The healing function in political conflict resolution

This chapter deals with ethnic and religious conflicts, which are consistently the most resistant to traditional techniques of diplomatic or political mediation and negotiation. Because the losses from these conflicts are so painful in terms of lives, sometimes territory, and always a sense of safety and justice, even the more psychologically sensitive approaches to conflict resolution described in this volume have had only limited success in starting a healing process between the nations or peoples in conflict.

After well over a decade as practitioner and theorist in political conflict resolution, the author is convinced that healing and reconciliation in violent ethnic and religious conflicts depend on a process of transactional contrition and forgiveness between aggressors and victims which is indispensable to the establishment of a new relationship based on mutual acceptance and reasonable trust. This process depends on joint analysis of the history of the conflict, recognition of injustices and resulting historic wounds, and acceptance of moral responsibility where due.

Coming from a career in traditional diplomacy in which superpowers and lesser states have relied on economic and military coercive power as the ultimate 'conflict resolvers', the author has no illusions about the ease with which governments, including his own, can accept the idea that forgiveness is a key element in peacemaking. He believes, nevertheless, that both theory and real-world political experience provide persuasive evidence for the thesis.

Victimhood and the persistence of conflict

In a conference at the Foreign Service Institute in June, 1991, James Mace, a political scientist at the University of Illinois, described the relationship between the Ukraine and Soviet Russia as a 'gaping, unhealed wound'. He was referring, of course, to the heritage of Stalin's forced collectivization in the early 1930s in which millions of Ukrainians died. The metaphor of a gaping, unhealed wound could not be more apt for understanding the

depth of pain, fear, and hatred a history of unatoned violence creates in a *victim*ized people.

The three main components of victimhood (Montville, 1989) are a history of violent, traumatic aggression and loss; a conviction that the aggression was unjustified by any standard; and an often unuttered fear on the part of the victim group that the aggressor will strike again at some feasible time in the future. To complicate matters, many nations and groups in conflict have competing, if not entirely symmetrical, psychologies of victimhood.

At this writing, Serbs and Croats in Yugoslavia, each outraged at the assertions of historic victimhood of the other, face off for an armed clash of potentially genocidal proportions. Not far behind in this category of fear and loathing are Arabs and Israelis, Armenians and Turks (in Azerbaijan), with low-level violence continuing in the historic dispute between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. How, indeed, can even the most experienced and psychologically sensitive specialists in conflict resolution approach confrontation so laden with passion and current or potential violence?

From victimhood to healing: The beginning of a process

It must be acknowledged at the outset that the methodology of third-party facilitation of communication between groups or nations in conflict is probably least effective on the eve of or in the midst of violent combat. In such a case, a process of gradual confidence-building between representatives of the groups in conflict would most likely be swamped by the passions of the moment. Far more appropriate would be third-party states or international organizations – the European Community or UN Security Council – arranging a cease-fire or separation of combatants and backing this up with a neutral peacekeeping force. When emotions had cooled down and parties were ready to proceed, a conflict resolution process could get under way. All other long-standing or protracted ethnic and sectarian conflicts are appropriate for third-party facilitation provided valid representatives of the adversary groups request help or agree to participate.

The social-science theoretical description of the early tasks in arranging and then facilitating constructive communication between representatives of groups in conflict revolves around the issue of changing political attitudes (Smith, 1973), or political beliefs (Lane, 1973), or belief systems (Seliktar, 1986). Almost always deeply rooted in the belief systems of ethnic and religious groups with a history of violent conflict are dehumanized images of the other side. Common beliefs are that the enemy is deceitful, aggressive, heartless, often sexually licentious, with unclean personal habits, and incapable of change for the better. One way to define the goal of facilitated communication is to *de-legitimize* stereotyped beliefs about the enemy by introducing new information which is cognitively dissonant, i.e., which challenges the negative stereotype.

For example, in 1980, in the first five-day problem-solving workshop organized by the American Psychiatric Association for Egyptians and Israelis (discussed further below), an Egyptian intellectual and journalist said that the newest and most important thing he learned in the meetings was that Israelis could be afraid. Before the meeting, his image of Israelis had been one of fighter-bombers attacking the Nile Valley at will, in callous, contemptuous disregard for Egyptian dignity and life. The knowledge he acquired directly from Israelis in a safe, facilitated exchange in Washington, D.C., produced a much more complex and ultimately hopeful image of the adversary.

In social-psychological terms, the Egyptian had undergone a transvaluation in which new beliefs, more consonant with a new reality he had experienced, had been generated. As will be discussed further on, the big challenge is to delegitimize the negative stereotypes of the enemy in enough people so that a group or nation as a whole will discard old beliefs and values and undergo a transvaluation in an evolving collective belief system. Such a transformation is, however, especially difficult in societies whose perceptions of morality tend to be absolutist. All societies moralize their behavior codes to strengthen commitment to laws and customs as well as group cohesion (Seliktar, 1986, p. 339) and to inhibit defectors and deviants. Absolutist moralities of the sort found in aggravated ethnic conflicts are least likely to consider positive change in the enemy even scientifically possible. In extreme cases of enmity, the dehumanized characteristics can be seen as basically genetic and simply incurable.

The problem-solving workshop

To confront the bleak scene of aggressive antagonism in protracted ethnic and sectarian conflict, practitioners of conflict resolution have made effective use of problem-solving workshops. Pioneered by John W. Burton, former senior Australian diplomat and later professor at London, Kent, and George Mason Universities, the four-to-five-day workshop has become a basic tool in conflict resolution strategies. Opinions vary, but the ideal delegation of representatives of groups in conflict will range from three to seven, while the third-party team or panel of facilitators can range from two to five. Variations and elaborations of this formula are found elsewhere in this volume and in the works of Herbert Kelman (1991), a master in the field, as well as Vamik Volkan (1991), Demetrios Julius (1991), and the author (1991).

In simplest terms, the workshops make possible a process of undermining negative stereotypes held by the participants and rehumanizing their relationships. By dealing with each other at close quarters over a period of days, representatives of the groups in conflict learn that they can act openly and honestly with each other assuming the individuals selected for the workshops pass the minimum standards of character and emotional maturity for such a process.

One useful way of describing the interactive psychological process of trust-building in a problem-solving workshop has been suggested by Maurice Friedman (1983) in the concept of 'confirming'. In general dictionary definition to confirm is to remove doubt. In a dialogue between adversaries, confirmation implies acceptance of the other person's fundamental values and the worth of the person him- or herself.

Human beings crave confirmation throughout life, but it is gained only in relationships. The best form of confirmation is in love, but absent that a conflictual relationship may suffice at least to attest to one's significance as a person. It is said that the opposite of love is not hate but indifference. Facing the latter, people feel meaningless and empty. Dialogue, the engine of relationship, promotes mutual confirmation and thereby serves a fundamental need of parties to a conflict to be recognized as individuals with values and unique (and valued) identities. The goal is to establish working trust, in Kelman's phrase (1991), and the role of a third party, like that of a therapist, is to involve and confirm individuals representing groups in conflict who for a variety of reasons find it very difficult to reach out directly to their adversaries.

The conflict resolution strategy: Taking a history

Reconciliation is to understand both sides, to go to one side and describe the suffering being endured by the other side, and then to the other side, and describe the suffering being endured by the first side.
(Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese Zen master)

The first substantive stage of the workshop is taking a history of the conflict. Whether this is initiated by the third party or begins spontaneously between the adversary sides should be determined on a case-by-case basis. The purpose of the walk through history is to elicit specific grievances and wounds of the groups or nations in conflict which have not been acknowledged by the side responsible for inflicting them. Only the victims know for certain which historic events sustain the sense of victimhood and these become cumulatively the agenda for healing. Published histories and official government versions of violent events initiated by aggressors very rarely convey the unvarnished truth. The almost universal tendency is not to discuss or to gloss or mythologize an event or military conquest as a justified defense if not heroic advance for the nation or perhaps civilization itself.

That nations have used the traditional psychological devices of denial and avoidance to exempt themselves from the moral consequences of their behavior has long been known. And the need for revising and cleaning up the published historical record of a conflicted intergroup or international relationship has become widely accepted as an essential part of a reconciliation process.

The extent of historical detail to be sought will depend on how much important information has been ignored. The Israeli–Palestinian case is recent

enough that relatively less education for the parties is necessary, although Arabs can benefit from knowledge of Christian historical abuse of Jews in Europe. For the cases of Northern Ireland, South Africa, Armenia and Turkey, or Cambodia and Vietnam, the historical record takes on much more of a central role.

Attempts at rigorous analysis of historic grievances need not depend entirely on the existence of a problem-solving workshop. Unilateral efforts at balanced, psychologically attuned review might prove useful in drawing the attention of certain publics to the previously unknown or ignored critical history of aggression and abuse.

The author (1982) tried to do this in an (unclassified) internal U.S. government document analyzing the psychological roots of violence and terrorism in Northern Ireland. A portion of the paper which otherwise focused on current events drew a line between modern Irish violence and the degradation of the Catholic Gaels in Ireland from the landing of Henry II in 1171 to the 'heritage of hate', in the phrase of a modern Irish historian, spawned under Elizabeth I and James I (1588–1625), and irredeemably hammered home by the violent mass repression of Oliver Cromwell. After his military victory in 1649, Cromwell ordered the exile of all suspected Irish subversives, massive Catholic depopulation, and devolution of the Roman Catholic Church.

Winston Churchill has written, 'The consequences of Cromwell's rule in Ireland have distressed and at times distracted English politics down to the present day. To heal them baffled the skill and loyalties of successive generations ... Upon all of us there still lies "the curse of Cromwell"' (Lester, 1991, p.6). The author's goal in the State Department study was to put today's ethnic and sectarian terror in historic perspective, something neither the U.S. in this case nor (especially) the United Kingdom government has done even with the benefit of Churchillian insight.

Providing an opportunity for articulating grievances in a meeting of ethnic adversaries, even if not organized as a problem-solving workshop, has some benefit. This was the case in a weekend seminar held in 1988 by the University of Maryland's Center for International Development and Conflict Management for Sinhalese and Tamil leaders. There was little problem-solving progress (nor had much been anticipated), but representatives of the Tamil minority had and took the opportunity to present their grievances in historic context in a way which would be imprinted on the minds of the Sinhalese for well into the future.

A comparable event was a two-day didactic seminar on track-two diplomacy for a mixed, high-level Northern Ireland delegation at the University of Virginia's Center for the Study of Mind and Human Interaction in 1989. In the meeting, a brief and only illustrative walk through history led by the third-party facilitators resulted in an (unplanned) deeply moving analysis of the hurt and losses on both sides of the conflict. The visitors left with a sense of new insight and common destiny which they said they had never experienced before.

In an example of a sequence of two planned, actively facilitated problem-solving workshops organized by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 (Washington) and 1981 (Vevey, Switzerland), Israelis and Egyptians exchanged views, accusations, and lessons from their mutual sense of history. (Four more workshops with Palestinian leaders participating followed through 1984. The author participated in the design of and in the third-party team in five of the six.) The following is excerpted from reports on the first two meetings which totaled more than eighty hours:

In their often profound and emotional exchanges, the Egyptians and Israelis revealed the significant cultural gaps between the European-oriented Israeli elite and Arabs in general. But the Israelis especially reflected the deep sense of victimization Jews had suffered before 1948 and the establishment of Israel and since in the face of Arab hostility. It became clear that the major psychological means of facilitating negotiations would be through highly developed sensitivity to the Israeli suspicion of Gentiles that is based on the Jewish historical experience. The underlying political assumption of most Israelis is that Gentiles, at best, are indifferent to Israel's survival and, at worst, actively conspire to destroy the state. This is why unconditional, public acceptance of Israel's right to exist – which Egypt conveyed – must be seen as *the* minimum Arab and Palestinian move necessary, for non-negotiable *psychological* reasons, to begin negotiations toward a political settlement.

Accepting responsibility, contrition, and forgiveness

To recapitulate the assertion of the importance of historical analysis in a political conflict resolution process, it might be useful to examine one incident in the postwar German–Soviet relationship which does that and simultaneously introduces the themes of subsequent and interactive contrition and forgiveness. The event was described by Helmut Schmidt in his memoir, *Menschen und Mächte* (1987).

In 1972 Brezhnev went to Bonn on the first visit of a Soviet leader to West Germany. Willy Brandt, a trusted friend of Schmidt and Brezhnev, hosted an informal evening at his home for the two leaders. Schmidt reports that Brezhnev suddenly began to pour out one story after another of German Army atrocities in Russia during the war. When he finished, Schmidt spoke of his personal experiences as a young soldier on the Russian front and his anxieties and guilty feelings about the invasion. It seems clear from this account that Brezhnev's presentation of historic grievances was explicit, as was Schmidt's admission of responsibility and contrition as a German. While there is no suggestion that Brezhnev openly expressed forgiveness to Schmidt, the latter writes (p.187), 'Probably it was this exchange of bitter war memories that significantly contributed to the mutual respect which has characterized our relationship between 1972 and up to his death'.[1]

A psychological parsing of this account in political conflict resolution theory would state that representatives of two nations with a history of

violent conflict met in a safe, confidential environment (Brandt's home), in the presence of a trusted third-party facilitator (Brandt). They took a history of their conflict with the victim (Brezhnev) presenting his grievances in depth. The aggressor, or his symbolic representative (Schmidt), acknowledged the injustices of the act, accepted responsibility and expressed contrition. The victim accepted the contrition as genuine and thereby was drawn out of his victimhood psychology, at least with Schmidt, with whom he developed a trusting personal relationship. This transformation came, after time, to be generally reflected (with numerous other subsequent contrition/forgiveness transactions and rituals) in the relationship between the two nations.[2]

The role of contrition and forgiveness in the resolution of conflict has not been discussed widely in the scholarly literature of clinical psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis. Indeed, when the author (1989) introduced the subject in his plenary address to the American Psychoanalytic Association (December 1986) which was then refereed and published in the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* as 'Psychoanalytic Enlightenment and the Greening of Diplomacy', one very supportive, anonymous reviewer defied his colleagues to identify any significant reference to forgiveness in depth psychology scholarship.

There are, however, some useful scientific references to the potentially profound effect of contrition and forgiveness which provide empirical support for the thesis of this chapter. One is found in the psychoanalytically oriented *Austen Riggs Center Review*, in an essay by the senior Israeli psychoanalyst, Rafael Moses (1990), entitled 'Acknowledgement – The Balm of Narcissistic Hurts'. Citing the pioneering work of the late Heinz Kohut in self psychology, Moses notes the predictability of the repetitiveness in the cycle of narcissistic blow, narcissistic injury, and narcissistic counter-blow. The resultant rage from a wound to the sense of self (individual or collective) requires acknowledgement if the destructive cycle is to be broken.

The interactive exchange of hurts is most familiar to clinicians in the family – between parents and children or husband and wife. Most interestingly, Moses also points out the occurrence of inadvertent offenses by therapists toward their clients or analysands. In the old days, he notes, analysts never openly admitted errors – their minds wandering, failure to point out something important, perhaps even falling asleep. Today therapists find that apologizing for mistakes invariably evokes an emotionally powerful and pleasing reaction in the patient.

Moses is also conversant and experienced in dealing with group political wounds. He is a veteran of the American Psychiatric Association Arab–Israeli workshops described previously and he reports from his personal experience the keen disappointment of Palestinians in a small workshop when their strong need for Israeli acknowledgement for the hurts inflicted on the Palestinians was not recognized (1990, p. 1).

The tension in the air grew palpably. The third party tried to encourage more direct and mutual interchanges ... The most articulate and vociferous spokesman of the Palestinian group made the following statement: 'If you Israelis would only acknowledge that you have wronged us, that you have taken away our homes and our land – if you did that, we would be able to proceed without insisting, without needing to get them back.' This was said somewhat wistfully. It sounded in the main honest, real, genuine. No such acknowledgment was made. The Israelis were frightened of the consequences, of what it might imply to make such an acknowledgment.

In separate essays focused specifically on therapeutic forgiveness in the journal *Psychotherapy*, Donald Hope and Richard Fitzgibbons provide clinical evidence for its effectiveness with clients. Greatest success was with adults who have suffered mental and physical abuse as children, which among other things, severely undermines their sense of self-worth. In what could be taken as a metaphor for the political history of the world as we know it, Hope (1987, p. 241) says, 'All therapists are confronted in their work with the facts of injustice, the abuse of the weak by the strong, betrayals of trust, loyalty and innocence'. He points out that after a therapist has helped a client explore the past and experience repressed feelings of anger and loss, the clinical literature offers little guidance about the potential cathartic effect of forgiveness as a component of a mourning process on the way to completion.

The question is how does a person let go of her past of humiliation and injustice, her victimhood? By suggesting forgiveness as an answer, Hope realizes that he is effecting a conjunction of religious tradition and scientific psychology, which may account for the scarcity of clinical references to forgiveness. He notes that in modern cases the therapist often substitutes for the spiritual confessor. He listens to all the client wishes to say, suspends moral judgement and exhibits tolerance and acceptance, thereby freeing the client to let go of past hatreds, including elements of self-hatred. What is clear in Hope's theory and a case study he presents is that the act of forgiving is unilateral, a fact which is helpful in individual therapy where the 'aggressor' mother or father may be dead, but unilateralism is rarely helpful in political conflict resolution.

Richard P. Fitzgibbons (1986) explains his cathartic use of forgiveness as initially a cognitive or intellectual process after the clinician analyzes the sources of the client's pain. The examination also includes efforts to understand the motives of the aggressor. In fact, 'Forgiveness is possible through a process of attempting to understand the emotional development of those who have inflicted pain' (p. 630). And while the cognitive process of forgiveness invariably precedes the affective or emotional release of hatred and desire for revenge, the author admits that obstacles to forgiveness can be quite serious. Individuals might be loath to give up their anger because they use it as an unconscious defense against further betrayal.

Striking much closer to the political parallel, Fitzgibbons notes that anger for some clients makes them feel alive and wards off the threat of possible

emptiness in their lives. Further, many individuals see revenge as a sign of strength and forgiveness as weakness. Similarly to Hope, Fitzgibbons deals basically with therapeutic strategies of unilateral forgiveness, which begs many questions in ethnic conflict resolution which can only be based on a relationship with the adversary. Transforming a victimhood psychology into a normal relationship in political conflict resolution requires interaction — essentially the negotiation of a new political and social contract between previous enemies.

A vivid example of how unilateral forgiveness in a political conflict can fail is conveyed in Frost's (1991, p. 123) account of a generous — some say foolhardy — act of forgiveness by the then Sandinista Interior Minister Thomas Borge. In 1979, members of the Nicaraguan National Guard imprisoned and tortured Borge and raped and murdered his wife. After the revolution Borge went to see imprisoned guardsmen and recognized two of them. Borge addressed them:

Don't you know me? ... I am Borge whom you tortured — and whose wife your colleagues killed ... Now you are going to discover the full weight of this Revolution ... I forgive you ... Go on. Out through the door. You are free.

This was not a transaction. The gesture fell flat. Borge released over 5000 national guardsmen at that time, most of whom fled to Honduras and joined the U.S.-backed Contra movement which, of course, worked to overthrow the Sandinista regime.

Yet again from Central America comes evidence of genuine, if somewhat flawed, transactional contrition and forgiveness which gives strong support for the healing thesis in political conflict resolution. In March 1991, the author was part of a small Freedom House mission to El Salvador which among other activities visited Gregorio Rosa Chavez, Auxiliary Bishop of San Salvador. Rosa Chavez had been very active in pursuing charges of human rights abuses by the Salvadorean military and police. At the time of the visit, negotiations toward a settlement between the government of President Alfredo Christiani and the guerrilla FMLN were on the verge of success. Rosa Chavez said he was concerned about Salvadorean reconciliation at the grass-roots level. He thought that it was extremely important for the durability of a future peace that the families of disappeared victims of military repression be able to retrieve the bodies of their loved ones and mourn their losses properly. This could help the healing.

In this regard, Rosa Chavez also said that Salvadorean priests were beginning to adopt the method the Chilean church had been using which was to act as go-between in contrition/forgiveness transactions. Priests were making it known that they would take and protect the confessions of soldiers who had 'disappeared' and killed civilians and who were ready to let the victims' families know where the bodies could be found. The families seemed to accept this form of imperfect, one might say filtered, contrition as the best

available since the soldiers feared extreme punishment if they revealed their identity. Yet the soldiers genuinely wished to communicate their remorse — the confessions were voluntary — and to shed their personal burdens of guilt.

The author did little to conceal his excitement and gratitude for this information and briefly described to Rosa Chavez the empirical research which supported his instinct. The Bishop responded with a warm smile and a single word, 'Precioso'.

Public rituals of contrition and forgiveness

One of the ironies of the contrition/forgiveness theory is that while scholarly literature supporting it is scant, daily events constantly occur which affirm it. The author has reported examples of healing interaction between previous enemies — French—German, Japanese—American, English—Irish — in an article first published by the Foreign Service Institute (Montville, 1987).

Perhaps the most noteworthy of these cases was the formation of a Franco—German commission of historians after World War II, whose task was to review existing French and German texts and revise them in light of available information, regardless of how painful or embarrassing it might be (Willis, 1965). The commission's work was critical to the postwar healing process which laid the psychological foundation for later establishment of the European Community, of which France and Germany are the core. This commission can probably also be taken as the model for all subsequent, similar analytical processes or efforts to resolve outstanding political conflicts. A random review of the press since 1986 reveals truly heartening evidence that many national groups and, most importantly, governmental leaders understand and accept the necessity of accepting responsibility for past transgressions as part of a reconciliation and peacemaking process.

In 1986, for example, the *Christian Science Monitor* reported (29 December, p. 10), that the German Protestant organization, *Aktion Suhnezeichen* (Action Reconciliation/Service for Peace), which had for ten years been working in the Holocaust memorials in Israel and Auschwitz, had built a youth center in Auschwitz and given it to the Polish people. Planned for the ensuing year were meetings of church congregations, schools, trade unions, and other independent youth organizations which would bring together West Germans, Poles, Dutch, Israelis, and Americans. Programs at the center would include reading the history of the Nazi extermination camps, viewing documentary films, meeting with survivors, and holding seminars on lessons of the past for the future. It is noteworthy that *Aktion* conceived of the plan in 1970, but Poles, who proportionally suffered more dead than any other country in the war, were reluctant to meet with Germans then.

An excellent case of institutionalized contrition and forgiveness was reported in the *New York Times* on March 7, 1990, in a story entitled 'Where Nazis Took Fierce Revenge, French Hatred for Germans Recedes' (p. A12).

Tulle, a city in southwestern France, was the site of a Nazi atrocity on June 9, 1944. In reprisal for the killing of 40 Germans by the French Resistance, the Nazis hanged 99 village men. Each year on the June date, the town of 20,000 remembers the 99, 18 others shot 'savagely', and 101 others deported to Dachau who never returned. But a 'healing process' got under way when Tulle was twinned with a German town, Schorndorf, in the mid-1960s. Since then hundreds of war veterans and students have exchanged visits, staying in each other's homes. While memories for the older French generation can be quite tender, the youth face their history openly, pay homage to its bitter lessons, and strengthen the sense of Franco–German community to assure that it can never happen again.

Mikhail Gorbachev's first visit to Warsaw in June 1988 brought to the surface one of the most painful incidents in the long-running story of Poland's victimization by the Russians. Powerfully illustrating the critical need for admission of past crimes before a new relationship can be established, Poles of all strata demanded Soviet confession of Stalin's murder of the 15,000 Polish reserve officers taken by the Red Army to Katyn in Byelorussia in 1939. One leader of Solidarity told the *Christian Science Monitor*, 'Katyn, it's to Poles what Auschwitz is to Jews'. Another said, 'It is the pure symbol of the Polish tragedy'. Yet another said, 'For Poles, Katyn dug the roots of the present Communist system. That is why, if confidence is to be restored between our two peoples, it must be treated' (12 June 1988, p.7). In 1990, after a joint Polish/Soviet commission of historians completed an investigation of Soviet state archives, Moscow formally acknowledged Soviet responsibility and apologized to the Polish people.

On January 30, 1990, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Jewish and Catholic leaders in southern California had issued a joint statement suggesting that the Roman Catholic Church inadvertently helped Hitler rise to power before World War II. A priest–rabbi committee had decided to launch its historical inquiry after the controversial reception by Pope John Paul II of Austrian President Kurt Waldheim in 1987. Jewish leaders expressed gratitude for the document which they said was an open and honest acceptance of responsibility. The report will be made available for incorporation into Catholic school curricula.

Two major acts of contrition made big headlines in 1991. On 20 May, Poland's President Lech Walesa, speaking in the Israeli Knesset said, 'Here in Israel, the land of your culture and revival, I ask for your forgiveness'. The *New York Times* story (21 May 1991, p. A5) noted that the chamber, filled with Israeli leaders, also held many survivors of Auschwitz and other Nazi death camps built in Poland. Many have blamed Poles for not having done more to protect the Jews. Significantly, the *Times*, which takes responsibility for reporting news of special interest to American Jews, ran a large front-page photo of Walesa and Israeli Prime Minister Shamir.

On 7 July, 1991, the *Washington Post* reported that Austria, for the first

time since World War II, admitted its role in the Holocaust. The historic event came in a speech by Chancellor Franz Vranitsky, broadcast live on state television, in which he apologized for atrocities committed by Austrians. He said, 'Austrian politicians have always put off making this confession. I would like to do this explicitly, also in the name of the Austrian government, as a measure of the relationship we must have to our history, as a standard for the political culture of our country' (p. A14).

Transforming public consciousness

The foregoing stories are moving and very encouraging as evidence of political maturity in Eastern and Western Europe. In fact, these examples of highest leadership stand as continuing challenges to those who claim to be leaders in other countries and who have not been able to come to terms with their own histories. But as noted previously, deeply ingrained political belief systems are extremely resistant to attempts to change them by political leaders, especially if they are reinforced by an intense victimhood psychology. One need look only at Croatian attitudes toward Serbians and vice versa, or Armenian attitudes toward Turks. Yet there is empirical evidence that thoughtfully designed initiatives in providing cognitive data – new information from credible sources – even if dissonant with existing beliefs, can effect constructive change.

Without suggesting that ethnic stereotyping in a conflicted relationship is neurotic behavior, one might be encouraged by the use of cognitive therapy in the treatment of depression or low self-concept for example (Beck, 1976). There is abundant evidence that even individuals with serious behavior disorders can be influenced by a reasoning process.

The basic assumption of the therapy is that harmful feelings and actions are linked to distorted or maladaptive thinking and that such thinking must be changed. In the process, therapist and client examine erroneous assumptions together, identify illogical thinking, and then, hopefully, the client abandons the cognitive errors thus exposed.

But how can maladaptive or destructive stereotypical thinking in mass opinion be addressed cognitively with any efficiency? There is a body of research which suggests some answers. Adams (1987) affirms that systematic study of persuasive mass communication shows that it is most likely to strengthen already held views rather than change them. In particular, when it is a question of public attitudes toward disliked or distrusted groups or nations, both sociological factors – from social networks, value systems, and influential leaders – and psychological factors – family, peer, ethnic biases – act as barriers to the receipt of new, favorable information. Yet even these barriers are vulnerable if the dissonant, 'good' news, conveyed by mass media, comes from a credible source; and is repeated with variation, is disseminated via multimedia, reinforced by personal contact, and presented in balanced, 'two-sided' accounts.

Everett M. Rogers (1988), a professor of communications at the University of Southern California, agrees that mass-media channels are effective in creating knowledge of new ideas, but less so in persuading people to adopt them. Change of attitude depends, instead, on interpersonal communications networks in which respected opinion leaders and then near peers accept the new information as valid and thus change their attitudes. He reports consistent empirical findings that once an innovative idea is accepted by 15 to 20 percent of the population, it takes on a diffusion rate that cannot be stopped.

Experimental strategies for changing negative belief systems in Northern Ireland and the Middle East

To draw this chapter to a conclusion, I will describe two projects which address specific activities in conflict resolution strategies for Northern Ireland and the Middle East applying theory previously discussed. Both projects aim at influencing deeply rooted belief systems among adversaries in each region in order to help create an environment in public opinion which would promote other conflict resolution efforts.

The first project is an exploration of the feasibility of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. To date it has brought together in a small workshop in Des Moines, Iowa, representatives of Northern Ireland political parties, Commonwealth specialists on human and civil rights, and American facilitators. Because the political atmosphere in Northern Ireland is highly charged, there was no intention to make the four-day meeting a problem-solving workshop devoted to finding a solution to the Catholic/Protestant conflict. Had this been the purpose, party representatives would most likely have refused to participate.

The purpose of the meeting, rather, was to discuss a draft Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland already drawn up by the respected Belfast-based Committee on the Administration of Justice. The CAJ, made up of Protestant and Catholic lawyers, academics, and others interested in civil liberties and equal treatment under the law, consulted for three years with various political and other interest groups before producing its draft.

The rationale for the meeting in conflict resolution theory was to provide a venue removed from daily distractions for interested parties from Northern Ireland to discuss principles of law and custom based on concepts of human-needs-based human rights and civil liberties. Protection of minority interests, including cultural identity, was to be part of the agenda. While the project may have seemed legalistic and academic, the subject matter was the essence of values guiding the negotiation of a new political and social contract for Northern Ireland. As consensus develops over these values then political negotiations in Belfast will, in theory, have a much better chance of success.

Participants agreed that the Des Moines meeting provided a good opportunity for learning and analysis on the Bill of Rights concept especially in

light of the experience of other Commonwealth countries. They also said they had never given the question so thorough an examination in Northern Ireland. The next steps in the project, which could last three years, would be a series of public meetings at the town and city level throughout Northern Ireland, led by experts in the Bill of Rights concept. This would be primarily a facilitative activity. It would be the responsibility of political leaders and parties to take whatever legislative initiatives they believed to be appropriate.

The second project addresses the antagonistic belief systems of Christians, Muslims and Jews in the Middle East, which are popularly thought to rest on religious doctrine and tradition. Called 'Pathways to Peace for the People of the Book: The Values of Tolerance in Judaism, Christianity and Islam', the project will convene highly respected scholars and theologians from each religion who practice their religion and are committed to an ecumenical view of interreligious brotherhood. The small group, not to exceed twenty, will have three four-day meetings at six-month intervals in which they will evolve studies and commentary on sacred writing which support the concept of diversity in community and tolerance of all religions, tribes and nations, or simply, all God's children.

The work in progress will be discussed in another Middle East project with which the author is connected and which aims to develop consensus on human rights concepts in the region through political and intellectual working groups in Cairo, Amman, and Jerusalem. The final product of People of the Book will be a book published simultaneously in English, Arabic, Persian, and Hebrew, with regional and international media attention via CNN and the United States Information Agency's WORLDNET satellite television facility.

As in the Northern Ireland project, the goal of People of the Book is not to resolve the conflict. It aims to create an environment which might promote peace negotiations by undermining the belief systems, particularly of Muslims and Jews, which support the conviction that the two peoples have no spiritual and human values in common. It is these belief systems which are exploited by religious extremists on both sides who work to sabotage peace negotiations. The project hopes to take religion away from these extremists and provide moderate politicians with room for maneuver in public opinion.

In sum, the two projects rely on the credibility of the sources of new information on common values which could support the concept of community for heretofore antagonistic ethnic and sectarian groups. Mass media will be used to create public awareness of the new information, but the strategy relies on the involvement of respected leaders of the various religions, groups, and countries to acquire the new information and then to diffuse it within their constituencies. With luck and perseverance, 15 to 20 percent of the communities will adopt the innovative thinking and the possibilities for success of full-scale, direct conflict resolution processes, including the healing component of contrition and forgiveness, will be enhanced.

Notes

1. This event is reported by Geiko Muller-Fahrenholz (1989).
2. Brian Frost (1991, pp. 16–17) records two incidents in *The Politics of Peace*. One was cited by Yevgeny Yevtushenko (1963), who recalls visiting Moscow with his mother in 1941 and seeing a march of some 20,000 German war prisoners. The sidewalks were lined with women, worn with work, 'Everyone of them must have had a father or a husband, a brother or a son killed by the Germans'. As the prisoners approached, the women saw 'soldiers, thin, unshaven, wearing dirty bloodstained bandages, hobbling on crutches or leaning on the shoulders of their comrades; the soldiers walked with their heads down'. Yevtushenko (p. 245) goes on:

Then I saw an elderly woman in broken-down boots push herself forward ... She went up to the column, took from inside her coat something wrapped in a coloured handkerchief and unfolded it. It was a crust of black bread. She pushed it awkwardly into the pocket of a soldier, so exhausted that he was tottering on his feet. And now suddenly from every side women were running toward the soldiers pushing into their hands bread, cigarettes, whatever they had ... The soldiers were no longer enemies. They were people.

Frost's second example is of a German, Klaus Krance (1984), who visited the Soviet Union and wrote in a Northern Ireland magazine that he was:

deeply moved by an old woman we met while travelling along a country road ... As soon as she heard that we were German, on our way to the memorial at Katyn, where German soldiers had locked the inhabitants of a whole village, 149 people in all, 76 of them children, the youngest only few weeks old, in a barn and set it on fire, she started giving us flowers and apples as gifts, having tears in her eyes.

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