as a social movement, and a political imperative. They take us on a voyage around the world, to the many countries that are taking the chance that reconciliation is the best way to avoid continued violence. They take us into the minds of men and women who have worked their whole lives to make reconciliation happen in their country, as well as in the minds of people who resist the call to reconciliation.

Even though people around the world are getting involved in reconciliation programs, there has been no comprehensive effort, until now, to ask the difficult questions and to develop a full idea of what reconciliation actually means. It is very easy to restate the clichés: you can't have reconciliation without truth, or justice; if you don't face the past, you are condemned to repeat it, and so on. But it is quite another to try, as the authors do, to dig beneath the surface and to explain what truth, justice, and reconciliation really mean in societies that are emerging from war, genocide, dictatorships and other kinds of oppression.

Erin Daly and Jeremy Sarkin effectively disentangle all the various strands of reconciliation and then weave them back into a holistic tapestry. They rightly focus our attention on the future as much as on the past. Reconciliation, they argue, is best thought of as a tool for transformation. It is the engine that helps people transform themselves from victims full of hatred into survivors who have moved beyond their pain and trauma. It helps whole societies transform themselves from violent and chaotic places into communities where people work together to raise children and live productive and hopeful lives. The book shows us how this transformation happens so that we can all gain a better understanding of how, and why, reconciliation really works. It is an almost indispensable tool for those who want to engage in reconciliation.