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## The Healing of America: The Path to Reconciliation

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### Abstract

The 2016 presidential election exposed the presence of wide divisiveness in U.S. culture between political groups, racial groups, levels of education, rural and city areas, and religions. Expressions of polarization between groups occurred in episodes of violence, protests, marches, and disrespectful behavior among candidates. This article suggests that reconciliation between groups will not occur without a commitment to facing the truth about social problems in America, forgiveness for harms committed, demonstration of concern for the social welfare of the disadvantaged, and commitment to serving as agents of peace. Included is a case study that demonstrates how one community used many of these elements in their journey toward a more just community.

For more than two centuries, the United States has built its national identity on principles of human rights including racial equality, religious liberty, prohibition of discrimination based on race and national origin, and freedom of speech. As a nation, it has prided itself on welcoming immigrants. The poem “The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus, inscribed on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, reads in part,

Give me your tired, your poor,  
your huddled masses yearning to breathe  
free....  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

The cohesion of American culture has been rooted in people living in freedom and welcoming others to share that freedom.

The two-year presidential campaign ending in 2016 revealed widespread disagreement about which policies best reflect America’s core values. The campaigns exposed different perspectives between the rich and the poor, those born in the U.S. and immigrants, college graduates and high school graduates, Muslims and non-Muslims, those who live in rural areas and those who live in cities, and people of different racial backgrounds. The divisions in America culminated one month after the election with 52 protest marches and 437 hate incidents reported to the Southern Poverty Law Center.<sup>1</sup> Two months after the election, mental health agencies across the U.S. reported an

increase of client visits related to stress associated with the election campaign.<sup>2</sup> Ellis Cose points out that the campaign “unloosed fear and dread in Latino and Muslim communities and anger and resentment, already brought to a boil by police shootings and other tragedies among blacks.”<sup>3</sup> The problems appear to run deep. A mid-2016 Pew Research Poll found that 84% of blacks did not believe that they are treated fairly by police. In this same survey, only 46% of white Americans believe that race relations are generally good, and 45% said they are bad.<sup>4</sup> Though political rhetoric talks about America’s prosperity and greatness, many Americans feel left out or left behind.

Cultural division is not new to the U.S. From 1861-1865, the U.S. embroiled itself in a Civil War that involved North against the South and racial divisiveness. At the end of the war, in his Second Inaugural Address, Abraham Lincoln proclaimed, “With malice toward none, with charity for all ... let us strive on ... to bind up the nation’s wounds...and to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.” An assassin ended Lincoln’s life just six days later. In 1963, more than 200,000 protestors demanded civil and economic rights for African Americans at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. In 1968, both Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of racial injustice and anti-poverty programs. Both were assassinated. Anti-war protests dominated the political climate in America including street battles between protesters and policeman at the 1968

Democratic National Convention. Political and social division have long been an element of culture in the United States. The divisions have required decades to heal, and some wounds have never healed.

During the 2016 presidential campaign, many women expressed dissatisfaction with the political climate, feeling that they were disenfranchised and marginalized. Their unhappiness culminated in January, 2017, when five million women worldwide and one million women in Washington, D.C. participated in protest marches calling for social, economic, and political equality. Women sent a message that women's rights were human rights. Tamika Mallory, co-founder of the million women march said, "This is pro-women. This is a continuation of a struggle women have been dealing with for a very long time. In this moment, we are connecting and being as loud as possible."<sup>5</sup> As a gender gap widens over the effectiveness of legal and political processes, new discussions must occur to reconcile differences.

This article proposes that healing and reconciliation depend on attitudes and behavior occurring in four different areas: truth, forgiveness, justice, and peace. Daniel Philpott writes, "The core proposition is that reconciliation, both as a process and an end state, is itself a concept of justice. Its animating virtue is mercy and its goal is peace . . . concepts born deeply in religious traditions."<sup>6</sup> Each of the four domains depends on success of the others. Without truth, there can be no lasting peace. Without forgiveness, both peace and justice remain fragile. Without justice, there will continue to be doubts about trust.

The four pillars of reconciliation have as their central point a renewal of relationship and community. These pillars reflect the Jesuit value of *cura personalis*, concern for needs of every person, and the importance of building healthy and safe communities. They reflect Pope John Paul II's admonition for communities to become "animated by a spirit of freedom and charity . . . characterized by mutual respect, sincere dialogue, and protection of the rights of individuals."<sup>7</sup> Forgiveness and reconciliation encourages dialogue in a spirit of mutual respect. As communities learn to talk about their ideas and

solutions to problems, they embody the Jesuit principle of promoting the common good, creating a social and political system that benefits all segments of the population.



**Figure 1.** Four Critical Aspects of Reconciliation

### Reconciliation

For the U.S. to reclaim its historical identity, it will need to return to values that built its culture: respect for diversity of opinion, freedom to follow faith traditions, respect for racial backgrounds, and inclusion of the rights of minorities. Reconciliation involves creating respectful constructive conversations among people who have been divided. It means rebuilding cohesion with shared values at the center, regardless of religious, racial, or political backgrounds. Jeff Prager describes reconciliation as repairing the social fabric of a nation and transforming adversarial relations into civic relations.<sup>8</sup> For democracy to work, there must be respect for opposing viewpoints and confidence in electoral processes that enable democracy to function. Citizens dialogue with each other's perspectives in a pursuit of understanding and new answers to old questions.

Reconciliation involves addressing wounds that have been ignored or buried and that became sources of resentment. It means restoring trust in institutions that appear broken. John Paul Lederach describes reconciliation as opening up a "social space that permits and encourages individuals and societies as collectives to acknowledge the past, mourn for the losses, validate the pain experienced, confess the wrongs,

and reach toward the next steps of restoring the broken relationships.”<sup>9</sup> Reconciliation is weaving together a new national narrative with new themes and heroes.

Reconciliation and healing have been the goal of many nations that have gone through political and cultural transition. Countries that have pursued national reconciliation include Algeria, El Salvador, Canada, Namibia, Chile, Sierra Leone, Morocco, Timor Leste, and South Africa. The reconciliation efforts took many forms, but they all included goals of addressing the wounds of the past and commitment to working together for a shared future.

Reconciliation as healing will involve more than the apologies of political leaders for their insults and unethical behavior. Reconciliation requires changes in attitude and behavior by institutions but also millions of citizens on grassroot levels. A national identity is built on values lived by the many, not just the spoken words of a few in leadership, though these words help. Civil rights activist and Congresswoman Barbara Jordan once said, “What the people want is very simple – they want an America as good as its promise.”<sup>10</sup>

Because of ideological differences between the major political parties, reconciliation at the national level may be unrealistic. Reconciliation must begin in communities or social institutions and from there expand into national groups. A bottom-up approach possesses a much stronger potential for building social cohesion and inclusion of voices than a top-down approach.<sup>11</sup> A bottom-up approach provides greater opportunity for dialogue, breaking down of stereotypes, and integration of needs. In communities, this might involve a meeting in which the city government invites representatives from different groups to dialogue about how to address social problems, or a church that invites community members to a meeting to discuss economic or social issues in the neighborhood. A school might ask faculty and students to attend a meeting that includes members of the community. Discussion could focus on social issues of shared concern such as how to reduce racial tensions, how to build trust in the police department, or how to increase citizen involvement in government policy making.

An example of a bottom-up strategy occurred in the 1990s in Guatemala. Led by leadership from the Catholic church, a non-government group called the Civil Society Assembly invited representatives from all segments of society with the exception of the large corporations. The representatives achieved consensus on socio-economic issues, anti-discrimination, the rights of indigenous peoples, and resettling refugees. These national dialogues enabled people to “work together to resolve their conflicts through the creation of joint interests and supporting peace infrastructure.”<sup>12</sup> The agreements did not fully achieve the peace desired in Guatemala, but it provided opportunity to surface and discuss issues important to the population and achieve consensus on courses of action.

### **Truth**

Truth Commissions in Rwanda, Chile, Guatemala, and South Africa engaged in constructive looks at sources of violence and injustice in their populations. Their goals were to get behind the rhetoric of leaders with special interests. The commissions looked for patterns of violence and human rights violations. They sought to establish the truth about what divided their nations. The South African preamble to its Commission document included the goal, “to promote national unity and reconciliation in a spirit of understanding which transcends the conflict and divisions of the past.”<sup>13</sup> Martha Minow adds that the task involved framing “the events in a new national narrative of acknowledgment, accountability, and civic values.”<sup>14</sup>

It is doubtful that the United States government would authorize a truth commission. Face-saving and political posturing would prevent such an action. However, on the level of institutions, communities, and states, groups could engage in discussions that accomplish the same purpose. A list of issues could be discussed at all levels, including: the ethical use of political action committees, the reason the richest health care system in the world leaves so many people without care, how the nation tolerates the fact that 19.7% of American children and 28.7% of disabled live in poverty<sup>15</sup>, why there may be a racial bias in the actions of police or in the administration of justice, why there are 13.6

millionaires<sup>16</sup> and yet 3 million homeless people,<sup>17</sup> why 21.5 million Americans 12 years or older have drug addictions<sup>18</sup>, whether America would be better off if the government deported 11 million immigrants, or why there is insufficient funding to treat mental illness. Political rhetoric hides deeper problems that are insufficiently addressed. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said in his Second Inaugural Address, “The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much, it is whether we provide enough for those who have little.”<sup>19</sup>

Because the United States values the principles of fair democratic processes for electing its leaders, a recommitment to truth may mean holding candidates to higher ethical standard for political campaigns. For example, a church in San Diego linked Hillary Clinton to Satan and proposed that anyone who voted for Clinton had committed a mortal sin.<sup>20</sup> At a Hillary Clinton presidential primary, former Secretary of State Madeline Albright used a similar tactic, telling women voters that there was a place in hell for women who don’t help other women.<sup>21</sup> People were hired to start fights at Donald Trump rallies. Demonizing opponents and intentionally promoting division does not reach for a higher ethic in politics. It demeans people and escalates polarization.

A particularly demeaning tactic used in political campaigns to polarize populations is the use of labels or stereotypes. This tactic focuses voters’ attention on negative portrayals of candidates while obscuring positive attributes or the substance of policy discussions. For example, Clinton characterized Trump voters as deplorable, and those who opposed abortion as terrorist groups on women’s issues. Trump called Ted Cruz a liar, Hillary Clinton a crook, Mexican-Americans rapists, Univision anchor Jorge Ramos a madman, and NBC talk host Megyn Kelly a bimbo. House Speaker John Boehner called Ted Cruz a jackass. Jeb Bush characterized Asian immigrants as anchor babies.

The function of labeling and ridiculing opponents is to reduce the credibility of ideas and leadership claims. Labeling creates negative associations for opponents and focuses attention on opponent weaknesses. Labeling separates “us” from “them” and provokes listeners to choose sides. “Ridicule

is a potent weapon because it is almost impossible to counterattack. It infuriates the opposition, who then reacts to your advantage.”<sup>22</sup> Although opinion polls may suggest stereotyping is an effective campaign tactic, the wedges it creates in American public opinion are great and may never be worth the cost. In the long run, the polarization of political processes may inhibit the ability to effectively govern.

## Forgiveness

Forgiveness is not a word that is generally associated with national reconciliation, especially with a polarized electorate. However, unless people let go of negative emotions from the past, they can’t deal constructively with the future. Forgiveness is an alternative to resentment, long-lasting grudges, and revenge. In Peru, a country that experienced a great deal of violence and death from 2006-2011, Andean culture connects reconciliation to “forgiveness or *pampochanakuy* in Quechua, which means burying something in the pampas, evoking the idea of letting the past go.”<sup>23</sup> Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa describes forgiveness as “drawing out the sting in the memory that threatened to poison our entire existence.”<sup>24</sup> Trudy Govier explains that as people choose to rebuild relationships, “the memories that accompany forgiveness will be memories that exclude resentment and allow us to ‘let go’ while retaining the knowledge that things were done, and that they were wrong.”<sup>25</sup>

Forgiveness does not mean forgetting harms that have been committed. Such harms can be dealt with in discussions about reparation, boundaries for relationships, or agreements about future behavior. Forgiveness involves replacing bitter words and get-even actions with attempts at cooperation. It involves breaking the cycles of harm by decreasing negative behaviors toward the other and increasing positive behaviors. In so far as we are able, it involves attempts at understanding the other and generating some empathy or compassion.

Forgiveness does not condone harmful actions; it acknowledges it. It does not disempower victims by letting offenders off the hook; it empowers victims by facing offenders, choosing to forgive them, while at the same time discussing how to

prevent further harm. After discussions about genocide and inhumane prisons in Rwanda and South Africa, Tutu concluded,

The cycle of reprisal and counter reprisal that had characterized their national history had to be broken ... the only way to go beyond retributive justice to restorative justice, to move on to forgiveness because without it, there was no future.<sup>26</sup>

Forgiveness may not occur in formal apologies by leaders of political parties, but it can occur one person at a time in families, communities, and realms of government where leaders can relax from political posturing. Forgiveness enables parties to transition from divisive attitudes to cooperative attitudes. Geraldine Smythe explains that for Ireland to overcome its history of violence, of insiders versus outsiders, and of economic exclusion, “Forgiveness is perhaps the key redemptive step on the journey in reconciliation.”<sup>27</sup> Similarly, for the U.S. to overcome divisions between political parties, between the North and the South, or between racial groups, forgiveness will be a central component.

On a community or on a national level, letting go of the need for revenge may be difficult. Cycles of retribution match threat for threat or blame for blame. Overcoming these negative cycles requires a commitment to forgiveness that sets the resentment aside in order to work together on more just and ethical standards of behavior. For the common good, instead of adopting inflexible positions, the focus can be addressing issues that divide Americans. Instead of focusing on what can't be done, we can focus on what we can do together. Additionally, we can turn our attention to the core issues that divide America, such as the deterioration of family networks in our communities, the growth of violence that targets the innocent, the needs of those who feel left behind, or negative perceptions of social and religious groups. Without forgiveness, it will be difficult to reestablish a society built on trust and cooperation.

Forgiveness is at the heart of healing in many nations. For example, Chile's history included

policies enabling genocide. Following discussion about the harm of these practices, President Alywin issued an apology on behalf of the government and expressed a need for forgiveness and reconciliation.<sup>28</sup> Truth and forgiveness were linked. Similarly, forgiveness and truth were linked in the reconciliation between the Canadian government and its aborigine population. After a year of study, Canada acknowledged unjust treatment of aborigine people and made a public statement expressing “profound regret for past actions of the federal government, which contributed to these difficult pages in the history of a relationship together.”<sup>29</sup> In Ghana, in an effort to create national reconciliation, President Kufuo issued the statement, ““Those who have been wronged need to be acknowledged, and where it is beyond human capability that those wrongs can be reversed as in the loss of dear ones, for example, the least we can do is to publicly apologize and help in whatever way we can, with their rehabilitation.”<sup>30</sup> An apology does not guarantee forgiveness or reconciliation, but it is a first step.

An opportunity for the U.S. government to address old wounds occurred at the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North Dakota during 2016. The Native Americans at the reservation believed that the potential for contaminated water created by the building of the Dakota Access pipeline one-half mile from the reservation violated their human rights. The pipeline builders, supported by financial and corporate interests, engaged in a standoff with those asserting the human rights of the Native Americans. The *Washington Post* characterized the standoff as, “The pipeline represents the latest chapter in the nation's long history of disrespect and abuse of Native Americans.”<sup>31</sup> A tribal leader described the project as “environmental racism,” an example of “hundreds of years of colonial oppression,” and “the force of genocide.”<sup>32</sup> Nearly 2000 people who protested lived in tents in 20 degree weather. Police arrested 560 of the protesters. When the Army Corps of Engineers temporarily halted the project in order to do an environmental impact assessment (truth), celebration broke out at the camp. Five miles of cars lined the highway with people seeking to join in the camp's celebration. Speakers characterized the victory as justice for American's “original sin” of ill treatment of

indigenous peoples and a “war for the hearts of humanity.”<sup>33</sup> Princeton professor Cornell West captured the spirit of healing in explaining why so many stood with members of the tribe: “Because we have a profound love of our priceless indigenous brothers and sisters and because justice is what love looks like in public.”<sup>34</sup> If truth can be coupled with acts of social justice, forgiveness stands a good chance of healing division.

## Justice

Name calling, stereotyping, emotionally charged rhetoric based on value differences, and politically motivated acts of violence divide and polarize populations. Even those who are not the target of divisive behavior share the emotional pain of the action. An insult to a single Hispanic becomes an insult to thousands when social media or CNN News reports it. The emotional wound of one becomes the pain of many. Healing may require more than determination of truth or apologies. Native Americans in the U.S. still speak of atrocities committed by the U.S. military 200 years ago. Rwandans vividly remember generations of genocide. Forgiveness may be shallow if apologies are not connected to acts of social justice. Actions may involve new policies that prevent future harm.

Daniel Philpott points out that justice in the scriptures of all three Abrahamic traditions is closely linked to the word “righteousness” (*Sedaq* in Hebrew or *‘Adl* in Arabic).<sup>35</sup> A healthy relationship requires the presence of justice. Reconciliation and justice merge together when democratic processes address harms of the past in a joint effort to plan the future. Erin Daly and Jeremy Sarkin argue that the task is to redirect the “focus of people’s attention from destruction to construction, from selfish impulses to community needs, from past to future.”<sup>36</sup>

On the societal level, scholars distinguish between retributive and restorative justice. Retributive justice is an approach that demands an eye for an eye or punishment in response to harm. Though it assigns penalty to the one who commits harm, it does not repair relationships or assure that the harm will not be repeated. Everett Washington points out that the “primary social effect of (retributive) justice is to reduce unforgiveness not

to promote forgiveness.”<sup>37</sup> The conditions that created the problem continue. Additionally, in many cases, it may be difficult to even determine who is responsible for the harm. Retributive justice and reconciliation can be at odds as commissions search for perpetrators and determine penalties.

A second approach is restorative justice, a path that connects restoring relationship to justice, mercy and peace. Philpott explains that restorative justice “calls for the repair of actual persons and relationships and aims at a state of affairs in which the repair has been achieved.”<sup>38</sup> Anthony da Silva, S.J. also links the healing of communities to the concepts of restorative justice. He views social reconciliation as a potential outcome of dialogue among offenders and those offended. It seeks justice for victims while promoting harmony. “Such a dialogue tends to create an enabling climate for forgiveness and reconciliation.”<sup>39</sup> In terms of the American public, this can mean inclusive local or national discussions to address the deeper social wounds in American culture. The components of restorative justice include: 1) Acknowledging the suffering of victims, 2) offering an apology and valuing forgiveness to repair the relationship, 3) exploring reparations to repair damage, and 4) seeking the building of a just process to prevent future harm. The first 3 of these factors link to establishing the truth about harm and processes of forgiveness. The fourth factor addresses a need to create a new cultural norm for behavior and establish a climate of safety and peace.

In terms of application, this may mean that leaders resist attacking one another in favor of focusing on issues that need to be fixed. Instead of arguing with “me” or “you,” we speak of “we.”

Negotiated understanding replaces emotionally divisive rhetoric. There may be winners from using divisive rhetoric, but the number of losers grows: 500,000 homeless veterans, a growing number of people living in poverty, people who can’t get adequate health or mental health care, victims of gun violence, and a growing dissatisfaction by people with their leaders. Reconciliation and healing are grounded in facing uncomfortable societal truths, learning to accept and forgive those who have different opinions, and engaging in actions that promote justice in

our communities. How can this occur? Citizens can choose not to get involved in divisive social media, choose not to watch television programs advocating divisiveness, hold leaders accountable through the ballot box, and by getting involved in community discussions that address the deep needs of our communities.

A convergence of mercy, forgiveness, and justice occurred on December 14, 2016. During a summer Trump political rally in March 2016, 79-year old Franklin McGraw, a white man, punched 27-year old Rakeem Jones, a black protester in the face. The police arrested McGraw. On the television show *Inside Edition*, Jones said, “The next time we see him, we might have to kill him. We don’t know who he is. He might be with a terrorist organization.”<sup>40</sup> On December 14, McGraw stood before a judge in Cumberland County Court in North Carolina. After sentencing, McGraw walked over to Jones. He said, “I’m extremely sorry that this happened. I hate it worse than anything else in the world. If I met you in the street and the same thing occurred, I would have said, ‘Go on home. One of us will get hurt.’ That’s what I would have said. But we are caught up in a political mess today, and you and me, we got to heal our country.”<sup>41</sup> Jones accepted the apology and the two shook hands. Then they hugged. Healing begins when we are willing to put aside our differences, forgive others, and begin a healing process.

## Peace

Defining how we might understand the concept of peace can be complex. In the interpersonal dimension, it can mean the ability to discuss points of difference with civility. For cultures that have been engulfed in years of warfare, it can mean cessation of violence. For those valuing the safety of a stable community, it can mean lower incidence of homicide, fewer rapes, or less overall crime. In the healing of divisions within society, it can mean healthy relationships between leaders, cooperative democratic processes, and development of policies that serve the common good. In this last dimension, social justice and the ability to constructively dialogue with one another are foundational. Lederach connects peace to justice in his assessment that “justice without peace falls easily into cycles of bitterness and

revenge; peace without justice is short-lived and benefits only the privileged or the victors.”<sup>42</sup> Long-term peace requires the presence of truth, forgiveness, and relationships that value the welfare of the disadvantaged.

Christianity and Islam view peace in similar ways. In Christianity, the Hebrew word for peace is *shalom* and in the New Testament’s Greek *Eirene*. Both words refer to a state of harmony in relationships that is reflective of mutual concern for the welfare of others. It is no coincidence that when Jesus began his ministry to reconcile God to man and bring peace to the world, he spoke of care for the poor, the blind, and the captives. He called it a “year of Jubilee, whose themes for social justice included forgiveness of debt and freeing of slaves. Similarly, in Islam, the word for peace, *salam*, means more than just cessation of hostilities. It includes harmony produced by treating others with justice. “Peace in Islam is not merely to be realized among individuals but is also meant to characterize entire social orders.”<sup>43</sup>

Peace can be viewed as either a state of being or a type of behavior. As a state of being, it may mean absence of conflict or anxiety. This state can be one of harmony and absence of fear. On the other hand, peace can be viewed as a manner of behavior, one that brings peace in relationships. A song that captures both of these views of forgiveness proposes, “Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.” Each person can be an instrument of peace attempting to create an emotional climate of peace.

The achievement of peace in a community requires both peacemakers and peacebuilding activities. Peacemakers can exist at every level of community, from neighbor to neighbor to relationships among leaders. The goal at every level is not to impose a way of thinking on each other, but to negotiate a new way that solves old problems. The Development Assistance Committee, an international organization with a membership of 30 countries, is committed to sustainable development, economic growth, reduction of poverty, and improvement of living standards. To accomplish these goals, the group encourages greater citizen involvement. The DAT emphasizes the importance of inclusive grassroots



discussions of societal problems in their assessment:

Peacebuilding focuses on long-term support to, and establishment of, viable political and socio-economic and cultural institutions capable of addressing the root causes of conflicts as well as other initiatives aimed at creating the necessary conditions for sustained peace and stability. These activities also seek to promote the integration of competing or marginalized groups, within mainstream society through providing equitable access to political decision-making.<sup>44</sup>

John Gaventa describes the integration of people from different roles and social groups in grassroots discussion as “invited spaces,” encouraging citizens to participate in bringing problems to the surface and solving problems.<sup>45</sup> More than that, it provides a sense of belonging instead of feeling like outsiders. This process is antithetical to decisions being made by a few leaders behind closed doors. Participants replace political rhetoric with sharing of knowledge, telling their stories and building trust.

Community peace-building processes are not new in divided countries. They occurred in Nicaragua, during the 1980s, South Africa, Rwanda, Somalia and Mozambique during the 1990s, and recently in Northern Ireland. Lederach identifies 3 types of approaches to peace-building processes.<sup>46</sup> Each of the approaches involves a neutral facilitator to monitor constructive behavior and discussion. The first approach involves a gathering of people who serve prominent roles in the community, such as leaders of city government, health care administrators, or leaders in law enforcement. A second approach involves representatives from primary networks, such as religious groups, colleges, social service agencies, or humanitarian groups. A third approach is to bring together people in conflict, and both build relationships and explore solutions to problems. This third group might involve representatives from minority groups, neighborhood groups, people from different geographical regions, or sparring members of political parties. The goals in each approach involve surfacing truths, facilitating forgiveness, encouraging understanding, and

engaging minds in a first step of problem solving. Pulling together adversaries, under the guidance of a neutral mediator, enables people to target issues and not each other, and creates the opportunity for “relational transformation and the integration of society.”<sup>47</sup> All groups may not be as successful as others, but participants may leave meetings with new problem-solving skills.

### Case Study

In 2014, I was invited to facilitate discussions for a city government in a city of 65,000 people. The City Council established a goal to determine whether the municipal court had administered laws fairly. The Council asked, “Was the court regarded as too lenient or too harsh in its penalties for breaking the law?” With full prisons and full probation officer caseloads, the question was highly relevant for the community. Additionally, the Council identified a new problem, how to prosecute violations committed by illegal immigrants, who if found guilty, would be sent back to their countries.

To get a diversity of opinion about how the courts administered justice, the city council authorized a gathering of twenty five representatives drawn from all sectors of government. This included the police department, the courts, victim’s advocate, the social service offices, the judges, and the city council. In preparation for full group meetings, I met individually with each of the participants to identify issues that could serve as agenda for the full group meetings. Immediately, I found tension and anger between the prosecuting attorneys and the defense attorneys. Many old emotional wounds existed between the groups. So, we met privately to discuss their issues and to create understanding and forgiveness.


We held two full group meetings, each lasting a couple of hours. The group discussed 18 issues identified in the individual meetings. The group achieved consensus (identifying truth) on reducing graffiti by gangs in shopping areas, and three social justice issues: 1) ways to address mental health problems associated with abuse convictions and traffic violations, 2) appropriate policy in prosecution of illegal immigrants and the effect on their families, and 3) policies about jail time associated with abuse cases for welfare families.

Following these meetings, a third meeting occurred with Mayor and City Council. The presence of camera crews suggested that insights from the meeting would be played on the evening news. The first question in the meeting, proposed by the Mayor, was to me: “Did the representatives work collaboratively to identify and explore solutions to community problems?” Following this question, for the next several hours, the mayor and council read the list of recommendations, asked questions of participants, and discussed budget implications of possible courses of action. After the meeting, the participants expressed gratitude for being included in the discussion of policies involving the welfare of the community. In retrospect, what was missing in these discussions were representatives from the business community, different racial groups who might be impacted by decisions, and representatives from faith groups.

These types of meetings, involving participants who care about the welfare of the community, can identify truth, work in a spirit of collaboration and forgiveness, address social issues of shared concern, and create a spirit of peace in working relationships outside of the political rhetoric associated with politics. The healing of societal divisions requires the involvement of the populations affected by public policy.

## Conclusion

America’s divisive society will continue to polarize unless a sufficient number of people commit to serving as instruments of peace. This peace is expressed in an honest facing of the truths about society’s ills, forgiveness for past failures and commitment to new beginnings, and actions that demonstrate concern for the disadvantaged. As peace is expressed first in relationships, then in communities, it has the potential to expand into matters of government. If we can’t commit our interest and resources to this task, the fuel remains for continued cycles of conflict. Healing requires relationships grounded in trust, and, at times, mercy for failures. America will need to hold its politicians accountable for unethical political behavior and lack of respect for diversity of opinion. Reconciliation is a shared process in which parties dialogue, negotiate, and seek integrative answers to shared problems. In the

end, it’s not about one side winning over the other, it’s about both sides winning together. 

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Karl Vick, “The U.S. Continues to Come Apart in the Wake of a Divisive Election,” *Time*, November 28, 2016, 9-10.

<sup>2</sup> Jessica Ravitz, “Calls to Crisis and Suicide Prevention and Surge Post Election,” *CNN*, November 11, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/11/11/health/election-crisis-suicide-prevention-hotlines/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Ellis Cose, “How Can America Heal As One?” *USA Today*, December 4, 2016, 7A.

<sup>4</sup> Pew Research Center, “On Views of Race and Inequality, Blacks and Whites are Worlds Apart” (June 27, 2016), <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2016/06/27/on-views-of-race-and-inequality-blacks-and-whites-are-worlds-apart/>.

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