

CAUX FORUM ON HUMAN SECURITY: TOWARDS A COALITION OF CONSCIENCE

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Introduction.

Good morning everyone. May peace be with you.

I want to say, first of all, that I am speaking mainly from my background as a citizen and peace activist in Northern Ireland. I will not presume that my experience is automatically of relevance to other situations. If my reflections are of use to any of you I am glad and if they are not, then thank you for giving me your attention.

Leadership that builds community.

I am a little bit uncomfortable with the theme of this session: "leadership that builds community".

Northern Ireland has been a contested society from its foundation in 1921. The principal division has been between the Protestant/unionist tradition and the Catholic/nationalist tradition. The unionist identity is primarily British and the nationalist identity is primarily Irish.

Against this background I think it is useful to observe three types of community:

1. The whole of society as one community. In Northern Ireland, this concept has often been invoked when appealing to interests or issues which span our divisions.
2. Geographical communities, whose membership is defined by people who live in a particular neighbourhood or locality. The demography of Northern Ireland is such that whole areas can be either Protestant or Catholic.
3. Functional communities, made up of people who share a faith tradition, cultural interests, a social bond, political outlook or, indeed, a sense of identity. Thus in our situation, it is common to speak of 'the two communities', meaning Protestants and Catholics, or unionists and nationalists.

After years of communal violence, in many places a whole generation has grown up with little or no contact with a neighbouring community, commonly referred to as 'the other side'.

We also speak of 'cross-community work', referring to various efforts aimed at bringing people together across the lines of division.

How should leadership come to bear on a society with divided communities?

Over the past forty years of conflict and division in Northern Ireland, individuals have often risen to leadership precisely because they gave people confidence that they would assert the interests of their particular community by opposing the aspirations or designs of another, rival community or, indeed, by attacking them.

Obviously, such community leadership can actually feed division and even violence.

On the other hand, in many instances, it has only been possible to manage conflict and build relations between communities under the leadership of so-called 'hardliners' whose people have confidence that they will not sell-out the integrity of their community.

The craft of effective leadership, as it has evolved in the Northern Ireland situation, has involved a capacity to maintain the confidence of your home community or tradition while also being able to do business with leaders from a rival community or tradition.

Leadership and Peace-building.

I would have preferred if this morning's session had been entitled 'Leadership that builds peace', for the work of building community is but one component of a society evolving towards peace.

I think the spirit behind this morning's theme was the idea that good leadership builds community between people. While it is certainly true that citizens must ultimately be led into a sense of common humanity which overcomes rivalry and division I would suggest to you that in a conflicted society skillful leaders know that their leadership depends on their group, tribe or community remaining confident that they will be faithful custodians of certain interests.

I suspect that communities of interest will become a significant factor in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt in the years ahead, whether they be geographic or functional communities.

Yesterday's discussion of the Arab Spring reminded me of a particular period in Northern Ireland during the 1970s. It began with a shooting incident between British soldiers and IRA men in a car which went out of control and killed two children on the street with their mother. A wave of outrage quickly took hold across society. The children's aunt and another woman called for a peace demonstration. People took to the streets in their thousands and a new peace movement, known as the Peace People, was born.

There were demonstrations all over Northern Ireland over the next couple of years, attended by tens of thousands of Protestant and Catholic citizens united in their desire for an end to violence.

The two women were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize amidst a wave of optimism that people power could overcome violence and division.

But it was not to be.

Those who wished to use political violence continued to do so, regardless of moral denunciation from thousands of people on the streets.

And, interestingly, when the Peace People began to develop their own political platform, its members divided; the demonstrations grew smaller and the crowds fell away.

Massive popular protest against violence proved to be largely ineffective in stopping it after all.

While mass demonstrations for peace did, indeed, have intrinsic merit, I would suggest that their single biggest flaw was that they were based upon anti-violence rather than non-violence.

Anti-violence is a belief that you can promote or defend justice by opposing violence. It unites people around what they are against.

As such, it has a limited long term impact because it depends on violence. Its energy comes from emotionally reacting to violence. Anti-violence could not exist without violence.

Non-violence, on the other hand, unites people around what they are for. It is not merely about being 'against'.

Non-violence has its own energy source. It is a belief that you can promote or defend justice by serving truth, with compassion.

It is rooted in the activist's spirituality and, therefore, is deeper than human psychology and the ego. Nonviolence requires critical personal awareness.

The non-violent activist understands that truth is to be found everywhere, even within the opponent, even among the violent.

Anti-violent activism involves protest and, even, expressions of righteous anger, whereas non-violent activism involves bearing witness to truth and compassion in situations of conflict or injustice.

As the troubles in Northern Ireland took root in the 1970s and political violence, communal conflict and political breakdown became part of a way of life for a generation, peace activists also settled in for the long haul towards peace. As the crowds grew tired of peace protest, a smaller corps of activists moved from a dependence on the emotional impulse of the heart to the development of peace methodology.

The concept of peace-building took over from peace protest.

In my own experience, supportive visits to Belfast by American Mennonites introduced new concepts and methodologies such as mediation and the importance of building relationships as a foundation for peace.

Advisors such as the Mennonite, Professor John Paul Lederach, imparted the idea of peace-building involving strategic thinking and the need to plan for change to happen incrementally over decades.

The Moral Imagination.

Lederach introduced the concept of the moral imagination and it seems particularly relevant to this morning's discussion about leadership.

Lederach was inspired by Boyd's Theory – which attempted to explain how a flock of birds could fly with such co-ordination and aerobatics, inferring that there must be some essential laws of nature which birds understand and enact together in order to function as a group or 'community'.

Lederach asked himself whether there are laws of nature which are implicitly understood by people who make peace happen in society. He came up with four essentials for peace-makers:

1. Relationships: an understanding of the importance of building relationships, especially with the other. I would add that effective leaders also understand the need to maintain relationships with their own side and do not wander too far ahead of their base constituency.
2. Curiosity, which Lederach takes to its root, meaning to have a caring interest in the other side. The peacemaker has a genuine interest in understanding the other and develops a concern for their welfare. He/she understands that the only viable future is one in which the opponent's interests are served as much as possible. Good leaders learn to move from exclusive thinking to inclusive thinking. They learn that just as important as speaking up for your side is the need to listen up to the other side.

3. Creativity: the peace-builder understands the need to enter creative spaces in the company of the other side.
4. Risk: in a context where erstwhile opponents develop relationships of depth; where they come to have regard for each other's interests and welfare; where they spend time thinking new ideas together, they will feel the confidence to take risks for peace.

In a sense, the moral imagination is a description of the creation of a kind of community between people who emerge from places of difference and take risks with each other for peace.

Dimensions of Peace.

Let me finish with some observations about where leadership is needed in societies building peace.

In my view, peace-building must go on within four dimensions of society.

1. The effort towards political consensus, which involves developing relationships between political leaders.
2. Agreed law and order, involving the judiciary, the police and the criminal justice system.
3. Economic development, because without commerce and employment a society will be stagnant. Business has everything to do with peace.
4. Social improvement, meaning the provision of education, health care, housing and the maintenance of social cohesion within communities, especially among the young.

Leaders must be found, fostered and supported within all of these dimensions if a more strategic approach to peace is to take hold.

End.