

Report on workshops on ‘Healing Memory’

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In the first half of the week, Tunisians and Egyptians shared their experiences of the democratic revolutions of 2011, and explored together the question is how to maintain these revolutions and take them further. Delegates from India, Kenya and Zimbabwe discussed the struggle to create just governance and described specific experiences in fighting corruption. Delegates from Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia and Democratic Republic of Congo who are engaged in post-conflict rebuilding described grassroots projects of trauma healing, empowerment, and job training.

One overall theme of the conference was Healing Memory. In this context, Brendan McAllister, one of Northern Ireland’s three Victims’ Commissioners, defined the task of the politician in Northern Ireland being to find a way to retain your own group’s loyalty while doing business with the other. But the vision of true community, said McAllister, is well defined by the Mennonite activist and scholar John Paul Lederach, when he speaks of the “moral imagination.” In a society held together by the moral imagination, relationships, especially with those that are different from ourselves, are the core of the matter, and creativity, risk and curiosity contribute further dimensions. Elaborating on curiosity, he spoke of taking a caring interest in the “other side,” showing concern for their welfare, and making sure the opponent’s interest is served.

McAllister continued, “People don’t live with a knowledge of history, but with a sense of history. Popular and oral history capture this difference, in contradistinction with intellectual histories. We can feel that popular histories have more validity for the common person, but there is a danger in having people tell their stories, because these stories are always a partial history. This is something we must bear in mind.”

Tee Turner from Richmond told about his reaction, as an African American, to a statue of a confederate soldier in his city, and how he had realized that the white southern community had built the statue out of grief. “I had encountered compassion for someone whose actions I hated and despised.” Tee described his work with Richmond’s Slave Trail Commission, and Richmond’s joint memorialization of the slave trade with Liverpool and Benin. “I have to own my history, in the same way I own the family members I would prefer not to claim. My history is part of who I am.”

In the same workshop, an historian from Niger spoke of the need to tell the history of colonization in Africa in a way that can build confidence in present day Africans: Africans are trying to rebuild parts of their history that have been completely obliterated. A German spoke of the way new inventions of history appear all the time: history is never settled. Another participant asked whether those currently alive are supposed to adopt a feeling of guilt for what previous generations did? Tee Turner responded, “No. But each of us is accountable to engage in the truth and walk in the truth. That is what we mean when we speak of ‘white privilege.’ White Americans experience privileges that they have inherited because of slavery and other inequalities. The question is what do we do with that?”

We explored further the question of relating to people different from oneself. Discussion groups had a lively interchange about how fear is at the bottom of our reluctance to reach out to those we don't know; how easily we seek out an "other" in order to identify ourselves; and how our sense innate of inferiority or superiority has a bearing on the way we relate to others.

The focus of the conference shifted in the second half of the week to climate change and environmental concerns. We were reminded of Richmond's connection with Benin when Luc Gnacadja of Benin was a keynote speaker on the topic of reversing desertification, and on the same day Yacouba Savadogo, a farmer from Burkina Faso, presented a film focusing on his remarkable success in introducing farming techniques in his region that have restored the land and transformed the life of thousands of people.