



Deepening cultural dialogue and understanding

A growth in inter-cultural understanding and respect is fundamental to the resolution of innumerable global and regional challenges. Often the growth hinges on our readiness to deal with past wrongs. What strategies will encourage this growth?

Thank you very much for this invitation and

At one level as you have heard earlier this morning, and as is evident from the conversations at Caux, dialogue can be very straightforward – interesting, a thoroughly pleasant learning experience. But dialogue across conflict (as we heard the other day in relation to Kashmir) can often turn tricky or seriously backfire. While reciprocal respect and shared values are crucial for dialogue, it is not always enough.

It's easy enough to converse at a superficial level about something that is shared or different across cultures - art music celebrations - but these are not generally provocative or problematic. Even across a conflict these are often the soft subjects that people can easily relate across, but then if the conversation turns more political or touched on anything sensitive, maybe it will then break down.

Yet people in a conflict need to be encouraged to make every effort to maintain their human connectivity, even perhaps taught to consciously cultivate empathy in order precisely to overcome the dehumanising and polarizing effects of the conflict and create a possible space for peace.

As the (increasingly cruel and terroristic) new wars target civilians more than soldiers, so does the demonization in conflicts target the entire population, and tend to dismiss the possibility of any "innocents", so that all become enemies and all casualties, and the need to promote empathy and rebuild trust is even more imperative.

I will be talking about the obstacles to dialogue and to peace, the obstacles from our own unconscious defence mechanisms, and the problems of dwelling on wrongs and suffering. How it is only by looking in the mirror and by awareness and acknowledgement of our own wrong-doing, that we are perpetrators as well as victims, that we can create space for deeper dialogue and true understanding and pave a way for peace.

I live and work in Palestine, within the Palestinian community, mostly in East Jerusalem, and have worked on many intercultural projects via my NGO, MEND, including for instance developing curricula for high schools on tolerance and appreciation of the other, and working on for instance, training in co-facilitation, and therefore what I say will be based on my experience of the Palestinian Israeli conflict, a regional conflict that is frequently the focus of world attention.

Both societies are traumatized, for different historical reasons. The two sides have become increasingly polarized, and there is now virtually no contact. Especially since the war on Gaza, there are only a handful of people on either side left willing to engage in any kind of

dialogue.

Despite the enormous imbalance of power, the Israelis are a well-equipped, major military power, a nuclear power, with control over almost every aspect of Palestinian lives, while Palestinians only have small arms, and regardless for this presentation, of right or wrong, the majority of people on both sides are only able to talk and/or to hear about their own suffering. Both societies are traumatized and entrenched in a siege mentality. They are stuck in a mindset of victimhood.

But this mindset, a natural product of trauma and suffering, does not leave room for any middle ground. It is a mindset that projects all the evil onto the other/the enemy and denies any evil in the sufferer. It makes it impossible for someone who is suffering and sees themselves as a victim to also acknowledge that they themselves cause suffering. But of course in conflicts, whether between individuals or between peoples or countries, people tend to be both victims and perpetrators. Even as individuals, we all suffer, and we all cause suffering

A sense of victimhood promotes self-righteousness to the extent that it tends to deny the evil in the victim and project it onto the other, making them into a monster, the embodiment of evil, and it tends to make the victim, regardless of their actual actions, see themselves as totally innocent in all their actions. Violent acts therefore cannot be perceived as such and therefore there is no perceived need for empathy or for finding a middle ground.

This is frightening too and leads to: "What is more, since you are a monster, I must be afraid of you - in fact I am justified in taking any measures to protect myself against you since you are inhuman."

This also leads to: "As I am so afraid - I do not want any contact with you - I will hide and will bury you behind walls and under prohibitive access systems." Or alternatively, - "you have total power over my life and make it so miserable, if I have anything to do with you this risks implying that I feel OK with your behaviour, therefore I will refuse all contact."

These thoughts and fears and actions of course create further reasons for people to have no contact and to refuse even intercultural dialogue - as why should we talk with non-humans?

And this then feeds even more into the fears - the negativity and the paranoia on both sides (and there is plenty of that, both real and unreal - based in reality and based on fantasy) - and can only polarise further.

Polarisation and lack of contact feed into the fears and the fantasies and then fear can also be used to justify actions that would normally be considered morally reprehensible. Again, polarizing even further and pushing both sides to extremism and feeding into the cycle of violence.

The mindset of suffering or victimhood therefore blocks out any possibility of dialogue.

But as it is caused by unconscious mechanisms, one way to deal with it is to bring it into consciousness. By reflection and awareness of the fact that we are not entirely virtuous, we start to free up space in this cycle of dehumanization.

The first step is to work on one's self or on one's own side. To look at our own shadow, to look at the parts of ourselves we don't like so much.

By looking at our shadow selves, we can create a non-judgmental space for a dialogue where people can speak

without blaming and can also therefore listen without feeling judged and condemned.

To demand that others even listen to, let alone deal with past wrongs just drives people further apart.

The main thing is to create a space for dealing with past wrongs by acknowledging one's own guilt and listening.

This brings us back again to the essential need for growth in intercultural understanding as the only way to hear and see these bits with others and to reach out to their humanity.

If we desire peace, each of us must begin to demythologize the enemy; cease politicizing psychological events; re-own our shadows (those parts of our character we generally don't like

to acknowledge – usually our negative characteristics) ; make an intricate study of the myriad ways in which we disown, deny, and project our selfishness, cruelty, greed, and so on onto others; be conscious of how we have unconsciously created a warrior psyche and have perpetuated warfare in its many modes. (David Bohm, pg. 202)

To sum up, whatever the “past wrongs” and their extent, it is only by overcoming the sense of self-righteous victimhood and acknowledging our imperfections – that we can be perpetrators as well as victims, - that we can start to break through the psychological barriers in a conflict and can progress to real intercultural dialogue based on curiosity and caring and pave a way to peace.

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Caux,, July 2009

