

RECONCILIATION AND ‘THE INTIMACY OF HONEST DIFFERENCES’ A Talk in Memory of Dr. David Stevens, 26th March 2019 by Derick Wilson

My close friend David Stevens passed away in 2010.

A major theme for David was that **“reconciliation involves people finding a way of living together in difference”**.

It is only when open and honest relationships are established that people can experience ‘the intimacy of honest differences’¹, the robust conversations that take us all forward beyond the cultures of silence, denials, and evasions-away from cultures of separation, avoidance and politeness that exhaust us and do not move us forward.

It is almost 21 years after the 1998 Good Friday / Belfast Agreement and we are still having to argue for, and promote, a practice that nurtures safe spaces, brings people from diverse experiences together and, in new relationships, honestly share their differences. In societies where political momentum falters, as here, peace processes are fragile (see John Braithwaite).

Especially in the continued absence of a devolved administration, our task is still to grow robust civil society engagements and respectful political engagements, in order to prepare an informed and imaginative civic ground capable of engaging with politics as it evolves here.

A robust civil society culture would be enhanced if we all ‘worked in the knowledge of one another’, sought not to compete or speak badly of one another, and supported practice cultures characterised by the ‘intimacy of honest differences’

Local and Global Reconciliation are interlinked

Building a more just and fair, respectful and diverse, interdependent society here demands that we work to a wider global vision to secure just, inclusive, respectful and sustainable ways of living².

The challenge of the Friday Pupil Protests saying “you are not doing enough!” means that, unless we face this challenge, there may be little of life to make just, respectful and inclusive!

A few weeks ago a group of us at Corrymeela hosted a week for 16 humanitarian aid workers from Aleppo, Beirut, Cairo, Kyiv, Palestine and Amman³. **These experienced and exhausted practitioners still refused to be without hope!** You and I can, in no way, give up here!

¹ Justin Welby in Prospect, January 2019.

² See appendix on Strands of Reconciliation Practice.

³ Locally, Corrymeela is working with the Red Cross supporting refugee families and families from Nationalist and Unionist traditions here. In February 2019 at Corrymeela, we hosted 16 Humanitarian Workers from Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine / Israel, Egypt and Ukraine. To hear these people speak about coping and nurturing possibilities between Sunni, Shia, Yezidis (Yazidis) and Christian in the midst of the most outrageous horrors was humbling.

Cities where 200,000 people, of all ages, have been killed; towns of 180,000 having to accommodate a further 180,000 internally displaced people as well as 70,000 returned injured fighters and, in their midst, generating mentoring programmes for young people; creating fishing co-operatives where people from all traditions sit together; christian groups who have been decimated, sharing 99% of their finances to support Muslim families. While we still have many legacy issues to resolve within our conflict, it is important too that we lift our heads and explore how our experience, energy and resources might also be placed at the disposal of others very different to us. We are faced with a wider world, where politics becomes less predictable and secure, and yet, increasingly, where our global interdependence can no longer be denied. We must focus outwards and challenge those who only want to think exclusively local, separate and populist, closing their ears to the wider challenges of living in a changing world, where the impacts of conflict, clashes over water and resources, and the threat to land with environmental change are mobilising potentially many millions to seek new places in the world.

RECONCILIATION- 'A WAY OF LIVING TOGETHER IN DIFFERENCE'

David Stevens was a wonderful friend, irritatingly insistent sometimes, thank goodness, because he insisted we must gain clarity around the meanings of the words and concepts around reconciliation practice.

“Sure, it all goes to show that we are all the same!”

This was one phrase that, when people associated with community relations work uttered it, it was to David's total and utter dismay.

In his text-'The Land of Unlikeness', David argued how the established statecraft of diplomacy could not deliver in contested societies. **Such societies, if they move forward at all, can only do so through face-to-face meetings, even where each person, and the traditions they come from, can appear to always be trespassing on the others' territory, generating mutual fear and threat.**

Whatever projects or programmes we are part of, I think they all must meet this litmus test-that they have, at their core, the attempt to support people from diverse traditions, cultures and political outlooks engage together 'in difference'!

BUILDING A MORE DIVERSE, INCLUSIVE, JUST AND FAIR SOCIETY.

Dong Jin Kim, a Korean Caroline Research Scholar working with Corrymeela currently argues that it is often civil society that gifts the politicians with the conditions for building peace. The reality often is that politics marginalises civil society in peace processes, once civil society has done the heavy lifting. Jin argues that civil society is a central building block in any peace process and we must work to have that place recognised by politics⁴. The web weaving potential of civil society is also crucial and central to building and sustaining peace⁵.

These challenges are central for community relations groups and peacebuilding projects here, and, thankful though groups are for funding support of all kinds, I think that the groups need to become clearer, at this time, about articulating how peace building in contested societies needs embedded by civil society organisations. We need partnerships between enlightened funders and committed organisations, and some exist, because we now are in uncharted waters in terms of peace processes.

How do we build peace in its widest vision when politics is on hold?

From a long partnership between Corrymeela and the Mennonites we have been influenced deeply by the work of John Paul Lederach⁶ who has identified three gaps as symptomatic of all peace agreements faltering:

1. **the interdependence gap**, where people are able to link people from all levels together and effect lasting change;
 2. **the social justice gap**, ensuring all worked to address social inequality;
- and

⁴ Dong Jin Kim, 2019, *The Korean Peace Process and Civil Society*, Palgrave Macmillan.

⁵ Catherine Barnes, 'Weaving the Web: Civil Society Riles in Working with Conflict and Building peace', in *People Building Peace II; Successful Stories of Civil Society*, ed: Van Tongeren et al: Lynne Reiner, 2005, 22

⁶ JP Lederach, 'Justpeace: The Challenge of the 21st Century', in *People Building Peace: 35 Inspiring Stories from Around the World*, ed. European Centre for Conflict prevention, 1999, 27-35.

3. **the process-structure gap**, supporting people develop new processes between them that lay foundations for new relationships, agreements and new initiatives locally.

We are discerning our practice around ‘transforming division through human encounter’ and these gaps above that Lederach has identified.

THE INTER-GENERATIONAL RECONCILIATION TASK

Corrymeela has identified a fourth gap, the inter-generational learning gap around reconciliation.

A 2 years full time stint as a volunteer with Corrymeela in Belfast after his Doctoral Studies in Chemistry, and then as Secretary of the Irish Council of Churches, David was secretary to various groups:

- the work of the Dutch Northern Ireland Committee (DutchNI) from 1975;
- the very important publications of the Faith and Politics Research Group:
and
- the Inter Church Working Party on Sectarianism with Mary McAleese and John Lampen as co-chairs.

He brought the work of Rene Girard to our notice through the DutchNI Committee. This work was about the possibilities for people to model freedom and trust in modern society and dissolve and erode experiences of escalating and destructive rivalry. This became a 40-year voluntary reconciliation education programme and so we experienced belonging to an Intergenerational Community of Learning, without realising it!

Corrymeela is now exploring how we might, with others, build intergenerational communities of reconciliation learning for the long haul, here and beyond. Such inter-generational learning communities would offer the space where ‘the intimacy of honest differences’ would grow and spread. In such an all-age learning community:

- clarity of thinking and reflection would be continuous-and valuable and insightful practices would be passed on;
- especially in a more politically challenging funding climate⁷, young practitioners would be stood with and affirmed, not isolated and hung out to dry or become depressed;
- Public and civic institutions and government departments could access reconciliation learning and practice through an institutional community relations memory.

At the heart of this inter-generational approach is the creation of relational spaces in which people, with very different experiences and beliefs, can meet and where they, honestly and openly, experience meeting around ‘the intimacy of honest differences’.

TRANSFORMING DIVISION THROUGH HUMAN ENCOUNTER

David argued in *The Land of Unlikeness* that “the possibility of having real meetings where there is honest conversation, respect and mutual regard is narrow in a contested society”⁸.

⁷ *Funding Peace*, UCT and Corrymeela, June 2018. See <https://www.corrymeela.org/resources/research>

⁸ David Stevens, *The Land of Unlikeness*, Columba Press, p23

If reconciliation is a dynamic quest involving spiritual, psychological, social, economic and political dimensions, then there is a need to develop spaces and encounters where all these strands are given time and space where we experience **“the intimacy of honest differences!”**

From the Girard influence, David and I came to know a range of diverse people, including some neuroscientists, who argued that human beings are made for stability and balance not conflict, however a dominant cultural reality is that we learn how to rival and fight for our place. For them and us, we therefore need to learn new ways, together, in our differences, without driving ‘the others away’. In such ways we come into the vicinity of experiencing “the intimacy of honest differences”.

UNDERSTANDINGS OF COMMUNITY

From the practical application of Rene Girard’s thinking, we learned that, in this society, too often ‘community’ is generated at the expense of different others, or alleged difficult others, through the often unacknowledged act of driving them from our midst.

All cultures, in some manner, are secured in often hidden and often-unacknowledged violence—they are *communities of sacrifice*—the communities of the successful scapegoaters who remain and who feel able to deny their actions.

We need to create *communities of communion*, characterised by all being included and a contrast to the excluding ways we often live.

Practically speaking what might this mean?

David was especially critical of faith communities not unconditionally embracing reconciliation as a non-negotiable strand in the Christian tradition and sometimes building defensive postures rather than being open to what is stated as being central to them—communion!

David acknowledged the many acts of individuals and small groups within the churches that have, and do, work for reconciliation, often unsupported by the wider institutions. Like some others, he wanted people in many different traditions within the Christian Churches to acknowledge, and critically engage with, the ecumenical vision of a just, peaceful and sustainable world ⁹ (JPIC declaration of 1960’s) ¹⁰.

He thought too that, in a society that was becoming much more diverse, it really was time we all got used to being at ease in the midst of difference. He wanted an open society where people of different faiths, cultures and political traditions could meet as citizens and experience ‘the intimacy of honest differences’!

⁹ The Presbyterian and Catholic churches here, especially, often cut themselves off from wider ecumenical actions historically in the world. The ecumenical movement in Ireland was, and still is, linked to a vision that was one centre of opposition to National Socialism in Germany in the 1930’s ⁹; a vision underpinning many who supported the disappeared in Argentina 1974 to 1983 and, currently, the work in in Argentina and Chile to ‘encourage spaces for encounter between the churches in order to give the witness of service to the world’; a vision underpinning the MinJung⁹ theological movement of opposing military power in Korea and standing with the poor; the work of the Croatian–Austrian priest and informal educator, Ivan Illich and the Brazilian theologian and educator, Paulo Freire.

¹⁰ See texts on this <http://www.ebooksdownloads.xyz/search/justice-peace-and-the-integrity-of-creation>

“WE ARE MORE THAN OUR BELIEFS”

- Some people argue they cannot move forward and meet different others, because they hold to sacred beliefs or unbargainable positions. Yet in so many positive encounters, if they enter into them, they often learn they are more than their beliefs.
- Some people are told from an early age that they are stupid, or limited, or incompetent, and they believe this and live it out. When these people experience a transformative relationship that sets them free, they experience they can become more than the beliefs and structures that have held them back.
- Some people brought up in political, cultural or belief systems that underpin an expansive practice, are often freed by these belief systems to do more and to embrace new thinking and practices, beyond their current positions and beliefs. They too find they are ‘more than their beliefs’.

David understood deeply that in new relationships of trust and openness we all grow and change—we are more than our beliefs!

If we are to create a more open and shared society then we need to ask whether some of the supposedly developmental spaces in this society are contributing to this wider agenda?

For me, the different christian traditions could do more to foster developmental spaces where people experience the ‘intimacy of honest differences’.

Equally so, civil society groups and organisations should critically examine their implicit cultures, and root out any support for partisan identities that get in the way of them hosting meetings that explore “the intimacy of honest differences”.

GOING BEYOND OLD WAYS-THE RESTORATIVE JOURNEY

Societies such as ours need transgressors (they often are called traitors!). Transgressors are people who will transgress the boundaries between their backgrounds and others, and also face into ‘their own’ and critically engage with them!

When people from opposed beliefs or positions meet in open and trusting relationships, there can be a new energy and freedom associated with that relationship.

I use the term ‘restorative’, in the sense that old patterns have been re-invigorated or new ways have been nurtured¹¹. For me the restorative process is a journey, it is future oriented, relational and structural.

When I look at the evidence in many other countries: in schools; in the adult and juvenile justice system; in restorative practice models developed by local authorities in their relationships with citizens; attempts to create restorative regions; in serious crimes, post sentencing as well as in lower level crimes, pre-sentencing, and, more recently some excellent

¹¹ Jenkins restorative: the tendency to give new strength or vigour. This interpretation points to something new, something better and healthier, suggesting a revitalisation, or new possibilities that might develop. In this context, restorative suggests something creative and productive. See Alan Jenkins, Shame, Realisation and Restitution: The Ethics of Restorative Practice. ANZJFT Volume 27 Number 3 2006 pp. 153–162

work, post court, in the area of sexual violence; I ask does this restorative concept not have something to say to us here?¹²

I would argue that in the best practice of restorative practices I have experienced in schools, religious organisations, communities, courts, councils and hospitals, there is evidence that this work can be truly transformative, and have much to teach us as a society¹³.

Such breakthroughs are experiences where ‘the intimacy of honest differences’ happens. This experience is worth learning from.

RESTORATIVE CULTURES AND PRACTICES

Working towards a more restorative society is linked to people working to a vision of acknowledging societal and historical hurts, resolving tension, treating one another more justly, valuing difference and deepening our growing interdependence economically, socially, and environmentally.

A restorative society culture would be characterised by:

- That starting with schools, we establish, cultures of ‘no violence’ or ‘no put downs’ between people;
- That we promote ‘cultures of resolution’ with our children and young people and suggest these are applicable in families too;
- That we end suspensions from schools and create more inclusive school cultures;
- That we, as far as possible, initially relationally seek to dismantle misunderstandings and dissolve conflicts that so readily escalate.

To deliver the fruits of a restorative culture we need a renewed focus on:

- nurturing new and unexpected relationships;
- nourishing the groups and structures relationships infuse;
- re-energising old stale ways of being with different others;¹⁴
- opening up established relationships and structures to restorative ways, allowing the oxygen of hope into them again.

There is a need to re-assert the importance of people, especially those with different views, meeting and learning together in what Amartya Sen calls ‘*reasoned public discourse*’¹⁵. Here significant and important communal learning, essential to our common good and the strengthening of civil society occurs, in communities of learners.

¹² The drive towards societal transformation—a theme that is emerging in papers by Christie (2012), Fattah (2012), Wright (2010), Wilson (2009, 2010), Johnston (2008), Maxwell & Liu, (2007) Strang & Braithwaite (2001), among others.

¹³ In NZ, Australia, USA, Canada, SA, Brazil, England, Scotland, the Republic of Ireland, Holland and Belgium, some in NI and elsewhere.

¹⁴ See Alan Jenkins and his future oriented definition of restorative as “the tendency to give new strength or vigour. This interpretation points to something new, something better and healthier, suggesting a revitalisation, or new possibilities that might develop. In this context, restorative suggests something creative and productive.” In Shame, Realisation and Restitution: The Ethics of Restorative Practice, ANZJFT Volume 27 Number 3 2006 pp. 153–162

¹⁵ Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence*, (2006) and *The Idea of Justice* (2009)

CONCLUSION

I often talked deeply with David about many things and we learned:

Let us never be afraid of showing weakness or vulnerability.

Let us be open to saying sorry.

Let us be prepared to share ourselves and our lives with others in order to move us into relationships with the estranged other, rather than feed fear, distrust, enmity and violence.

While forgiveness **is not** part of the restorative script (a common misunderstanding) let us never say that forgiveness is not possible or valuable when it happens!

Hannah Arendt suggests that “forgiveness is the unexpected gift of the victim to the perpetrator!”¹⁶ and also to those of us in wider society.

Arendt suggests that “forgiving... is the only reaction which does not merely re-act **but acts anew and unexpectedly**, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and **therefore freeing from its consequences, both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven.**¹⁶”

In such ways different people around us, and we too, will be opened up to experience more “the intimacy of honest differences” without which it will be difficult to we find our ways forward together into a more open society; a more just and fair one; a more interdependent one and a more sustainable world.

My thanks for this friendship with David Stevens.

¹⁶ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 241 in Hannah Arendt and Collective Forgiving – Glen Pettigrove, *The Journal of Social Philosophy* 37.4 (winter 2006): 483-5

Appendix: The Local and Global Context of Reconciliation

The wider landscape within which we need to locate our vision, learning, and the need to equip people to live constructively, and hopefully, within includes:

CHALLENGES TO ACKNOWLEDGING DIVERSITY

1. **Ethnocentrism and Exclusion:** The growth of ethnocentric ideologies asserting ‘our people, our land, before all else’ and companion expressions in sectarian, racist, and religious identity superiority.
2. **Religious Fundamentalism:** The harnessing of religion to support excluding and violent positions (Atran, 2010); a diminishing of the inclusive, 'social justice, peace and integrity of creation' aspects we understand faith offers (WCC, Justice Peace & the Integrity of Creation).

ISSUES OF EQUITY

3. **Population Movement:** The challenges of a diverse world where it is estimated that 65 million people (Observer Sunday, 18th September 2016) are continually on the move seeking work, sanctuary, asylum or new lives and the impact of this movement on societies of origin and those that host.
4. UNHCR Refugee Resettlement Trends, 2015: www.unhcr.org/559e43ac9.html; Speech by Antonio Guterres UNHCR High Commissioner, www.unhcr.org/55ba370f9.html
5. **Inequality:** The growing divide between ‘the haves’ and ‘the have nots’.
The growing gap between rich and poor within states (OECD 2014; Pew Foundation, 2014);
6. **Challenging the violence against women and children and securing ‘gender equality’.**
Report of the UK Children’s Commissioners, UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Examination of the Fifth Periodic Report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland UK-ccs-uncrc-examination-of-the-fifth-periodic-report-July-2015.pdf; Beckett & Warrington);
7. The responses to the **BREXIT** vote and the need for a more inclusive political and civic culture.

CHALLENGES TO ACKNOWLEDGING OUR INTERDEPENDENCE

8. **Environment:** The challenge of securing commitments to address global warming and the need to secure our environment for future generations.
UN Global Sustainable Development report, 2015 Edition <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/globalsreport>;
9. **Systemic Distrust:** A growing disillusionment with many major institutions in many societies- e.g. politics, banking, public and civic society.
The need for new relationships: between those in political power and those who feel unacknowledged; the distance between those in power post conflict and many victims and survivors.
10. **The political responses often associated with societies moving on, post conflict, when the narrative of victims is often pushed aside in favour of the new political narrative and education tends not to be harnessed to the new societal agenda-** (Germany is an exception).

There can be a political and civil society preference to ignore, rather than engage with, the need to explicitly acknowledge and promote a ‘never, never again’ position. (Rothfield et al, 2012; Eames & Bradley, 2009; Fay, Morrissey, & Smyth, M.1998; See also Shriver, 2005.4)

Notes: For Equity, Diversity and Interdependence see Eyben, Morrow & Wilson, 1997. A Worthwhile Venture? Practically Investing in Equity, Diversity and Interdependence in Northern Ireland, Ulster.

For the outworking of the principles above see also: related Western Routes and Future Ways Practice documents by Keys, Bunting, Eyben, Morrow and Wilson.

The Equity, Diversity and Interdependence Framework, A Framework for Organisational Learning and Change by Karin Eyben, Duncan Morrow, Derick Wilson (UU) and Billy Robinson (Counteract), 1999.

Mainstreaming Community Relations in Public Sector Organisations; *The R.E.D.I. Project with Newry & Mourne Council*, (2001) Karin Eyben, Duncan Morrow and Derick Wilson with Joe Law and Stevie Nolan