

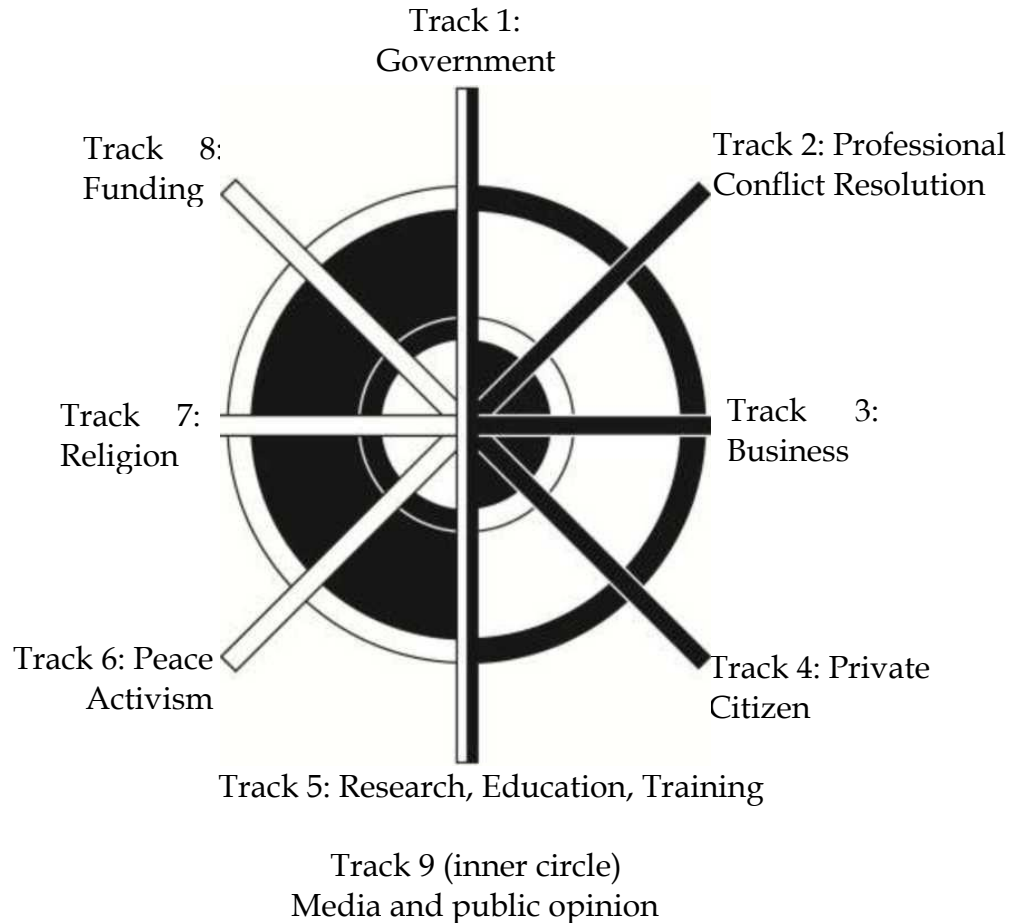
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Peacemakers in a Warzone

The Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy

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The mission of the Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy is to promote a systems approach to peacebuilding and to facilitate the transformation of deep-rooted social conflict

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(NOTE: To avoid the awkward grammatical construct of referring to the peacemaker as "he or she," to the peacemaker's experience as "his or hers," the masculine and feminine pronouns are used interchangeably, sometimes one, sometimes the other. Note also that 'peacemaker' here is used to refer to individuals who engage in a wide variety of activities for peacebuilding and peacemaking in inter-group conflict situations.)

INTRODUCTION

Point of view is a critical element in fiction. So it is, also, in real life. To sit comfortably in a warm and bright office and think, talk, or write about a conflict somewhere in the world is a totally different experience than to be in the field directly with the conflicting parties – in their homes, offices, streets, buses, cities, villages, and countryside.

Peacemakers in war zones face specific psychological and ethical situations unique to the challenges of being within a conflict system. Once a peacemaker enters that system physically, he becomes a part of it in a way that differs profoundly from his role if he remains on the outside. In this paper we will examine some of those differences – looking at psychological and ethical effects on body, mind, and spirit, at systemic phenomena, and at the re-entry process. The paper offers no prescriptions or answers, but rather seeks to delineate some of the critical questions and issues raised when people engaged in peacemaking or peacebuilding from outside the conflict system enter its physical, emotional, and spiritual space in an attempt to be of service.

BODY, MIND AND SPIRIT

Physically, being in a war zone presents issues of safety regarding oneself and others. We can delineate at least three types of war zones: (1) where conflict is active, with shelling, shooting, sniping, bombing, or other acts of war occurring on a regular basis; (2) where conflict is inactive but violence or the threat of violence tangible and imminent; and (3) where conflict is inactive and the threat of violence remote but the passions and pains around the conflict are strong.

Obviously, in the first situation, the physical safety factor is considerable. UN Peacekeepers currently in the former Yugoslavia are facing this at the very moment this paper is being written. How to stay in the field to do the necessary work without risking one's own life or the lives of one's hosts or "clients" can be a minute-to-minute challenge. Less obvious are the risks associated with the second

and third category. Though the peacemaker's safety is less an issue in these circumstances, there well may be significant threat to those she speaks with, stays with or in any way associates with. These dangers can come from governments and their military, paramilitary or security forces, or from rogue or vigilante groups or individuals, in many cases from the same community as the local individual.

Ethical and security considerations are inextricably interwoven in these situations and are associated with almost every decision the peacemaker takes in the field. Should she visit local people in their home or office? Are these places likely to be bugged? Is there any danger to the host in being seen receiving a foreigner? an American? What if the peacemaker is in a position to go back and forth between conflicting communities and is asked to deliver messages, parcels, correspondence between the two?

Is it safe for the peacemaker to write or publicize in any way his relationship with any individual? Does that put the friend in danger? What is the correct behavior if the possibility exists that someone might be jailed, killed, or tortured as a result of speaking with a peacemaker and consciously chooses to take that risk? What does the peacemaker do if he witnesses brutality, or behavior intended to harm, intimidate, or humiliate people on the street? What if the victims are people he knows?

There are no hard and fast answers to these questions. The very act of asking them is to set in motion both inner musing and interactive collegial dialogue. This dialogue becomes critical to the development of the field as more and more people go out to conflict situations in increasingly diverse capacities. It is essential that those who have had to deal with these situations begin to talk and write about them; that these discussions become part of the training of newcomers in the field and part of the ongoing sharing between colleagues. We are more likely to make grounded decisions in tense moments when we have been exposed to thinking about these matters ahead of time.

Mentally and emotionally, too, there are severe challenges to the peacemaker who goes to a war zone. Up front, there is the issue of direct exposure to violence, which may be a new experience for a third party. The peacemaker who comes from a well-ordered environment where anger or violence are not necessarily every day aspects of life may have quite a shock when faced with the reality of

brutal, raw, and intentional violence.

Even violence that is unexpressed physically but exists in the hearts and words of the people as hatred, anger, vengeance, and blame can be traumatizing to one who is not used to this experience. The peacemaker who reacts to every bombshell, be it physical or verbal, with horror, surprise, fear, or judgment is not available to be in the present with the people for whom this violence is a way of life. The peacemaker must somehow walk that thin line between becoming insensitive to the violence and becoming de-sensitized to it; that is, she must acquire the ability to experience the horror fully while not getting stuck in her reaction to it or by being traumatized by it.

The same considerations are true regarding the peacemaker's exposure on the ground to injustice, individual pain and hardship, and group trauma. It is far easier to read about horrendous situations in newspapers, journals, and academic papers; far harder to be with human beings who live daily with a level of suffering and injustice unknown to many of us. Often the peacemaker finds himself responding with passion, with solidarity, with outrage; often the peacemaker wants to take on the "guilty party" and right all wrongs. The pull to become an advocate for a righteous cause or remedial cure can be strong indeed. The ability to stay centered as an advocate for a process rather than a particular outcome or victory for one faction can be truly challenging.

An analogy that works for me regarding the ability to manage exposure to large scale violence, injustice, and personal suffering comes from a recent experience at a concert. The amplifiers were tuned way too loud, and the music, which had a hard-driving quality to it, was therefore so loud as to be assaultive and painful. Upon doing a visual scan of the environment, I realized that my choice was to sit out the assault or to climb over a long row of people to get out. I chose the former and worked with myself to sit quietly and let the combative and painful sound move through my relaxed body rather than to tighten up against it with resistance. My friend beside me made the opposite choice and found herself tensing up as if that would stop the attack. Afterwards she was in such physical pain that she could hardly walk up the stairs.

To be fully present to suffering and let it pass through you without pushing it away, denying its existence, or attempting to put a band-aid on it is a skill that can be learned and shared with one another. It is a talent that all artists of

peacemaking and peacebuilding need to develop in themselves if they wish to be effective in their purpose over time.

Another challenge to the mind of the peacemaker is the confrontation with cultures, mores, experiences different from her own. We are all to some extent ethnocentric; we naturally assume that other people think, feel, act, and value as we do. We are all products of our own educational process, with views on history, religion, politics, life-style, morality, and etiquette that grow out of and make sense within our cultural framework. When we become peacemakers in another culture, we must acknowledge and then step through the barrier of that ethnocentricity so that we can see and hear and know how it is for the people we are working with.

Because so much of the peacemaker's work depends on building trust with and between conflict partners, it is especially important that she be able to recognize when her own cultural screen is clouding her perceptions of the situation and interfering with her understanding, compassion, and clarity about the issues. This is especially true when the peacemaker becomes engaged in intervention behaviors that ask the conflict parties to risk new behaviors. Ethnocentric screens can block from view appropriate and creative responses, can skew information and distort the relationship-building process at every level.

Finally, the peacemaker must address the experience of survivor's guilt. He can walk away from the conflict – the poverty, the injustice, the fear, the pain, the hunger, the hopelessness that is the everyday reality of the people he has met with. He can cross the lines, sleep in a warm bed, eat a good meal, use the telephone with ease, joke and laugh with people on the "other side," get on a train or plane and go away. The friends or contacts he has made cannot do these things; they are tied to their circumstances and doomed to continue life under sometimes devastating circumstances indefinitely into the future.

The psychological effect of this on the peacemaker must not be underestimated. She can often experience post traumatic stress syndrome herself after leaving a conflict situation, and this will be compounded by unconscious, or conscious, guilt about being able to leave while those she befriended are left behind to their fates.

The spiritual cost can be high as well for the peacemaker who is willing to take in, take on, and be fully present to the plight of others. One of the most

evident aspects of a conflict situation, especially those that are long-term, protracted social conflicts, is the despair and hopelessness that pervade the system. People of good will, who are often the very people in the system that the peacemaker will be dealing with, may have tried everything they know over many years, facing great risk to themselves and their families, and still find no significant movement toward peace and a better life. When the peacemaker comes in contact with this hopelessness he may entrain with it, sensing his own smallness to affect such complex and deeply embedded circumstances.

This is a dangerous circumstance if the peacemaker is unable to move through this stage, because the peacemaker by his very presence provides a note of hope. We cannot know how important those seeds of hope can be to those living in fear and oppression; sometimes they might even be the lifeline that enables individuals to get through torture, detention, or the unremitting daily fear and pain that wears one down slowly and inexorably. The strength that comes from knowing that someone on the outside cares and is trying to do something positive should never be underestimated. Expressing that hope through his words and actions, the peacemaker might just be the foot that holds the door open for conflicting parties to find their way through the darkness toward one another.

People who live in war zones live with pain and suffering, with blame and hatred, with anger and, above all, with fear. The peacemaker who would be effective will inevitably feel this suffering as if it were her own. How to hold all that pain and still be effective in the work becomes the vital question. It may be that the peacemaker needs to let her heart break again and again, a thousand times and more if necessary, to grow a heart so full of compassion that its spiritual strength becomes unbreakable. If she tries to be objective, neutral, non-feeling, and to avoid, diminish, or deny the reality of that suffering, she will necessarily distance herself from the truth of the situation and the truth of peoples' lives. From that distance she is perpetually an outsider looking in, and she loses her moral credibility and human authenticity in the relationship building process that includes her as well as the parties she seeks to bring together.

The sense of oneness that can come from allowing the heart to open in that way can be a powerful gift to the intervention process. By identifying with the

suffering on each side, the peacemaker can be an effective bridge to help parties understand one another's real needs. The bridging aspect is unique to the role of the peacemaker. He is often able to move between communities in conflict in a way that individuals in those communities cannot. By being himself a connecting force between parties not in communication, he creates roadways for information, energy, and relationship to pass where there have previously been only thick walls and silence. He can share information about "the other side" that slowly breaks down the fantasies, stereotypes, and assumptions each side holds of the "enemy," and by passing safely between sides can de-mystify the element of danger that is so often exaggerated.

The peacemaker who allows herself to be that bridge can experience something wonderful in her own spirit as well. To be the thread that binds the cut edges, even briefly and metaphorically, can weave a healing in her own life between parts of her own psyche that may have been in conflict. To take on, even briefly, the persona of the one who walks in many worlds is to open the door to the possibility of living comfortably in multiple and simultaneous realities. That ability to tolerate the tension of ambiguity, paradox, and polarization is a rare and special opportunity in any human's life, and those who can find the synthesis or become the synthesizing force have forever strengthened their capacity to be fully and divinely human.

A SYSTEMS VIEW

When the peacemaker enters the conflict system, he joins it. No more is he the outsider looking in. The moment he sets foot on the soil and makes personal, face-to-face relationships with parties in conflict, he becomes part of the system, even if he pretends to himself that he is neutral, value-free, and objective. His very presence changes the system and introduces new elements, new variables. Now people relate to him, and often through him, directly or indirectly, to one another. Now the environment is changed. Whatever activity the peacemaker is engaged in, he offers a promise and a threat that the status quo can change, has already changed. Those that see his presence as a promise and those who view it as a threat will respond accordingly.

Knowing that, there are many choices the peacemaker can make along the way. How close can she get to the people she meets with? Should she stay in their

homes? Should she distribute her time and attention equally among the parties in conflict? Are the people her clients? her friends? her research subjects? her professional trophy? Does she have the right to talk about them? write about their lives when she gets home? Is she establishing relationships or contacts?

How can she manage the expectations that naturally arise about her potential contribution? Should she play the ubiquitous word games that imbue conflict situations, where certain words, names, titles, or phrases referring to places, groups, events, or individuals are flashpoints that trigger passions and assumptions and consequences? How will she respond to the inevitable attempts to use and manipulate her presence, her behavior, for the benefit of one side against the other? What about the promises she makes, specific or implied?

The peacemaker must know that in situations of despair, the littlest things, things that may be meaningless to him, are enormous points of light to others. The very fact that someone wants to listen, wants to help, cares enough to come, can be of tremendous significance in peoples' lives. The opportunity to have the undivided attention of this well-educated professional, and through him the attention of governments, media, universities, the public, is a magnet for peoples' dreams and hopes for a better chance for peace. The peacemaker must be ultra-sensitive to this dynamic, and be careful in the extreme not to play on the hopefulness to gain personal advantage, not to nurture false hopes, not to heighten expectations that are unrealistic.

Finally, the peacemaker needs to be aware of the different streams of energy within the system. Where in the system is the resistance to reconciliation, and how is it expressed? Where is the positive momentum for change? What is the relative strength of these streams vis a vis one another? What emotions are allowed expression, and by whom? What emotions are disallowed? Which parts of the conflict are "hot," and which are "cold," and which are waiting to be re-kindled? What are the wounds, and how do they find expression in the system? What are the myths, and who are the mythmakers? Who are the heroes, and who the villains, and who the magicians and messiahs?

This knowledge is important because, like any human system, the conflict system is a complex, fluid, dynamic, and organic set of processes within which different needs and voices of the system appear in different places at various

moments. As with a hologram, the part contains the whole. The peacemaker needs to be aware of the system at this level because if she is present within the system for any length of time, chances are strong that her own inner processes will begin to mirror or express the system dynamics. She may find herself acting out the craziness of the system, its disallowed emotions, its contradictions. She may take on the helplessness and despair, the rage and blame; she may find herself expressing the resistance in the system, or even its violence.

This degree of awareness helps the peacemaker get clear what responses are truly his own and which are voices and needs he is articulating for the system. It also helps in designing intervention strategies, for it enables the peacemaker to see where a need in the system can be met, where new information or perspective can be introduced.

In recognizing the systemic nature of the process, the peacemaker takes a step toward her own commitment to the situation. A friend in the religious community recently remarked that unless a peacemaker is willing to lay down her life for the people in the conflict, she is not really a peacemaker. While we might take "to lay down her life" literally, we might also take it figuratively, and state that a peacemaker needs to make a long-term commitment to be of service to the system she enters, knowing that she is indeed one with the people on whose behalf she seeks to build peace.

Finally, the peacemaker must address the systemic issue of glamour. The glamour of power and the glamour of suffering are invidious streams that infuse society's thinking, and they are major pitfalls for the peacemaker. The peacemaker may not think of himself as powerful in a third party role, but he is likely perceived as having tremendous power by people on the ground and by colleagues and friends back home. His words, his actions shape how resources flow, how and to whom information is passed; he carries a certain stature associated with "the expert," "the outsider," "the professional" (professor, ambassador, whatever). Friends, family, and even colleagues may view his work as exciting and exotic. He gets to travel to far-away places, meet well-known people, participate in news-making, even history-making events. The danger is that the peacemaker will get caught in the trap of this adulation and invest in the mystique that surrounds his work.

Likewise there is a certain glamour in suffering that the peacemaker needs to be aware of. This refers to a subtle and often vicarious interest western society seems to have in violence and the suffering it produces. When television screens are filled with images of blazing guns, starving children, agonized refugees we cannot take our eyes away. The peacemaker, especially if involved in any way with media, often has the opportunity to manipulate images (verbal or pictorial) to highlight certain aspects of violence and suffering, and this can be a real disservice to the people she is portraying. In many ways, the power to use the "clients" to enhance the reputation of the peacemaker or further her cause is a subtle threat to the integrity of the peacemaking process.

RE-ENTRY

Coming home from any extended stay in a war zone can be confusing, painful, and disorienting. First, there is the problem of culture shock that comes with changing from one cultural milieu to another. This can be compounded by the survivor's guilt mentioned earlier. It can also be heightened by a subtle addiction to the adrenaline rush of living on the edge of violence, of fear, of strong passions and life-threatening situations.

If the dynamics of the conflict are indeed being played out by the peacemaker by this time, he may feel slightly crazy and "not himself" and not know why. He may be manic or depressed, hyper or lethargic – none of which seemingly having anything to do with his life at home, which he probably picks up upon return as if nothing has happened, nothing changed.

The re-entry process is a critical time for the peacemaker. He must make intellectual sense out of what he just observed and experienced. At the same time he must sort out the emotional responses and cleanse his mind, heart and body of the stresses and tensions that come with exposure to and embrace of suffering. He must separate out what is his and what belongs to others in his thinking, his feeling, his energy. And he must work through his feelings and confusion.

The peacemaker must ground herself back in her daily life and bring to it whatever learnings, musings, awarenesses she has gleaned, personally and professionally. In other words, there needs to be a sorting time, a time of quiet contemplation, of purification, of analysis; a time to extract the gifts of the experience, see how to apply them, and integrate the whole.

Most peacemakers do not take this time or give the re-entry process any conscious attention. They move back into their demanding world and bring all this unresolved material with them. But we know that unresolved psychological material does not fade away; it hangs in wait for the time and place it can extrude into behavior, often inappropriately.

Because of the resonance between the peacemaker and the conflict system, it is all the more critical that there be a conscious and thorough re-entry process. We might even say that a complete re-entry process is an ethical imperative for the peacemaker, for without it he is not serving the highest good of either himself or the people he has entered into relationship with, nor is he serving fully the peace process. Conflicts go on and on for years and decades because people don't cleanse and process and resolve and heal things as they arise. For the peacemaker to collude in this unconscious attachment to stasis is to collude with the forces that impede peace. Exactly because of the systemic relationship, it behooves the peacemaker to be the agent of conscious change within himself as a way of opening pathways for change within the system.

CONCLUSION

In sum, we see that the peacemaker who engages actively and physically in a conflict system has a myriad of factors to be attentive to. She must be aware of the effects on her body, mind, and spirit, and of herself as part of the conflict system. Finally, she must be willing to attend to an active re-entry process from which she can extract learnings both about herself and the conflict system. We see that the point of view of the peacemaker who visits the war zone for any length of time is inevitably different from the view of one who observes from afar, or who drops in briefly and stays distant from the immediate situation on the ground. The peacemaker who allows herself to be truly present cannot but be affected by the dynamics of the situation and must be attentive to the psychological, behavioral, and ethical implications of her activities.

A peacemaker in a war zone can be a potent force for good. By experiencing life as it is for the people, through their eyes and hearts, he can develop a profound understanding of the issues and underlying group needs that must be addressed in any political solution and accompanying reconciliation process. He can come to know the meaning and value of peace directly, without the screen of theories or research questions. He can come to know the people and their dreams

and visions for an end to war, for a new relationship that turns enemies to allies. He can see the space between the peoples' lives and the political rhetoric. He can be an authentic, real human being addressing real human problems with all the resources he can muster. It well may be that until a peacemaker actually does enter the war zone, he will never be truly and effectively a maker of peace.