

## Healing from within

by Michael Gleich

*When vision and will come together, anything is possible. Even peace. Fearless, strong-willed people are working in conflict zones, undeterred by the day-to-day violence, and dedicating themselves to civil society initiatives. They combine professional strategies for conflict resolution with cultural empathy and are demonstrating how cultural differences can be experienced in a constructive way.*

Of all the peacemakers, it was the two murderers who touched me the most. As a young man, Joe had fought for the Catholic armed underground, shot a British officer and been handed a 22-year prison sentence. Peter had long been a career terrorist on the protestant side and had an even more serious record. As members of two cultures that were battling for supremacy in Northern Ireland, they found themselves fighting a civil war in which everyone was a loser.

At some point, something snapped. When Joe was released from prison he was depressed by what he saw: frustrated young people with no chance of training or a job were inciting mini-revolts in the poor areas of Belfast out of sheer boredom. Peter's life collapsed even more spectacularly. He dropped out when he was ordered to shoot a disgraced member of his own paramilitary group. Out there in the woods, he found he was unable to pull the trigger and asked himself in despair: "What has this war done to me?"

Joe and Peter separately came to the same decision. They wanted to carry on fighting, but non-violently. They both had a difficult path ahead of them as they attempted to escape the orbit of their former comrades-in-arms. They were in constant danger of being denounced as traitors. Today, they are both social workers who work with young people to persuade them to keep their distance from the paramilitary groups. They are putting all their efforts into finding a political solution to the conflict. It is not the 'road to Damascus' story that impresses me about them so much as their unerring belief that Catholics and protestants can live together as equals, along with their strong will to begin life afresh in their mid-forties. When vision and will come together, anything is possible. Even peace.

It happens more often than we might think. Since the early 1990s, more than 80 violent conflicts have been resolved: in Mali, Mozambique, Haiti, East Timor, Kosovo, to name but a few. The situation in these countries ranges from fragile to stable. And there are yet more reasons for optimism. Since 1992, there has been a 40 percent reduction in particularly violent conflicts, and the number of people killed in such conflicts has fallen by 98 percent since 1950. And we should not forget events in places like South Africa, where a country ruled by fear and racism made the transition to democracy with hardly a drop of blood being spilled. This was more than anyone had hoped for. But charismatic leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Fredrik Willem de Klerk possessed both imagination and initiative.

## War is now an event

So why are we not celebrating? Why is the International Day of Peace not a public holiday? And why does watching the evening news make us feel that the world is increasingly ruled by war, death and destruction? The explanation is simple and twofold. Simple, because we are dealing with the way the media typically distorts reality – the amount of violence in the world has not increased, just the

number of reports. Twofold, because the responsibility for this does not lie solely with sensationalist journalists seeking to increase their viewing figures or sell more newspapers.

The public is also to blame for focusing on the negative. We are fascinated by dramas involving life and death, and war brings them into our homes every day. The battlefields are reported like football matches. During the last Gulf War, embedded journalists related what was happening like over-excited sports commentators.

War is now an event. Peace is quiet, slow, boring, and reporters soon lose patience with it as they race around the globe.

And they are not the only ones. Research also cultivates its blind spots. There should be nothing more important than finding out when and how peace can be achieved, but unfortunately very few researchers are interested in breaking new ground by exploring the causes of peace. War sells better – even in trade journals and at conferences.

So any kind of exciting changes go unnoticed. In the past, war was declared by statesmen, prosecuted by generals and armies and brought to an end by presidents signing treaties. Nowadays these kinds of wars between countries involving huge numbers of victims have become the exception. This is surely a step forward for civilisation.

But now we are faced with new challenges. The international community is confronted by violent conflicts that emerge from within societies. They are a society's heart attack, its organ failure. Generally, two or more ethnic groups with different cultures come to blows in order to gain power. Or so it seems. But underneath it all, it is about mutual respect and recognition. I would even go as far as to say it is about the desire to be respected and loved by others. Every single one of us yearns for love, and communities are no different.

The healing of such societies that are torn apart by hate also has to come from within. The poet Hölderlin remarked that "where danger is deliverance also grows", and indeed, a new generation of peacemakers is growing up. They do not demonstrate, and they no longer leave it to politicians and armies to take charge of events, preferring to roll up their sleeves and get involved. Doctors and human rights activists, trade unionists and housewives, sportspeople, aid workers, priests and educators – many of them are risking their lives in their desire to find non-violent solutions. They are creative, professional, courageous and, above all, successful.

They count it as progress when rebels lay down their arms, as happened in 1995 in Mali; when minefields are cleared and peasants return to their fields, as in the north of Sri Lanka; when the army removes road blocks, as in Israel; when Catholic children can once again walk to school through a protestant suburb, as in Northern Ireland; when Ugandan child soldiers are allowed to take up civilian jobs.

### **Project Civilisation**

With every step, peace regains a tiny piece of territory. Behind every step there are social innovators, empathetic people who are perfecting techniques for promoting mediation, active listening and reconciliation. The art of peace requires great skill. All together, they form civil society. It sounds like they are sitting around drinking tea, but in fact they are creating a secret superpower. Alongside national governments, multinational organisations and transnational corporations, they

are increasingly becoming the face of globalisation. Whether small circles of activists or large special interest groups, one thing unites them: they are extremely flexible, which makes them difficult to control and even harder to stop. Their strength lies in their global networks. They use the internet and emails to tell each other what does and doesn't work. Suddenly a successful campaign in one place has become an object lesson somewhere else. Working together in a loose alliance, private peacemakers all over the world are advancing project civilisation.

These days a good idea needs no time to spread from the Cape of Good Hope to the other side of the globe. In the aftermath of its apartheid regime, South Africa found itself faced with the question: should we allow people who have tortured and massacred to go free in order to maintain peace in our country? Or should we take them to court and once again risk furious uprisings on the part of entire ethnic groups? This is a typical dilemma faced by societies the morning after the night before. South Africa found its response in the truth and reconciliation Commission. The main culprits were punished, while lesser miscreants and victims were invited to conciliation talks. This balancing act proved to be successful, allowing wounds to heal and democracy to endure.

Since then, other countries have experimented with similar instruments, as has happened in Rwanda. The village communities organised their own tribunals called gacaca, which means "sitting in the grass". Lay judges and elders presided over these open-air courts, pronouncing judgment on the main perpetrators of genocide against the Tutsi. This was a desperate, common effort to heal the deep sense of shock caused by the genocide. This grass-roots movement in its most literal sense can be viewed as a real success story. It is proof that all peace is created by peoples; otherwise it is not created at all. Civil wars tear societies apart. The leave in their wake traumatised children, shattered villages and hostile groups that still mistrust each other and contemplate revenge, despite any ceasefire that has been imposed. Ethnic groups often live in separate areas and have no communication with each other.

This is where non-governmental peacemakers have an important role to play. Unlike official diplomats, they can find unconventional ways of bringing the members of enemy groups to the negotiating table. When the German Benedictine abbot Benedikt Lindemann opens the doors of his monastery in Jerusalem for discreet talks, Israelis and Palestinians know that they can come together without fear of spies. The hallowed walls provide a refuge. the monk is the mediator. He does not ask the politicians whether he is allowed to get involved. He just does it. He is inspired by an image that he has never lost sight of: the image of Jews, Christians and Arabs all living together in peace in the Holy Land.

This flame burns inside all successful peacemakers. They are driven by a vision of how they can change their country for the better. They are "unrealistic" in the positive sense of the word. They don't accept things as they are. The importance of this has been shown in Sri Lanka, a country that has been torn apart by a bloody civil war for over 20 years. A young colleague from the shattered north of the country told me: "the war has been going on all my life. It has poisoned our minds and our hearts. We just can't imagine a life without attacks and bombings." The worst thing about this is that people who have only ever known violence will always turn to violence as a solution when in doubt. Of course it presents a risk, but at least it is a familiar risk, whereas peace is a journey into the unknown, an adventure with an unpredictable outcome.

This is why imagination is so critical. It unleashes energies that – as Einstein said – can take people everywhere. When Singham, a Tamil who had lived a carefree life in Berlin for 15 years, decided to

return to war-torn Sri Lanka, his friends told him he was crazy. But he dared to dream: “one day the island will once again be rightly called “Happy Lanka.” He didn’t just leave it at that, but used donations to build houses for refugee families, set up a school for children orphaned by the war, and looked after street kids. Tamils and Sinhalese, supposed enemies, work side-by-side in his organisation. Singham is one of those volunteer bridge-builders who are prepared to risk all in the quest for reconciliation. The very best of them are a charismatic blend of Mahatma Gandhi and Bill Gates. They have that rare ability to think big and act decisively – and be good managers. These new professional peace activists understand that security and stability are also linked to money, jobs, economic growth and development.

It is worth investing in humankind’s number one dream. According to experts at Oxford University, the average civil war lasts seven years. Of course, every year and every victim are one too many, but the good news is that wars do come to an end, sooner or later. But sooner is better than later. If it is not possible to prevent a war, then the international community can at least try to curtail it. United Nations interventions are in fact better than their reputation suggests. According to a study by the US think tank RAND, two out of three peacekeeping missions are successful. And they are cheaper than might be thought when listening to the awkward skirmishes in the Security Council. The total cost of all 16 blue-helmet missions carried out in the last year was just under five billion dollars. To put this into perspective, the USA spent more than this every month on the war in Iraq, and as the world’s self-proclaimed sheriff, they have just experienced one debacle after another.

Multinational institutions such as the United Nations and the European Union are the state counterpart to a closely-linked civil society. The UN and EU have made great strides over the last few decades in combating poverty, improving health and promoting human rights. In this way, they have made a major contribution to building ‘positive peace’: a peace that is more than just the absence of war, a culture that is no longer governed by violence and fear, but by respect and love. In the end, this is what it’s all about.

And of course it’s about money. It’s amazing but true that it makes economic sense to invest in peace. The Oxford experts have calculated that a typical civil war costs around 70 billion dollars. On the loss side, they place lower economic growth, equipment, illness, refugees and organised crime. To look at it another way, every year that such a war can be shortened brings a dividend of 10 billion dollars. It costs just a fraction of this amount to try to end the war by deploying an international intervention force. The new wars need both approaches. They need their societies to be healed from within, with civil society initiatives and peacemakers being the decisive factor in this respect. They also need strong resolve on the part of the international community if it decides in favor of military intervention. In many troubled regions, the fighting is not done by regular soldiers but by militias organised into unruly gangs. Many of them are still teenagers with the emotional maturity of children. And so this is how they behave – wildly, erratically, turning killing into a game. From my own experience of war zones I know that if someone bangs his fist on the table everyone shuts up. There has to be an authority figure to say ‘that’s enough!’, like the strict father that so many of these children in uniform have never known.

Of course, non-violent interventions are in principle always preferable. Europe’s present-day unity has been won at the cost of centuries of bloody war and new spirals of violence. It has been a long hard road to reach today’s union of nations where cultural differences are valued and seen as a positive enrichment. United in diversity – the EU’s external and cultural policies should spread this

motto as inspiration for the rest of the world. There is a good chance that this voice will be heard in places where people are struggling to return to peace. But only if Europe continues to really live its cultural diversity – in a constructive way.

**Michael Gleich** *is a journalist and writer specialising in finding understandable and surprising ways of presenting complex issues such as peace, social change and the environment. His works have been translated into several languages and he has won many awards. For his latest project, “Peace Counts”, journalists and photographers travelled to more than 30 conflict regions to document the work being done by peacemakers to find peaceful, proven ways of successfully resolving conflicts.*