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“THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE ARTS TO A CULTURE OF PEACE IN THE AFTERMATH OF VIOLENCE”

Abstract

This paper suggests that distinctive features of aesthetic engagement make the arts well-suited to nourish and capacities and mediate the learning that is required to build a culture of peace in the aftermath of violence. Because the arts 1) simultaneously engage sensuous and rational faculties; 2) engage people in forms that are bounded in time and space; and 3) themselves mediate tensions, such as those between tradition and innovation, they invite people into transactions characterized by reciprocity between perceiver and perceived. This reciprocity can enliven the imagination, nourish people's capacities for receptivity and empathy, and stimulate learning. These resources can be marshaled in support of the educational tasks and challenges of reconciliation, such as acknowledging the humanity of the other, mourning losses, empathizing with suffering, addressing injustices, letting go of bitterness, and imagining a new future.

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Why, in rebuilding war-torn communities, should precious and scarce resources be invested in the arts and cultural programs?

In the aftermath of violent conflict, investing in artistic and cultural renewal is not likely to be at the top of the agendas of negotiators or administrators who plan for reconstruction. More likely, the arts will be seen as luxuries that must be sacrificed until basic needs for food, clothing, shelter and security are met. In addressing painful historical legacies, trials and tribunals are likely to claim far more resources than theater, poetry or exchange programs for artists.

However, recent studies in cognitive psychology suggest that rational deliberations alone are unlikely to be sufficient to rebuild inter-communal relations in the aftermath of ethnic violence. After extensive empirical research, the psychologists William Longe and Peter Brecke (2003) conclude that, at least in the case of reconciliation following civil wars, an evolutionarily determined, emotionally driven pattern, not purposeful rationality, transforms aggression into empathy and desire for revenge into desire for affiliation (p. 28).

If purposeful rationality is inadequate to the task of reconciliation, how should peacebuilding practitioners facilitate the kinds of understanding that will allow communities to rebuild relationships in the aftermath of ethnic violence? Years ago, the anthropologist, cybernetic theorist and family therapist Gregory Bateson (1972) proposed an answer to this question. In contrast to the goal-driven conscious decision-making needed for the survival of individuals, he asserted that the “knowledge” required for the survival of the group is held in the non-conscious realms of the human mind. This wisdom can be tapped through processes such as ritual and art (p. 147).

This paper explains why the arts and cultural work are critical to promoting a culture of peace in the aftermath of violent conflict. It lays out theoretical frameworks for reconciliation and for the nature of aesthetic engagement that explain **why** the arts and cultural work should be effective resources for peace-builders. Then it suggests **how** the arts and cultural work are being used to facilitate seven different educational tasks crucial to reconciliation, including assisting former adversaries to appreciate each other's humanity, to empathize with each other's suffering, to address injustice, and to imagine a new future.

The range of activities indicated by the phrase ‘the arts and cultural work’ is very broad. The arts include both oral and written literary forms, narrative and poetry, fiction and non-fiction. They include vocal and instrumental musical works, both composed and improvised, solo and ensemble. The domain of ‘the arts’ embraces drawing and painting, photography, movies and three-dimensional works as well as performative modes such as scripted and improvisational theater and dance. Cultural work cultivates and harvests the knowledge embedded within collective folk expressions like embroidery patterns, lullabies, and folk architecture. These collective expressive forms are densely packed with meaning, having been “polished” by centuries of transmission from one generation to the next.

The art forms we wish to consider as resources for coexistence and reconciliation, therefore, include both paintings to be viewed by solitary museum-goers and the participatory rituals of dance, drumming and masks; mass market movies and booklets of poems written by children in refugee camps; staged theatrical productions and improvised scenes acted out in a dialogue group. People engage in these forms as creators, performers, audience members, producers and critics. In some cases art and cultural projects focus on the process of creating, with minimal concern for the product. In other cases, it is the beauty and power of the produced works that make them effective resources for peace.

Engaging with the arts can generate, for both individuals and collectivities, for creators and spectators, special qualities of attention and response – such as disinterestedness, committed participation, meta-cognitive alertness, receptivity, and blissful serenity. These qualities of attention and response afford unique opportunities for learning, empathy, reflexivity, creativity, innovation and experimentation. The engagement with a work of art or cultural form that gives rise to these special qualities of attention and response can best be understood within the framework of aesthetic experience.

What is unique about aesthetic experience that allows it to become such a fertile ground for learning and for creativity?

There are several factors, each of which has important implications for the educational work associated with coexistence and reconciliation.

First, aesthetic experiences engage us on both sensory and cognitive levels. Rituals, for instance, involve people bodily in seeing colors and images, hearing sounds, tasting spices, feeling textures and temperatures – all within formal structures that are imbued with narrative references and cultural meanings. In the visual arts, symbols convey meaning on many levels simultaneously, in part through literal representation, but also through color, texture, shape and composition. Even forms such as abstract paintings and instrumental music link our senses with our rational faculties as we become aware of the ways in which we perceive. In other words, we see ourselves seeing, notice ourselves hearing, and become aware of ourselves as makers of meaning.

Human beings tend to find the inter-animation of our sensory and rational faculties especially enlivening, causing states of alertness and awareness that are infused with feeling. These qualities of presence can be harnessed to address some of the key educational tasks and challenges of coexistence and reconciliation. For instance, to understand meaningfully our own or another's suffering requires knowledge that is both cognitive and heartfelt. We must be simultaneously engaged, but detached enough not to be overwhelmed by the intensity of our own responses. The arts can be crafted to invite just such responses: alert calmness, engaged detachment, and awareness that is laden with feeling. In addition, the arts can help us become critically aware of the symbolic structures through which we compose meaning. This level of meta-cognition is often necessary also in the processes of reconciliation, as former enemies reassess the symbols embedded within enmity discourses.

A second defining feature of aesthetic transactions is that they involve us with forms that are bounded in space and/or time. A framed picture, for instance, and a theatrical event with a clear beginning and end, each provides boundaries within which viewers can focus intensively. The formal qualities of works of art both invite us and support us to open ourselves to depths of feelings, in ways that are much more difficult in the unframed, on-going flow of life. The bounded quality and formal structures of artworks and ritual can provide support for survivors of violence to confront and work through painful history that might otherwise be too overwhelming to face.

In addition to simultaneously engaging us rationally and sensually with forms bounded in space and time, **aesthetic forms acknowledge and mediate certain tensions – for instance between innovation and tradition.** Human beings seem to appreciate both exemplary forms of a type or genre, and also a certain amount of innovation. Most works that engage us aesthetically follow the conventions of a genre or tradition, but with some new element, an original turn. In some cases, artists defy such conventions – but grasping their meaning nevertheless depends on awareness of rules even as they are broken. The degree to which innovation is embraced, or to which tradition is upheld, is one of the ways in which different cultural groups express their distinct aesthetics.

However, neither random idiosyncratic expression, with no reference to any tradition, nor completely uniform expression, with no room for interpretation or originality is likely to evoke the qualities of response known as aesthetic. Artists can work with the tension of innovation and tradition – as well as other tensions, such as randomness and rigidity, and the impulses of the individual and the imperatives of collectives – to construct forms that enliven but do not overwhelm the perceptual capacities of their audiences. In contexts of oppression and violence, when people's perceptual capacities may have been blunted, forms of expression that are in

themselves enlivening can create conditions for learning and communication. In the aftermath of violence, when people face the challenge of reconstructing their lives and adapting to change, the arts can provide support by integrating new ideas into forms that are familiar, or by exemplifying how even innovative forms can express longstanding values.

So aesthetic experiences arise in the interface between human beings and expressive forms because of the simultaneous engagement of rational and sensual faculties; because of the intensity of engagement made possible by the bounded nature of formal structures; and because the forms themselves avoid certain extremes, such as utter disregard for, or utter allegiance to, conventions. Taken together, these defining features of aesthetic experience allow for a kind of **reciprocity** between the sensibilities of perceivers, on the one hand, and the objects of their perception. This reciprocity can most readily be understood as a midway point between two other kinds of transactions between perceivers and objects of perception: analysis and propaganda. In **analysis**, the perceiver "controls" the object by investigating it in relation to pre-existing categories, or by breaking it down to be examined. In **propaganda**, the expressive form has been designed to manipulate, seduce or coerce the perceiver. By contrast, in the case of aesthetic apprehension, the perceiver and perceived are equally weighted. Expressive forms are designed with perceivers' sensibilities in mind; and the perceiver opens him- or herself to the resonances and reverberations evoked by the object or event. In other words, when a work of art works, **as art**, it is because the sensibilities of the viewer or listener are anticipated in the expression itself. It is this calibration of the form of expression with the sensibilities of the viewer that gives rise to the perception of beauty; and it is through beauty that a work of art issues its invitation.

It is by virtue of this reciprocity that aesthetic transactions are inherently other-regarding. They involve an awareness of the other, a sensitivity akin to respect. This quality of aesthetic experience alone makes cultural work and the arts especially valuable in situations of enmity in when groups act with utter disregard for the well-being of each other. When individuals have been tortured, when homes and centers of community life have been destroyed by war, when the dignity of an ethnic group has been assaulted through longstanding oppression, the arts can remind people of what it is like to be acknowledged and respected, and, in time, to acknowledge and respect. As aesthetic engagement enlivens perceptive capacities, it can support people in confronting painful history, assist communities in grappling with change, and infuse the sensibilities of respect into relationships that have been defined by violence and oppression.

A Culture of Peace in the Aftermath of Violence: Educational and Psychological Perspectives
Nourishing a culture of peace in the aftermath of violence generally requires the re-building of relationships. The precise activities that comprise this relationship-building work, and the order in which they are undertaken, must be developed in particular contexts, taking into account the nature of the preceding alienation or violence, the trajectory and stage of the conflict, the individuals and cultures to be brought into relationship, the leadership resources available, and the larger systems within which the conflict and peacebuilding processes are embedded. Nevertheless, it is safe to assume that processes of coexistence and reconciliation almost always involve former adversaries in culturally-inflected versions of at least some of the following tasks, not necessarily undertaken in this order:

- Appreciating each other's humanity and respecting each other's culture
- Telling and listening to each other's stories, and developing more complex narratives and more nuanced understandings of identity
- Acknowledging harms, telling truths and mourning losses
- Empathizing with each other's suffering
- Acknowledging and redressing injustices
- Expressing remorse, repenting, apologizing; letting go of bitterness, forgiving
- Imagining and substantiating a new future, including agreements about how future conflicts will be engaged constructively.

All of these processes involve learning about one's own community and the other. They involve learning new skills and expanding the meaning of concepts, often "un-learning" what was formerly believed to be true. Taken together, they represent a daunting array of tasks and challenges, especially considering that they must be undertaken in ways that reach deeply into the person and broadly throughout society.

Furthermore, in many instances, widespread ethnic violence and long-standing oppressions can leave people and communities with insufficient capacities to undertake this work. People are likely to be disoriented and confused, often having lost loved ones, the places that sheltered them, and the webs of relationships that gave meaning, texture and ethical anchoring to their lives. People's abilities both to listen and to express themselves so others can understand are often impaired. Along with bombed-out villages and desecrated shrines, capacities to discern when trust is warranted, to respond to problems creatively and to imagine a different future have often been destroyed. Those who have perpetrated abuses or are implicated in other's suffering (even through omissions) may be straight-jacketed by inexpressible shame, fear and self-loathing.

Because of the distinct qualities of aesthetic engagement – namely the integration of the sensory and the rational, the engagement of audiences with forms that are bounded in space and time, and the reciprocity engendered between artwork and audience – the arts are uniquely well-suited to restore the capacities required for reconciliation and meet the educational challenges inherent in building a culture of peace. They invite people into modes of receptivity and expression that are themselves restorative. They enliven people's sense of imagination, and restore the capacity to listen to, empathize with others, and to learn.

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