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Preparing for Peace: Interethnic Dialogue and Communal Healing in Sri Lanka

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In November 2001, Karuna Center for Peacebuilding was invited to Sri Lanka to facilitate an inter-communal dialogue among NGO leaders and academic activists drawn from the different sides of the long-term civil war that has been destroying this beautiful island. Having worked periodically as peacebuilders in Sri Lanka over the previous five years, we were eager to reunite with colleagues and former participants and to learn how socially engaged Sri Lankans are addressing the conflict.

Approximately 40 people from all sides of the conflict participated in the five-day dialogue process at a remote site in central Sri Lanka. Among them were Hindu and Muslim Tamils, Buddhist Sinhalese, and Christians from both groups. Each had varying degrees of direct encounters with violence, but all had consistent experiences of loss and pain as a result of the civil war. In the introductory session, we asked group members how they traditionally communicated with each other across the ethnic divide. They responded as follows: "We have two methods of communication. Either we politely sip tea together and avoid the topic of war, or we yell at each other without listening." Our challenge as dialogue facilitators was to invite participants to discover a third way based on respectful listening and honest communication. Our willingness to enter this arena was based on previous inter-communal dialogue experiences in Bosnia, Israel/Palestine, Kosovo, the United States, and other deeply divided and/or warring societies.

Since 1997, Karuna Center for Peacebuilding has been engaged in the Project for Dialogue and Community Building (Project DiaCom)

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in two "ethnically cleansed" cities of Northern Bosnia. A central achievement of the project has been the facilitation of meaningful in-depth dialogue among Bosnian Muslim (Bosniak) and Bosnian Serb educators and women's groups whose previously intertwined lives had been completely shattered by the Bosnian War. From this experience Karuna Center has developed a model that initially includes dialogue experience for large numbers of interested participants followed by a "Training of Trainers" program for the most invested and skilled among them. Our goal is always that participants develop the capacity to carry the program forth in ways that best serve their communities. At this point, our work in Bosnia consists of supervision and mentoring as the Bosnian Muslims and Serbs design and deliver inter-communal dialogues together in mixed teams, no small accomplishment six years after genocide.

We believe that inter-communal dialogue is one of the most fruitful interventions in postwar community restoration. Research, evaluation and personal experience has led us to conclude that inter-communal relationship building is a life changing process that often inspires individuals to significantly impact their communities through acts of tolerance and mutuality. We also know from the mideast, where there was considerable investment in bi-communal relationship building before the Al Aksa Intifada, that dialogue alone — without structural change, without high level endorsement and visibility, and without sufficient breadth throughout the many strata of community — will not hold back the floodgates of war.

Based on these beliefs and on our sense that positive incremental changes plant seeds of peace, we welcomed 40 courageous participants into the Sri Lankan dialogue. In this paper we will look at the experience of conducting a bi-communal dialogue in a country that has seen horrendous communal violence and political terror over the course of a 19-year civil war. In particular we will explore how Judith Herman's stage model of recovery might be used in conducting inter-communal dialogues in a war torn country, not only to promote reconciliation but also to help communities heal from the traumatic effects of communal violence. The Sri Lankan dialogue was not designed with Herman's model in mind. Her model does, however, illuminate some of this dialogue's key successes, and a more conscious use of it may well improve the efficacy of future efforts.

In her groundbreaking book, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books), Herman (1997) not only describes the common elements

of traumatic experience inherent in combat, political terror, domestic abuse, and sexual violence but also outlines the common stages necessary for recovery and healing. Regardless of the source of trauma, the healing process, she posits, must happen in the context of supportive relationships and must move through a sequential process of establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection. The book focuses on the traumatic experience of individuals. In the afterword of the 1997 edition, however, Herman comments that in the massive outbreaks of communal violence of the last decade where the distinction between civilians and combatants has largely broken down, entire communities have become traumatized. Herman suggests that these communities will need to find collective ways to move through the stages of recovery, but she does not elaborate on how this could be done.

Herman's Stage Model of Recovery

Herman points out that no process of recovery from trauma will follow a precise linear trajectory. Stages overlap, and there is movement back and forth. Herman's stages, however, capture the essential dimensions of the process and are fully congruent with the processes of healing described by many other trauma theorists.

First, and perhaps foremost, is the need to establish *safety*. To feel safe, traumatized individuals need help protecting themselves from further harm, developing control over their bodies and environment, and promoting self-care. Safety and control, so devastatingly shattered in the traumatic experience, then provides the container for the next stage in which the story of the trauma can be retold and its manifold losses mourned.

In Herman's second stage of recovery, *remembrance and mourning*, trauma survivors tell their stories in depth and detail, transforming wordless and fragmented memories into a coherent narrative that can be re-integrated into the survivor's life. Also at this stage the many physical, emotional, and psychological losses that have accompanied the trauma need to be mourned and the resulting anger and grief squarely faced. There is a sober recognition of the ways in which the survivor has been forever changed by the trauma and will never again be quite the same person as before.

As the intensity of telling the story begins to dim after many repetitions, there may be readiness to move on and build a new future. Herman calls this final stage, *reconnection*. As trust gradually returns,

the individual can focus on replacing helplessness with empowerment, and isolation with development of new relationships. At this stage there is often interest in finding new meaning and purpose, which can result in what Herman calls a "survivor mission," the desire to use one's own experience of suffering to help others.

In addition to the elucidation of a stage model of recovery, Herman's most important contribution may be her contention that recovery cannot take place in isolation. On page 70 of her book, she writes that "sharing the traumatic experience with others is a precondition for the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world." Building new relationships also becomes the vehicle for recreating psychological faculties that are damaged by trauma, be they trust, autonomy or intimacy. Given that these basic human capacities were developed through relationship in the first place, they can only be recreated through relationship. Thus, the structured and facilitated dialogue group can become a partner in healing, both for individuals and their communities.

Discovering Herman's Stages in the Dialogue Group in Sri Lanka

Before the recent ceasefire, the population of Sri Lanka has endured an ongoing 19-year civil war between the Sinhalese controlled state and Tamil rebels fighting for an independent homeland. The traumatic toll of war has been further exacerbated by severe outbreaks of communal violence, "disappearances" during periods of state repression, forced conscription of child soldiers in the Tamil controlled North and East, suicide bombings in the capitol, and the dashed hopes of numerous failed attempts at peace.

In the group that came together for our dialogue, it was not clear how many participants carried identifiable symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. However, all described the war as a constant traumatic presence in their lives deeply affecting their sense of safety and ability to move through their lives in a planful way. Many had been in life-threatening situations and/or had endured severe losses.

The dialogue was designed to promote mutual understanding and reconciliation. When given the opportunity to speak of their experience as a member of their particular ethnic group, most chose to tell stories of the traumas they had encountered. The effects of these traumas were quite similar across ethnic groups, and the descriptions, rather than stimulating blame or divisiveness, provided a powerful experi-

ence of common ground. Seen through the lens of Herman's model, the structure of the dialogue not only allowed for communication across the ethnic divide, but also allowed for narratives of traumatic experience to be communally expressed and communally received. It also enabled participants to have at least a small experience of moving through stages of recovery in a communal context.

The opening phase of the dialogue focused on establishing *safety* much in the way Herman suggests it should be done in a therapeutic relationship. Ground rules were collectively established; the hopes, purposes, and goals of the week were elucidated; and a clear time frame was set for the actual dialogue process with the understanding that it would be followed by several days of teaching and training. Considerable practice with communication exercises set a standard for respectful, sensitive listening. Participants also wrote their fears (anonymously) on slips of paper, which were then collected, randomly distributed, and read aloud. All seemed relieved to have their own fears echoed by many others both within and across ethnic lines.

Perhaps it was this experience of a collectively built oasis of safety that led participants in the middle, less structured phase of the dialogue to respond to questions about their experience as a member of their ethnic group with stories about the traumatic effects of war and communal violence. There seemed to be a shared sense that narratives reflecting the depths of suffering had to be told if there was to be authentic communication between the ethnic groups. Each ethnic group took its turn sitting in an inner circle and speaking, while the others sitting in an outer circle formed a listening and holding container. The stories and ensuing conversation illustrated the type of *remembrance and mourning* Herman suggests as her second stage. A Muslim Tamil spoke of being wounded inside a mosque in a massacre that was perpetrated by Hindu Tamils. A Sinhalese woman described losing her husband in a right-wing paramilitary attack, and a Tamil woman told of being a child cowering in a corner with her siblings, while her mother was taken away by Sinhalese soldiers. Regardless of ethnic group, the stories of terror, loss of loved ones, loss of homes, and the complete disruption of lives were strikingly similar. As the stories layered upon each other, the room filled with a collective sense of grief and mourning not only for individual pain, but also for the collective pain and horrific damage done to the country. "We are all in one pot of suffering," one Tamil man commented.

At one point, some of the participants became concerned with the

level of emotion in the room. They felt it was not typical for Sri Lankans and may have been somehow prompted by the presence of the U.S. facilitators. This generated an intense discussion about how constrained many felt from openly acknowledging their fears and suffering in daily life. They also felt, however, that in burying their tears, they became disconnected from themselves and from their respective cultures. To their surprise, acknowledging painful experience also led to feeling both more connected to the other ethnic groups and more hopeful that mutual understanding is possible. Especially moving were several rescue stories that emerged, describing critical moments where lives had been saved through the protection and kindness of members of the opposing group. These stories further deconstructed beliefs about the intractability of the conflict.

In the final phase of the dialogue the facilitators encouraged participants to create action plans for new projects in peacebuilding and reconciliation. What ensued was naturally congruent with Herman's final stage of *reconnection*, in which, as she suggests "the survivor must decide what is to be done," as meaning cannot be reconstructed by the exercise of thought alone (p. 178). With new relationships forming and a growing sense of possibility and empowerment, plans were laid for bi-communal work with mothers, youth and religious leaders. Specifically, study groups and dialogues within universities, dialogues between journalists from both sides, a television documentary on bi-communal dialogue, and a book of "rescue stories" were envisioned. The group's move from shared grief to new meaning-making and new purpose had resulted in an infusion of what Herman terms "survivor mission." Given that at the time of the training Sri Lanka has still not achieved sustainable peace, however, it was a challenge to channel this energy into realistic possibilities, as safety remained a concern and political forces continued to constrain behavior.

The final day of the training happened to coincide with Diwali, the celebration of the Hindu New Year. The Hindu Tamils prepared the festival for their Muslim and Buddhist colleagues with an elaborate floor decoration constructed from colored, powdered coconut surrounded by tiny oil lamps. One of the Tamil women from Jaffna (a city once held by rebels, but now occupied by government troops) explained the festival's symbolic roots harking back to the Hindu hero, Rama, who vanquished the demons that threatened to overtake India. His deed is remembered each year in the middle of November by the lighting of earthen lamps just when the days are turning darker and colder. The

lamps, we were told, represent the light of truth and knowledge that can overcome the ignorance that lies at the root of all evil. It was a rich metaphor to conclude a week in which many had come to a new understanding of themselves and the "other side."

For most participants the dialogue marked the first time they had shared personal experiences of the traumatic impact of the war with strangers, let alone members of the opposing ethnic group. While no one was asked to speak of traumatic experience, a sense of safety coupled with desire for authentic communication seemed to prompt the stories. Herman suggests that recovery from trauma can only happen in the context of relationship. Here, those relationships were formed in a highly structured and "safe enough" inter-communal context, that served not only to decrease the isolation accompanying trauma, but also to generate trust in the possibility of peace and reconciliation. A more conscious use of Herman's stages in the design of such a dialogue could further deepen the experience at each stage and provide a potent context for communal recovery.

Participant Reflections

Since dialogue is not just an end in itself but a means to bring about community restoration and reconnection, we concluded the five days of dialogue with attention to the integration of the participants' experience into their home and work lives. In addition to specific action plans, they generated a list of desirable behaviors and attitudes with a commitment to incorporate them into their lives. These included practicing tolerance, increasing exposure to the other side, spreading awareness to prevent deep-rooted hatred, moving beyond assumptions, managing violent reactions, engaging the media in pro-social reporting, building support networks and interrupting prejudice, intolerance and violence in their communities.

In the closing circle, many participants expressed surprise at the intensity of the process and at the deep anguish they allowed themselves to express. They reported having discovered a new sense of solidarity, a feeling of companionship on the road to peace, and an increased responsibility to achieve the Sri Lanka of their shared visions.

Facilitator Reflections

Before the workshop began, we met with several international field workers from the non-governmental sector, some of whom offered

gloomy assessments about the possibilities for meaningful dialogue. We heard that Sri Lankans tend to fear and resist self-disclosure, polarize into intellectual debates, allow males to dominate, avoid personal statements, often don't listen, etc. We found none of those to be true to our experience. Dialogue is structured to create a safe container for self-awareness and connection with the other. Our local organizers selected a secluded site for the dialogue, far from the frontlines of the fighting and removed from each group's primary communities of identity. Our participants were volunteers, eager to explore, appropriately wary but not overly guarded, safer each day and extremely tender to each other and welcoming to us as outsiders. Resistance is a common and often sensible behavior in the life of a new group, and we think these participants discovered that they could set the agenda that they considered critical, and that our role would be to hold the container as they explored their own edges. Unlike psychotherapy, dialogue does not have a specific therapeutic agenda, but rather provides a structured opportunity for new, hopefully productive, forward thinking conversations.

In the six months since the dialogue took place, Sri Lanka seems to be on the road toward its first promising peace agreement in twenty years, and our dialogue participants now report that the services of their NGOs are in high demand. As Sri Lanka moves from perpetuating a culture of war toward building a community at peace, cross-ethnic exposure will increase, as will opportunities for participants to practice skills of listening and responding, of tolerance and mutuality. We hope to continue to stand side by side with them, and return to develop a "Training of Trainers" project so that Sri Lankan NGO leaders and academic activists will establish mixed facilitation teams. This will be an important step to spread the spirit of inter-ethnic collaboration across their beautiful island, in the service of a lasting peace.