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Reconciliation – A few ideas from a wandering soul

Introduction

I have a rather simple proposal to make this evening. Reconciliation is, at essence, a circular not a linear process.

While simple on the surface, the shift in metaphor requires us to rethink much of what we programmatically endeavor to take up, both in terms of research and practice of reconciliation. The shift I wish to explore this evening is to move our image of reconciliation from that of a line that moves from A to B, or from phases that advance 1 through 5, to the rather startling notion that reconciliation not only may be more akin to a circle, it may in fact not be a process in the common way the word process is understood. Let me start with what I would call the five most common misconceptions about reconciliation.

1) Reconciliation and healing are linear processes.

A linear process poses two fundamental assumptions. First, in the movement from A to B, things happen sequentially. Second, once one thing happens then the next stage or phase is “progress” and earlier stages or phases are “retrogression.” Or worse, that once addressed and discussed, one cannot go back again to those things. The past is over. Forget it. Move on.

It is instructive that nearly everyone who writes about reconciliation and healing offers a caveat that says, in essence, care should be taken to recognize that these processes are not neatly linear. Then in nearly the same breath they go onto describe

reconciliation as a “process” with “stages, steps and phases” understood as representing levels of growth and movement forward.

2) Time flows from past to future, and therefore so does healing and reconciliation.

A linear concept of time as related particularly to reconciliation breaks a complex set of humanly constructed realities – past, present and future -- into a sequential chronology. I no longer believe that time is neatly laid out on a line. I think time is experienced in ways not explained by linearity. More on this later, or sooner, depending on what spacetime you are in.

3) Reconciliation is essentially a process that moves from the intra to the interpersonal engagement, from the interpersonal to intercommunal, and from the intercommunal to the national levels. This belies the idea of simultaneity rather than sequentiality and that at the same time individuals and groups are moving in potentially different directions and paces in reference to healing and their various journeys. Much of my own recent experience in places hardest hit by violence suggest for example that the community represents a kind of “container” that holds these multiple processes going on at the same time and that we do not have a directive or controlling capacity for the coordination of individual journeys happening in common timeframes that lead to social reconciliation. Greater accuracy of experience suggests that in any given place multiple individual and community journeys are happening at different paces and are constantly bumping into each other simultaneously. What *surrounds* these multiple processes of reconciliation are more important than what *motivates* the individual-as-actor.

4) The locus and epicenter for building reconciliation processes reside primarily with cognitive understanding, rational planning and explanatory interpretation.

While most of us intuitively recognize that reconciliation, in the end, is a matter of the heart, the heart *per se* has never been perceived an adequate guide and in fact is often understood as a poor conductor of scientific and political affairs. So programmatic applications of reconciliation seek to relocate reconciliation from the heart to the head. However, violation and pain reside in the emotional memory not fully explained or controlled by cognitive processes, and certainly not by social or political planning.

5) Given the seriousness of the pain and loss experienced, “seriousness” and “intensity” of direct focus on the events that created the violation and their explanation are the most effective and appropriate responses to encourage healing.

In fact creating spaces that touch and mix voice may require processes that on the surface appear to be playful, moments rather than processes, that restore a sense of humanness. And we have no scientific evidence that being serious and intense contributes to healing more than being playful.

So what happens if we shift metaphors, from a line to a circle, from a process to a space-moment, from rational thought to something like sound, rhythm or music? And why would we do so? I posit for your consideration these two ideas: 1) The most overlooked dimensions of violation, individual and social, are the loss of voice, sense of self, identity and place. Finding place requires spatial understanding more than rational explanation; and 2) Reconciliation and healing are at essence the heroic journeys of

survival in a land of forgetfulness in which memory and hope, rather than representing opposite ends of spectrum, or radically opposed horizons, are simultaneously present, like sister guideposts, like posts that create an archway through which the pathway of rediscovery, claiming and projection of voice happens. But where do we find such metaphors?

The Tibetan Singing Bowl

I want to start with an illustration of sound as metaphor of circle. I have before me a Tibetan singing bowl. It was crafted in the high plateaus of Tibet, crossed the Himalas and was probably first sold in Nepal. The vendor expounding on its qualities and teaching me its secrets explained that the bowl has healing qualities. “When people are sick,” he said, “we place the bowl on the stomach or affected areas and call forth its song. The vibrations heal.” I am not sure I have clear the actual physical healing qualities, but let me demonstrate the sound. Take notice as I do of several things. First, sound will reach all you simultaneously. It is multidirectional. Second, it will surround you, close your eyes if you wish. Third, if you are close enough you will feel it before hear it.

I have been curious about the bowl for a number of reasons related to the theme and propositions I wish to explore. It has helped me conceptualize the metaphoric shift in reference to healing and reconciliation. Let me suggest a number of insights that emerge from the bowl in relationship to inquiry.

My first step was to try to understand the physics of sound. So I consulted a physicist. I posed a simple question: Explain to me the physics of the bowl and the rise of sound. His answer was equally rapid and simple: It is the theory of the natural frequency.

Natural frequency is a phenomenon that has an unusual graph. It compares the rise of energy with the frequency of vibration. As the stick in the case of the Tibetan bowl goes round the edge, it is bouncing thousands of times, creating micro-vibrations from the friction of touching the bowl and circling. If one goes too slow, nothing happens, no sound rises. If one proceeds too fast, nothing happens, no sound rises. But at a particular moment, the moment called the natural frequency, the vibrations interact in a way that gives rise to a burst of energy, not a bell curve, but a spike of unexpected and for a time, sustained resonance. You feel it before you hear it. Natural frequency not only suggests how sound rises, it suggests that the circling must start and continue again for a new resonance to emerge. Sound does not sustain itself on its own. The elements are all there, but the voice and resonance must be coaxed. It reminded me of Patricia Burdette's (2004) research among the Lakota Indians where restoration of health, physical, spiritual and communal, require a process they refer to as "calling the spirit back." But this process, mixing of vibration, circling, container and sound pose whole new metaphors by which we might conceive reconciliation. Let us explore a few of these shifts.

- 1) Sound rises from going round and round. The metaphor of the bowl suggests this: Voice goes deep. Resonance expands, envelopes and encircles. I intentionally moved to the middle of the room when I made the bowl sing in order for all of you, no matter where you were sitting, to feel the sound encircling you. Sound moves in all directions at once. It is nonlinear. Of particular note for our purposes is the image of depth and expansion in a space, rather than a movement from A to B.

- 2) Continuous, sustained circling is the movement that helps create the space where sound emerges. In pure linear terms this movement appears not to be going anywhere. Circling represents travel that is going nowhere. However, for the metaphor of the bowl, feeling and touching sound, feeling and sensing the vibration, not reaching a destination is the purpose. Alan Watts (1968:ix) in an old essay put it succinctly responding to some critics who had called his essays repetitious. “My thinking spirals: it does not follow a straight line...besides what I mean by understanding is not simple verbal comprehension -- Understanding is feeling it in your bones.” This captures the impulse of voice and reconciliation: To feel it in your bones.
- 3) Sound rises from friction. This is a journey that produces millions of stops and starts. These are micro-vibrations, mostly imperceptible, tiny and insignificant. Yet as they interact, they give rise to sound. This seems to me very close to the actual process of healing, thousands of circles seemingly going nowhere that create thousands of tiny bumps, blips, and friction along the way.
- 4) There is not a single bump or vibration that produces the rise of sound and resonance. Efforts to rationally locate a particular moment, bump, micro-vibration as the leverage point, technique, key, or explanatory insight is futile. Resonance rises from the sum total of the stops and starts, the bumps and micro-vibrations.
- 5) Sound can be produced with a single big hit on the side of the bowl. However, this sound is not singing. It is not the natural frequency. It clangs but does not harmonize. There is no easy shortcut to resonance, and it does not sustain itself

once found. It requires attention, circling, and continued search. It is a space-moment rather than a result or even a process. It suggests, that the most significant of human endeavors are life-long, continuously coaxed and recoaxed, repetitious processes. Take a few for example, from spiritual growth to healing, from citizenship to democracy, from negotiation to peace and reconciliation, we have tended to conceptualize these as linear processes, when in fact they are circular and repetitive. Near the end of her lengthy study of the Guatemalan peace process, Susanne Jonas concluded with a set of comments that suggest beyond negotiation “long-range peace processes are largely about constructing citizenship” (Jonas, 2000:234). She quotes in the same conclusion a comment by a prominent Guatemalan reflecting on the nature of their events: “The peace process,” he said, “will have to be invented over and over again” (Jonas, 2000:244).

- 6) The emergence of resonance among the vibrations does not reside in the strength of the materials nor is it coaxed through either under or overexertion of pace and rhythm. Resonance rises in locating the natural frequency, the place where pace and rhythm create a spike, a near explosion of energy in the whole of the system. We rather consistently underestimate the significance of pace in finding voice and resonance. This particular metaphor suggests that too little and too much have the same result. Finding the natural frequency requires the going round, the bold experimentation and the respect to listen for the vibrations recognizing the timing of their interaction. Programmatically, though many politicians would prefer not to hear it, reconciliation is not a phenomenon that lends itself to programmatic

timeframes driven by starts and conclusions with produced desired results, and then it is over.

- 7) The bowl provides a context, a “container” that nurtures the “rise.” The guiding metaphor suggests something quite provocative for our inquiry: resonance does not rise from the individual. It rises from the interaction of vibrations held within a communal context. In other words, reconciliation may well be about the container that holds the processes more than the individual’s particular journey.
- 8) Finally, an observation about the nature of a circle. A circle has this extraordinary characteristic: The two points that sit at the greatest distance from each other also sit in closest proximity. Paradoxically, this may help explain why in the healing and reconciliation process, simultaneously enormous and negligible distance co-exist. The bowl as a metaphor would suggest that time, rather than being sequentially past, present and future as points separated on a long line, are simultaneously available realities that we move between in an instant. Take the phenomenon of music as an example. Most of you can probably know of a song that when you hear it transports you across time. You move between time spheres instantly but in ways that are experienced as present and real. The past, present and future are always immediately available.

What does all this mean? I don’t know really, I am just sharing with you my journey, the new book I am writing, due out at some point in my lifetime. It is a journey that will take me from “string theory” (the notion in physics that the smallest discernible element of life, smaller than an atom, is a vibrating string) to the music of Van Morrison (if anyone knows the man please see me after the event I am desperate to meet him) to why

aboriginals in Australia construct their sense of place by songlines, the singing of their geography as a way to locate themselves, the mapping of their meaning and sense of place, to how and why we in the human community mostly make sense of our world through metaphors and images that are not easy to capture in words, to native American concepts of spacetime and circles as the mechanisms of healing. I am lost and searching. I don't have answers, just a deep sense gained in too many settings of violence that reconciliation is a journey toward the inarticulate speech of the heart that is not explained by rational processes, or a line in time. Do join me. Being lost when things are inexplicable is not as bad as we tend to think.