

Paths to Sustainable Peace: Accountability, Reconciliation & Problem Solving
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Question #3 of the Reflection Questions says this: *“How can we build sustainable peace?”* My first response is *“not the way we are now trying to do it, by imposing our version of ‘democracy’ and so-called western values.”* But I am an optimist, and I’ll give a similarly brief, and hopefully more positive answer at the end of this short commentary.

I find myself having three threads of thought a week after this outstanding workshop. My comments will be simple narrative commentary based as much on feelings as anything else.

Thread One is Words and their Utility (and non-Utility) to the Sustainable Peace Process.

Thread Two is the immense power of Story and the need to factor Story as an integral component of any Sustainable Peace process.

Thread Three is about the unavoidable positive or negative impact of Religion (however one defines that term, or feels about Religion, personally) on Sustainable Peace.

THREAD ONE - WORDS:

As individuals, I would imagine we are all highly literate and well educated.

We are – every one of us – among the elite of the world, if for no other reason than we are well educated, have the facility of words, and the blessing or patronage of someone with resources to make a workshop like this accessible to us. Probably most important of all, we all know American English, which for the moment at least, is a basic world language of diplomacy and commerce.

Words like “Sustainable” are simple for us; for many people, including literate U.S. citizens, they might fall into the category my father used to call “two dollar words” – kinds of words ordinary people don’t ordinarily use, or see in print, or even think about. We have a particular luxury in being able to think about these words and their meanings.

Question #1 asks: *“What is the relationship between accountability and reconciliation?”*

After the workshop, one of the first things I did was to look up the words ‘**accountable**’ and ‘**reconcile**’ in two versions of Roget’s Thesaurus, both which sit in my home office. This is how these words are described in the two Roget’s:

Accountable: in the first, *liable, debit, duty*; and in the other – *adjective – explainable, liable.*

Reconcile: *agree, pacify, content, forgive (oneself); and – verb – 1) to re-establish friendship between reconciling old enemies (syn. Conciliate, reunite, idiom ‘heal the breach’; 2) to bring (oneself) to accept: reconciled herself to the loss of her friend. Adapt, harmonize, settle.*

Without doubt, there are many other synonyms for the companion words, and their synonyms have even more synonyms. That is the nature of this complicated language called “English”. There is no such thing as a simple definition of these words.

As I’ve thought about the function of these Words in the context of this workshop, two things occur to me:

First, in the application of Reconcile and Accountable (all that matters, really, is the application), my guess is that, all things being equal, each of us would prefer the softer and more

gentle word – reconcile – applied to us as a result of our own personal failings; while we might be more inclined to apply the harsher one – accountable – to the one who transgressed against us. In other words, we'd like to be forgiven for our offense; we'd prefer the offending other to be punished. Perhaps that is the nature of humans.

Second, and even more important in the context of this workshop, in my opinion, is that in the literal battlefields of the present and the past (and even more likely in the future), few of the combatants or victims, even if literate, have any understanding of or interest in these words, and certainly would not sit around and intellectually debate what they mean. Their understanding is much more basic, personal and in the moment.

I was struck, for instance, in the recent film *Hotel Rwanda*, at how the lead antagonist stirred up violence against the hated other by referring to them all as 'cockroaches'. (I don't know if this is how the genocide actually began in Rwanda, but it is a rule of war to paint the enemy as uniformly repulsive and even less than human). I was also struck, in the same film, that the leader conveyed the 'cockroach' message via radio. In an under-educated and impoverished society in the modern day, radio is likely the mass communication method of choice, perhaps even more effective than person-to-person, and whoever seeks to control the population, seeks to control the radio waves. (In the United States, television is a primary manipulator of opinion, with the same advantage for anyone who wishes to mis-lead. U.S. citizens are, I would guess, probably even more susceptible to propaganda than most others, simply because they are so barraged with advertising and assorted other media messages.)

It seems to me that most conflicts are fomented by people who are highly literate and sophisticated in their command of language and methods of manipulating people through communication and use of communication technology. Once a population can be divided into segments whose members mistrust or even hate each other, the rest is easy. Again, one needs only to look at the huge and seemingly unbridgeable gulf between the Right Wing and the Left Wing in this country.

It seems to me, thus, that those who have to be accountable for reconciliation – or its opposite, destruction - are those who are, like us, leaders. 'Divide and Conquer' may be a very useful tool, but it is in the long run a very dangerous tool, solving nothing.

THREAD TWO – STORY: THE ORAL TRADITION

Dr. Weinstein, on February 4, related a story of the Balkan grandmother grabbing and shaking her grandson while declaring that she would never allow her grandson to forget what had happened to her community at the hands of the enemy.

As I was sitting there, I thought back to a family history letter I had had translated from the original German over ten years ago. I think the story is pertinent to this conversation.

Succinctly, my mother's parents were first generation American; my mother's grandparents had come from Germany in the 1860s. Mom's grandfather, his father, and his two brothers, all migrated to the United States at about the same time. They came from a farming background, and in context of the times they were well educated. All were adults when they came to the United States. One of the brothers, Bernhard, became prosperous and lived in Dubuque Iowa.

Bernhard had been in America for perhaps 60 years when he wrote a series of letters back to his relatives in Germany between 1923 and 1925. The letters were in fluent German, and they covered assorted topics.

There was one paragraph of Bernhard's letters which Dr. Weinstein's story brought back vividly to my mind. The translator footnoted the paragraph saying *"While this is a very long sentence, there was a great deal of emotion expressed in its length and style and I felt that it was important to leave it exactly as the writer had written it."*

This was the paragraph, in relevant part (the person who had received this letter lived on the home farm of Bernhard in Germany – the farm from which he had migrated 60 years or more earlier): *"...don't worry about the picture of home and wait until a convenient opportunity presents itself and then send the bill and I will send you the money right away. The two beautiful chestnut trees would make a nice postcard picture. I will never forget how, each year on slaughter day, as we cut the fat pigs and cows apart, dear grandmother would say if only the dear Lord will let us eat it in peace and good health, and then, each time, she would tell how the French took everything of hers, in addition to all of the oppression they had to endure, and dear grandfather would tell how the French and the Russians took him and his father with [their] horses and wagon to drive under orders for weeks and, how the horses couldn't go anymore, and how they were then whipped and left by the wayside [to die] and that the Busch's homestead had been their lawful property but was taken away by the French, no wonder that my father left his home with his sons."*

The letter doesn't specify exactly when the indignity against the family took place, but other references in the series of letters, plus the geographic location of the farm in Germany, strongly suggest the Busch family farm was in the path overrun by Napoleon Bonaparte's forces in the early 1800s.

I am repeating, here, a family story that is now over 200 years old. I note that this story has no reference to defending the honor of the home country of which the Busch farm was a tiny part. Rather, the story is about the abuse of a small farm family by an entire country, France. That distinction is an important one I feel.

I don't know when Bernhard died. But if he lived into the 1930s, I wonder how he felt about the rise of the Nazis and Hitler in Germany. I know, from these same letters, that he felt the Germans both in Germany and here, had been humiliated by WWI, and felt discriminated against during and after the 'war to end all wars'.

My point is: Stories do matter. If we pretend the stories don't matter, reconciliation cannot happen. The memory will always be there. The stories, however awful, or even untrue, have to be honored for what they are: a recitation of someone's memory. They are a relevant part of one's history.

THREAD THREE – THE IMPACT OF RELIGION

I think this may be a sensitive item in the whole conversation of accountability and reconciliation, but I think it has to be not only on the table but central to any conversation about Sustainable Peace.

I have thought about the below words for some hours now, and this sentence is added after the rest of this thread has been completed: I would hope that those who are inclined to generally dismiss religion as irrelevant in this conversation would reconsider. "Religion" is a very, very big tent, full of very diverse opinions and ideas.

I happen to be an active Catholic, a life-long Catholic. It is a choice I've made. It suggests nothing about my state of orthodoxy or agreement with the Pope, the Bishops or anyone else. I just happen to be Catholic. There is much very good to be said about religion, and about my own denomination, and the people active in my religion. Otherwise I would not remain a

member. But there is a very significant and very dangerous downside to organized religion, including in this matter of Sustainable Peace.

I happen to believe that many of the gravest sins of society are and have been committed by some in the name of formal and informal religion. This can probably be said equally for almost all belief systems. Most people, I would guess, are in one sense or another, at least somewhat 'religious', regardless of the formality or informality of their belief system.

In the February 4 exercise, Professor Lopez assigned to me the label "Mercy" during his exercise on Justice, Peace, Truth and Mercy. Afterwards I described that most interesting experience to a mailing list of mine. This led to one correspondent responding by quoting her favorite Bible verse (Micah 6:8) ***"He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God"***. This led me to checking that phrase in seven different English language versions of the Christian Bible (addendum one).

The oldest of these Bibles, dating from 1906, my grandmothers Bible, and a Catholic version, said this, at Micheas 6:8: ***"I will shew thee, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requireth of thee: verily, to do judgement, and to love mercy, and to walk solicitous with thy God."*** Without belaboring the point, the other six Bibles used the words 'justice', 'right' 'justly' and 'just' as well as 'judgment'; and 'kindness', 'goodness' and 'love' replaced 'mercy' in several Bibles. It takes only a cursory review of the words which replaced judgment and mercy in the other Bible versions to become aware that words and their interpretation can become extraordinarily troublesome, especially if singled out and explained and espoused by someone who seems authoritative and is viewed as a religious leader.

Of course, Micah 6:8 is one tiny phrase in a very large book. There is also a potential problem in what phrases in the Bible are NOT selected for emphasis by clergy and teachers.

The function of Religion in Sustainable Peace is far too complicated to be dealt with in a few sentences. Suffice to say, the Bible (or Koran, or Jewish teachings...) can be played like a fiddle by any religious leader, drawing unsuspecting believers into a dishonest web. This has always been true. Examples abound: People like the Rev Jimmy Jones (Jonestown), and David Koresh (Waco), are at one end of this spectrum, but there are many others.

One doesn't have to be even an active listener to come up with almost daily examples of the problem posed by religious dogmatism in contemporary society.

February 11, in a casual conversation, I listened to a somewhat anguished father, raised Methodist but who no longer has any faith in organized religion, both mouth the same Bible Verse quoted above, and then talk about his adult daughter, who he said, believes in the literal truth of the Bible (whatever version she uses, and whichever adviser she accepts as her teacher on that Bible). The next day, I heard a workshop leader, a radical Catholic, talk with some satisfaction and conviction about the inevitable war between Islam and Christianity, without worrying about the fine points of distinction between the assorted beliefs held by people who profess either a belief in Islam or Christianity. Two years ago, a Catholic Priest, a parish pastor who I'd never met, felt moved to write me a letter in response to a letter to the editor I'd written with concerns about the consequences of U.S. militaristic actions (this was before the war on Iraq) arguing that radical Islam needed to be dealt with: ***"No one likes war. But in this case it was thrust upon us. Now we have no choice but to fight and win. I firmly believe that this is a just war. Terrorism is a major threat to our world..."*** Of course, the very term "Just War" is a very Catholic philosophy, debated within the Catholic Church, and used and mis-used by many, including those with great power. It has always been interesting to me that the head of my

hierarchical church, the Pope, has consistently been very outspokenly anti-war, but in this particular instance, his opinion is often dismissed by pro-war faithful and even clergy who believe what they want to believe.

Finally, in the same 1906 Catholic Bible from which the above verse is extracted, the Preface makes the following instruction to readers: *“The [Catholic] Church warns readers of the Bible to beware of interpreting it according to their own whims, caprices, and judgments, as so many have done to their own spiritual ruin. She [the church] has even restricted by legislation the promiscuous reading of the Bible by the uncultured and the ignorant who sometimes have presumed to interpret even the most difficult passages in it, as the first “reformers: insanely did...the Bible is “God’s letter to His creatures.”...[and]...the “creatures” can read nothing better than [the Bible] provided they follow the interpretation of the only infallible interpreter, the Catholic Church. If everyone were allowed to interpret the Bible as he thinks, then every many would logically be his own priest and his own “infallible” teacher.”* I have to confess some amusement at the this pompous Preface, since the owner of the Bible, my grandmother, barely had a sixth grade education, and most likely didn’t spend much time studying the instructions laid forth in the preface. But there the amusement ends: it was the Christian church – not only the Catholic - which effectively lubricated and facilitated the genocide of the Jews – the holocaust, among other sordid chapters in so-called civilized and Christian human history.

Religion just cannot be ignored as a player in, and contributor to, this problem. Neither should religion be arbitrarily dismissed as only a problem. Within the diverse ranks of religion are infinite millions interested in helping work toward Sustainable Peace. Leaders and members of Religious Institutions can be an immense help in building Sustainable Peace, as they can also be an impediment to such resolution of conflict.

MY OWN CONCLUSION: HOW CAN WE BUILD SUSTAINABLE PEACE? One person, one village, at a time. And by helping build the small bridges in any social infrastructure that can live past the inevitable betrayals and disappointments that litter human relationships.

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ADDENDUM #1

Here are the assorted statements of Micah 6:8 as it appears in seven different translations of 20th century Bibles:

Micheas: "I will shew thee, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requireth of thee: verily, to do judgment, and to love mercy, and to walk solicitous with thy God."

Douay Reims 1906 p. 977 also Douay-Challoner of Confraternity Edition 1950

"He has showed you, O man, what is good: and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Revised Standard Version 1952

Michea "You have been told, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: only to do the right and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God."

St. Joseph Catholic Edition Confraternity-Douay 1962

"He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God."

King James Version 1966

"No, the Lord has told us what is good. What he requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God."

Good News Bible 1976

"He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

New Revised Standard Version 1989

"He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"

Self-Pronouncing Edition: The Holy Bible, #200 index, Saalfeld Publishing Co, Akron OH. (no date)