

EASTERN CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY.

PEACE CONFERENCE, 9 NOVEMBER, 2002.

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‘ UNEARTHING THE STRANGE:

MEDIATION AND THE JOURNEY TOWARDS OTHER.’

Good morning everyone.

<p><i>1. PEACE IS A JOURNEY, A LIFE-LONG PILGRIMAGE.</i></p>

There is an ancient Chinese saying:

‘A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step’.

I have a friend named Michael Clark. He is the President of the Citizens’ Committee for New York City, a non-profit agency that promotes citizen activism and community empowerment in New York. Framed on the wall of Michael’s office is a reversal of the Chinese dictum. It reads:

‘A journey of a single step begins with a thousand miles’.

In the Northern Ireland situation we are used to offers of help from abroad. Whenever outsiders talk to me about the possibility of giving us help I usually tell them that the worst type of helpers from outside are those whom I call ‘missionaries’ who come with a pre-conceived idea of what we need and a plan to convert us to their way of peace. I tell them that the best kind of outside helpers are those whom I call ‘pilgrims’ who come among us with a healthy sense of respect and deference and with a mind that is truly open. The pilgrim among us does two particularly useful things:

Tells a good story - about their experience elsewhere, leaving **us** to apply it to our situation if that seems right - and

Asks a good question – the type of question which a stranger asks and which, if asked by a **local**, would be viewed with suspicion.

I hope that my contribution here will be understood as the thoughts of a mere pilgrim thinking aloud and in keeping with the spirit of Michael Clark’s office wall, my **pilgrimage** here began before I left Belfast when I sat at my desk struggling with the various titles and themes used to describe the nature of this conference.

<p><i>2. PEACE IS A RESPONSE THAT BEGINS IN THE HEART.</i></p>

Thinking about the title of this section of today’s conference – Peace as a Response to Conflict, War or Terrorism - I struggled with the question of whether my personal instinct for peace is a **response** to the violence of the Troubles in Ireland.

If I had lived my life in a politically stable society, would I be so preoccupied by Peace? Is the Peace that is meaningful and important to me solely a response to violent conflict? If I did not know such conflict, what would peace mean to me? Is it a stand-alone phenomenon or is Peace always a response? And, is there a difference between being personally peaceful and living in a peaceful world? By this I mean, if there is no peace in the society around you, can you have peace within yourself?

I suspect you can in fact be peaceful or, rather, peace-filled in the midst of violence, though that requires a maturity which is, so far, beyond me.

However, the most essential point is that if Peace is a response to conflict, the origins of that response are within the human heart; that Peace begins as something personal.

3. SUSTAINING PEACE REQUIRES THE DEVELOPMENT OF METHOD.

Peace is about balance.

Where there is imbalance, peace is disturbed. And the primary arena of struggle, either a struggle to maintain balance or a struggle to redress imbalance, is within the human person, within the Self.

I think the definitive place where peace needs to take root in order to stabilize the whole world is the human heart or, for the spiritual among us, within the soul.

I think that in the earlier years of our Troubles in Ireland, most peace activities came from the impulse of the heart: in the face of terrible violence, groups of citizens were moved to organize demonstrations for peace and, especially over a period of years in the mid 1970s, people responded in large numbers. With thousands on the streets in

protests that appeared to unite the whole community, it seemed that violence could only wither and fade in the face of such collective moral outrage. But violence did not wither and fade. Indeed one veteran paramilitary more recently told me that peace demonstrations only served to anger paramilitaries who were disgusted by what they saw as simplistic condemnations and vowed to respond with an even greater determination to shake what they saw as the complacent self righteousness of the peace movement.

However, what actually happened as our Troubles stretched into years and political violence took on a durability in our lives was that some peace activists began to develop methodologies for peace. They came to realize that sustained peacemaking required more than the impulse of the sickened human heart. There was a need to move to the development of method. My own journey into the field of mediation was an example of that transition because, for me, mediation emerged as a potential method of building peace. And I should add that it is only one of a wide range of peace-building methodologies that have evolved in our society over the last thirty years.

<p><i>4. MEDIATION IS A METHOD OF NONVIOLENCE.</i></p>

I should also like to make the point that some peace efforts are **anti-violent** and others are **non-violent**.

For me, anti-violence is a belief that you can promote or defend justice by opposing violence. Anti-violence is reactive to violence and while often does good in society, it

tends to limit people to an awareness of what they are against rather than an agreed understanding of what they are for.

Nonviolence, on the other hand, is a belief that you can promote or defend justice by serving Truth, with Compassion.

In this respect, of course, Truth is viewed as multi –faceted, with no individual or group being in total possession of truth. Rather, as the peace philosophers, Jean and Hildegard Gos Meyr taught us, every human being carries within themselves at least a seed of truth.

So, love of truth - and a belief that it is to be found in some measure within every person's story - is fundamental to nonviolence.

So is the need for compassion. And by compassion I mean an attentiveness to the suffering of others and a desire to relieve suffering. Mediation is a method of nonviolence because it seeks to unearth truth that is hidden or disguised and because it demands of the mediator that they give a degree of respect or compassion to all sides in a conflict, no matter how repugnant some people seem to be.

5. COMPASSION IS THE MEDIUM BY

WHICH WE UNEARTH THE ORIGINS OF CONFLICT.

If peace is ultimately a personal gift or a personal struggle, so is conflict. All conflict is ultimately personal because it involves human beings. All human beings are worthy of compassion, no matter how wrong their opponents may view them to be. In this respect, compassion and the search for truth provide a path by which we can be led to

an understanding of the origins of conflict. The philosopher, Gaston de Bachelard, provided a good direction to the peace seeker when he wrote the following:

‘ What is the source of our first suffering?

It lies in the moment when we accumulated silent things and harboured them within us.’

Compassion, then, views people in conflict as suffering in various ways and seeks to relieve their suffering.

6. ENGAGING DIFFERENCE HELPS US LEARN ABOUT OURSELVES.

The conflict in Ireland is one of the world’s more celebrated and analysed affairs. But I have to tell you, as an Irish person whose life has been preoccupied with our conflict, I do not yet know the origins of our particular quarrel. Many nationalists in Ireland would react with incredulity to that statement. For them the origins are obvious and well documented: they lie in the centuries old occupation of Ireland by the British and will end when the British give Ireland back to the Irish. However, ours is a disputed history, for many people from the unionist tradition in Ireland view the nationalist demand for British withdrawal as nothing more than an anti-democratic desire for secession from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. They view Irish nationalism as the cause of much of our difficulty.

If we want to know the origins of conflict we must enter its humanity. We must get to know the human beings who are within a conflict, whether they are victim, villain or, indeed, both. We must retrace the story of their anger and travel into the pain that lies within it. We must hear their sense of justice and discover the integrity that lies beneath it.

To do this we must be able to win the respect of those with whom we would work. Their respect does not necessarily involve winning their affection or, indeed, their trust. But to examine the origins of conflict, we need to enable those within it to have the kind of confidence in us that a patient holds for a dentist or an air passenger does for a pilot. After all, conflict intervention requires the participants to become vulnerable - to the danger that they will be over-exposed and weakened; that they may be disempowered and manipulated or perhaps most threateningly of all, that they may have to surface the source of their own suffering.

The town of Oldham, just outside Manchester, England, is one of a number of places in England which have experienced racial and ethnic unrest in recent years. Some weeks ago I spent a few days there and on one morning I was introduced to an Inter Faith group of clerics from various traditions who have come together to improve relations across Oldham. I asked them to tell me what God was saying to them about their divided town. One Muslim imam replied through an interpreter. He said that, in the beginning, God had created a single unit of man and woman and then separated them into different nations in order that they should learn about themselves. In other words, the very diversity of humanity should serve to enable people to learn about themselves by interacting with each other.

7. DIFFERENCE IS ESSENTIAL TO ALL OF LIFE.

Interestingly, this theme is central to the thinking of Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of England, in his new book, 'The Dignity of Difference'. According to Rabbi Sacks, we should view difference not as a difficulty to be overcome, but as the very essence of life. He observes that even in terms of simple biology, while all of life has four genetic characteristics in common, every eco-system is dependent on bio-diversity.

Again referring to Scriptures, Sacks traces the moment in the book of Genesis when Judaism and Islam go their separate ways. Says Sacks,

“ God splits up humanity into a multiplicity of cultures and a diversity of languages.”

According to Sacks, God effectively tells Abraham,

“ Be different, so as to teach humanity the dignity of difference.” (as reported by Jonathan Freedland in 'The Guardian' newspaper, 27.8.02)

8. RECONCILIATION ADDRESSES ESTRANGEMENT BETWEEN PEOPLE WHO ARE DIFFERENT

Enda McDonagh is an Irish priest and theologian. A few years ago I asked him to help me understand the literal meaning of the word 'reconciliation'. McDonagh responded by talking about the Greek word 'Allos', meaning 'Other'. He explained that in the Greek, the 'Other' was someone who was different and whose difference appeared a threatening thing.(Indeed, my dictionary defines 'otherness' as the state of being different) According to McDonagh, reconciliation is the work of bringing together those who are "hostilely different". Reconciliation requires respect for the Other. It

means taking the Other fully seriously, including the bits that you do not understand. In our conversation, Enda McDonagh referred to various instances in the Jesus story which revealed how Christians should treat the stranger. For McDonagh, respecting the stranger – the Other –is not about excluding or wiping out difference. It is about taking the other fully seriously, including those parts of him which we do not understand; those dimensions which are strange to us. For him, the work of reconciliation is about serving a coming together of the strange. It requires a capacity to recognize ‘the more’ in the person who has offended us.

Conflict evolves when human beings cannot cope with difference; when the difference in the other person appears to threaten us. And we are more likely to feel threatened by things which we do not understand or which we find strange and alien. Reconciliation is the process by which we overcome estrangement.

9. MEDIATORS PROVIDE BRIDGES THAT HELP PEOPLE

ON ONE SIDE TO JOURNEY TOWARDS THE OTHER

What is the mediator’s bias?

It is to be ever oriented towards the Other, whoever the Other is from one place to the next.

What is the mediator’s challenge?

It is to approach the ‘Hard to Reach’ and to engage the ‘Comfortably Divided’.

What is mediation's essential character?

It is to appreciate that all conflict is ultimately personal.

10. PEACE IS A LIFE TASK FOR THE PILGRIM

I have been professionally engaged in the activity of mediation within Ireland's deep societal conflict for ten years. As an indigenous practitioner I have to recognise that I am not outside of our conflict; by the very act of being born in Ireland I am part of the Irish problem. It was there before I was born and it will still find expression after I am dead. Hopefully, we are at an end of a terrible period in the history of Ireland when conflict took on a violent form. However, the struggle to accommodate difference is a life task for my generation. Conflict is an enduring reality of my life journey and Peace is a Life Task. As a mediator my task is to journey towards otherness, wherever I find it. Living in a divided society, the mediator's contribution is to help people to approach that which is strange in the Other and, in doing so, to encourage the gift of compassion, which, as I have said, is the medium through which we approach the origins of conflict.