

**Sheila Cannon\***

**Inter-ethnic Dialogue  
as a Personal and Collective Healing Process:  
Examples from the Former Yugoslavia**

Civil society programmes in the former Yugoslavia that involve inter-ethnic dialogue have a greater impact on individuals, groups, and perhaps on society, when the projects engage the whole individual, intellectually and emotionally. This phenomenon is elucidated by examining experience in the field. The initiatives that contribute to an indigenous healing process, on the personal and group levels, receive better evaluations by participants, are more sustainable, and are more effective overall.

Researching the publications and reports of hundreds of projects that involve inter-ethnic dialogue, and talking to participants in and organisers of those initiatives, one can conclude that programmes to conduct interethnic dialogue are not necessarily helpful or useful.<sup>1</sup> They may just scratch the surface, and not have any real impact on the participants and on society. How they are conducted is key to their success.

In the past few years, as widespread violence in the former-Yugoslavia has largely ceased, Civil Society Organisations have issued plenty of project reports indicating the importance of inter-ethnic dialogue as effective and worthwhile in helping to transform violent conflict. Literally thousands of project activities that include inter-ethnic dialogue as a component, such as regional teacher training, conferences, journalist training, human rights awareness raising, reconciliation initiatives, have been financed by the International Community. Measuring the impact and quantifying the results of such work is difficult, if not impossible. How can we tell, therefore, whether these initiatives are really effective?

It is possible to find statistics that seem to support the claim that inter-ethnic dialogue on the grass-roots level does indeed make a difference during times of crisis and mobilised violence. A report from April 2004 states that in the 30 communities in Kosovo where CARE, an international NGO, was running inter-ethnic dialogue programmes, virtually no violence occurred during the violent

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the information used in this article has been gathered through informal interviews during workshops and conferences in which I have participated from 2000 to 2004. The most comprehensive source of information on this topic is condensed in one database that can be found at <<http://www.see-database.org>>.

riots of March 2004.<sup>2</sup> However, more reliable evidence of a direct relationship between inter-ethnic dialogue and a decreased tendency towards violence is not available.

The experience of a youth group that has formed in the past year in the former Yugoslavia shows that outside experts offering advice are not as helpful as a carefully guided process of dialogue between the group members. The Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe (CDRSEE) has been running a youth programme called "*Building a Future Together*" that was initiated in April 2003. When the youth were given the space to trust each other and share their personal stories, they were able to understand each other better, as they empathised with each others' experiences, and thus began a post-conflict healing process. The youth group members are mostly from the former Yugoslavia and are activists, students, and young professionals, between the ages of 18 and 30. They are designing joint projects, sharing experiences, and beginning to implement some of those projects that they have designed together.

The CDRSEE held a one week long training workshop in September 2003, which was the first in a series with the youth participants. There were two types of expert trainers.

- The International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ, <[www.ictj.org](http://www.ictj.org)>) deals with all of the issues in a post-conflict, transitional society, such as criminal tribunals, lustration, reparations, truth commissions, etc.
- The Oxford Leadership Academy (<[www.oxfordleadership.com](http://www.oxfordleadership.com)>) offered a course in Self Managing Leadership. It uses a model that can be applied to businesses, individuals, governments, or societies. It begins with the individual to identify values, and ends with an action plan.

The ICTJ course on the first two days covered all of the major elements of Transitional Justice. The methodology relied on the fact that we can learn from examples from other societies that have found creative and successful ways of dealing with the complex post-conflict issues, but that each society must design its own country-specific transitional justice mechanisms. The group discussed, for example, the Truth Commission in South Africa, which was a successful example compared to the Truth Commissions in the Balkans which have not yielded the same type of results. They considered the idea of having one regional Truth Commission, which in their view would be the best solution, but would face the major obstacle of a lack of political will to support it.

The Transitional Justice course with the youth proved to be less effective than expected. The workshop organisers could see that the trainers were excellent. The approach was objective, scientific, pragmatic, and informed. The participants, overall, rejected the idea of comparing the situation in the Balkans to other post-conflict situations. The discussions seemed to have a divisive effect on the group; cliques formed, and the participants made negative, resentful comments.

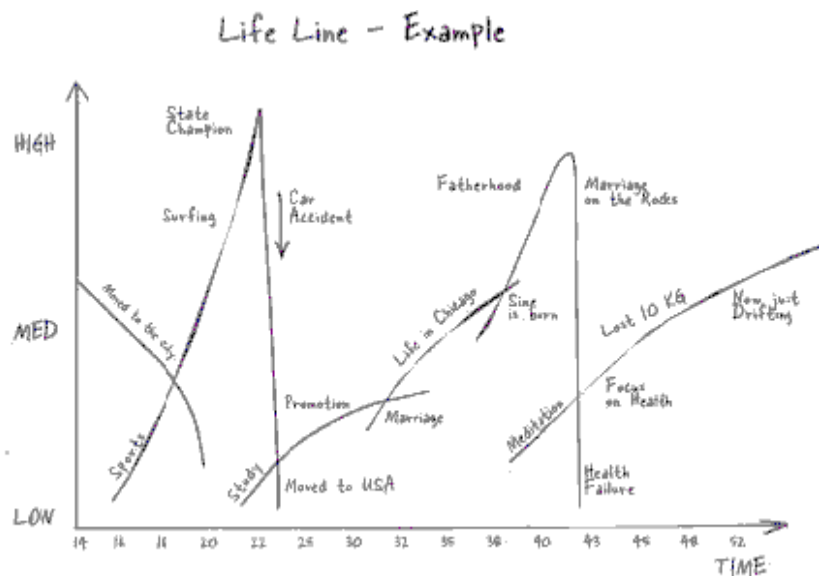
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<sup>2</sup> International Crisis Group: *Collapse in Kosovo*. Report No 155, 22 April 2004, Pristina/Belgrade/Brussels, p. 16;  
<<http://www.crisisweb.org/home/index.cfm?id=2627&l=1>>

When Oxford Academy began the leadership training course on day three, a complete transformation happened. The trainer, Brian Bacon, is a consultant to major multi-national corporations, and to governments, and runs a self-management course for leaders and executives. The course that he led with his colleague, Tanja Petovar, a Human Rights Lawyer from Belgrade, during the September workshop was Self Managing Leadership. It did not begin with the wider society as the ICTJ one did, but with the individual, and with his or her own life experiences. One of the first activities that the youth were asked to do was to make a map of ones' own life on a chart where the Y axis represents happiness/success and sadness/failure, and the X axis represents time, see chart 1. They were marked the phases or events in life on the chart according to success and failure. They were given 15 minutes to complete the chart, and then divided into small groups to share their charts with each other. This had a profound effect on the group dynamics. After the first morning session, when they then broke up for lunch, the group had a completely different quality. The cliques had largely dissolved, and the workshop organisers noticed a new open and constructive tone.

### Chart 1. From The Oxford Leadership Programme

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The training subsequently led the participants to identify their own values, their values as a group, their purpose and mission, and their specific action plan. Out of the two days came three excellent projects that are now developing and continuing.

The experience of the group transformation from hostile resentful individuals, to an open constructive group was remarkable. Bacon's method stands in contrast to a global comparative study on how to approach transitional justice. Regardless of the fact that the ICTJ training was excellent, this particular subject matter requires a more personal approach. Effective inter-ethnic dialogues must include the personal psychology of the individuals involved. The result will be much more profound impact on the participants.

A body of research and experience on this topic shows that individuals have been working on inter-ethnic dialogues largely separately from each other, only sometimes linking up from different regions or within the same region. One of the most extensive and advanced projects, which takes place outside the Balkans, began in 1988 and is called, To Reflect and Trust (TRT), a group that consists of German descendants of Nazi perpetrators and Jewish descendants of Holocaust survivors.<sup>3</sup> The next generation after WWII meet with each other and simply tell their own story – who they are, what they have done in their lives; much of it is underscored by how the legacy of the war affected them. The process is deceptively simple. The small 'dialogue groups' begin with the individual, the personal, but aim towards breaking down the stereotypes and collective identities of 'the other'.

In an article about the methodology used in the TRT dialogue groups, the authors suggest that their work resonates on three levels: individual, group, and societal.

*"We suggest that before reconciliation is possible, one has to work through the pain and the evil of the past events. We have learned that one can work through unresolved pain and anger related to past traumas through group encounters."*<sup>4</sup>

The individual is the one who has suffered pain or trauma; the *group* is the 'dialogue group', or simulation of society where one can embark on the healing process; and the societal refers to the wider community that faces reconciliation, or the lack of it. This three-part nexus is complex, and the dynamics between the parts – individual, group, societal – are fundamental in deciphering the effects of inter-ethnic dialogue.

The individual and societal healing processes are linked by creating 'dialogue groups', which serve as a simulation or small-scale society. The individual goes through a process of emotional re-learning on the individual level that can be re-

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<sup>3</sup> Albeck, Joseph H.; Sami Adwan; Dan Bar-On: Dialogue Groups: TRT's Guidelines for Working through Intractable Conflicts by Personal Storytelling. In: *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 8 (2002), 4, pp. 301–322.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

lated to the societal context by sharing in small groups. The small groups link the experience of the individual to the society, and serve as a testing ground or school, a place to practice how the individual will be reborn into society having been through personal epiphany, or self-searching process. The practice of remembering the past in small groups as part of a societal re-entry process is described by Mircea Eliade when he refers to mythico-ritual experiences in traditional cultures that involve a collective going back to the beginning of time, recollection ("*anamnesis*"), and result in an 'awakening', or re-birth back into society.<sup>5</sup> While Eliade refers largely to ancient and Eastern traditions, which are very different contexts to modern Europe, the comparison does provide a well-examined example of how a group experience links the individual to the societal.

Dr. Dan Bar-On of Ben Gurion University of the Negev in Israel demonstrates how the 'dialogue groups' can be applied to different societies when he successfully transfers this methodology to different conflict prone areas of the world. He brought together at one conference in 1998 people from the different sides of conflicts from Northern Ireland, South Africa, and Israel.<sup>6</sup> Individuals who participated in these 'dialogue groups' build up trust between each other to reveal, even to themselves as a personal epiphany, his or her feelings on the micro level, which then contribute to understanding the complexities of the political and social environment on the macro level. As the individuals share their personal stories with each other, they begin to empathise, and then the former 'enemy' can be re-humanised. The hope is that when individuals go through this psychological process as a group, a similar healing will then be possible on the societal level.

Dr. Dan Bar-On refers to this process as, "personal storytelling as a way of working through political and collective hostilities." This concept is relevant to several on-going initiatives in the Balkans, the CDRSEE's youth project among others. These select projects are evaluated by participants as exceptional, and as having a great impact. It is also interesting to note that many of these initiatives are indigenous, not imported, and several were initiated by women from the former Yugoslavia.

An example of personal storytelling as part of the healing process after massive trauma can be seen in the work of Dr. Janja Beč, sociologist at the University of Zagreb. She has published a book called *The Shattering of the Soul* in which she has gathered stories from Bosnian women who mostly lost their homes and families and became refugees in Slovenia.<sup>7</sup> She met with the women, gained their confidence, and listened to their stories. Dr. Beč engaged these victims in the process of personal storytelling, and the tales are heart-breaking. By listening attentively to their stories, and by documenting them she made the victims feel that

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<sup>5</sup> Eliade, Mircea: *Myth and Reality*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers 1963, pp. 75–91 (Time can be Overcome); pp. 114–138 (Mythologies of memory and Forgetting).

<sup>6</sup> Bar-On, Dan (Ed.): *Bridging the Gap*. Koerber-Stiftung, Hamburg 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Beč, Janja: *The Shattering of the Soul*. Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, Belgrade 1997.

their stories were legitimate or valid. This process is an indigenous initiative of personal and collective healing.

There are several other examples of this process of personal and collective healing in the former Yugoslavia. All of these initiatives are good examples of how to engage people in post-conflict dialogue, intellectually and emotionally, including the psychology of the participants in a constructive way, and as part of a personal and collective healing process. Dr. Svetlana Broz, a physician from Belgrade, travelled to battle zones during the wars of the 1990's and gathered stories of personal experiences of the wars. Her collection of stories in one volume entitled, *Good People in an Evil Time*, records people who conducted acts of goodness across the ethnic divide.<sup>8</sup> Dr. Svetlana Slapšak led a caravan journey with 47 women activists from the former Yugoslavia and Albania to the conflict areas of the wars of the 1990's. They met and listened to people who lived through the wars. Their personal experiences and impressions are published in a book that reads similar to a diary, *Balkan Women for Peace*.<sup>9</sup>

The Nansen Dialogues are another good example of indigenous inter-ethnic dialogue that rests on the premise that the outsider is the facilitator, and the dialogue process is in the hands of the participants themselves.<sup>10</sup> When the Nansen Academy in Lillehammer, Norway, which later teamed up with the International Peace Research Institute (PRIO), began work in the former Yugoslavia in 1995, the project leaders brought in outside experts to lecture on Democracy, Human Rights and Peaceful Conflict Resolution. The organisers were perceptive and open enough to realise fairly quickly that they did not have much to teach the participants about their own societies, so they began to let the participants talk, and the organisers listen. After a period of developing the dialogue process, this project grew into the establishment of several Nansen Dialogue Centres throughout the region with the goal of undertaking "inter-ethnic dialogue as a means of promoting mutual understanding, reconciliation and peace building."<sup>11</sup>

In the introduction of her book, *The Shattering of the Soul*, Dr. Beč mentions the fact that there has been extensive documentation of the wars of the 90's in the Balkans, and we know much about what happened, but at the same time we hear very little of the personal experiences of people and what they experienced during those years. There is a dichotomy between the personal feelings on the micro level that are underemphasised in conflict societies, and the public information on the macro level which is overemphasised in recording and reporting on conflicts. This dichotomy is analysed, but in a different context, in the book, *Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman.<sup>12</sup> His conclusions on the human brain and psychology are that a misleading and inaccurate emphasis has been put on IQ or in-

<sup>8</sup> Broz, Svetlana: *Good People in an Evil Time*. Sarajevo: Graficar Promet 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Deschaumes, Ghislaine; Svetlana Slapšak (eds.): *Balkan Women for Peace*. Paris: Transeuropéennes / Réseaux pour la culture en Europe 2002.

<sup>10</sup> The Nansen Dialogue Project consists of independent Dialogue Centres in several cities. For more information see <<http://www.nansen-dialogue.net>>.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, Dan: *Annual Report 2002, Nansen Network*, Prio and Nansenskolen 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Goleman, Daniel: *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books 1997.

telligence since the 1920s when IQ tests were first invented, with the notion that emotions only hinder intelligence and the ability to learn. Goleman overturns this conventional assumption relying on recent psychological research to reveal that emotional intelligence is a greater determinate of how a person will succeed or not in life. He inverts the hierarchy of importance between information versus emotion.

According to Goleman, emotional learning is the way our experiences and how we feel about them shape who we are and what we do. Much emotional learning happens in the first few months and years of life. But there is evidence that re-learning throughout our lives, changing old habits and patterns, is possible, but not easy. Psychiatrists lead patients through a process of emotional re-learning by asking them to go back in time to childhood, uncover the experiences locked in the past, and nurture or heal the trauma as if one could travel back in time. Dr. Sigmund Freud was one of the first to propound the concept of a 'going back in time' through psychoanalysis, which is emotional re-learning, and he was followed subsequently by many psychologists and psychoanalysts.<sup>13</sup>

Storytelling is a way of emotional re-learning, and it is this same procedure that psychiatrists use when they treat patients with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). After massive trauma, the individual can experience 'flashbacks' or emotional flooding even just recalling the trauma, or being reminded of it years later. During therapy, when patients repeat their story in a safe place, they are putting the overwhelmingly terrifying event in a more manageable social context. They learn that they are gradually more and more able to deal with even thinking about that traumatic event in the past, and condition the brain on how to respond. It is possible, even without professional help, for an individual to heal him or her self.<sup>14</sup> An encouraging finding comes from a study of Holocaust survivors with PTSD. One quarter of those who had PTSD after World War II recovered from it on their own. Even though PTSD changes the chemical composition of the brain, the change is not permanent, and the effects can be reversed with therapy, and even without therapy. In the former Yugoslavia, after the trauma of the 1990s, some people, such as Janja Beč, Svetlana Broz, Svetlana Slapšak, the Nansen Dialogues, and the CDRSEE youth group, seem to be taking part in healing-processes with individuals and groups.

The psychological aspects of the healing process after war are usually kept out of the conference room, and put separately into ones personal life. At hundreds of conferences in the post-conflict Balkans, organised by local and international NGOs, Intergovernmental Organisations, and by local and foreign governments, the handout materials include brief biographies, one paragraph on what each participant has achieved, where he or she studied and worked, etc. Along

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<sup>13</sup> See Freud, Sigmund: Die Freudsche psychoanalytische Methode (1904). In: *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 5, Frankfurt 1961, pp. 3–10; idem: Die Verdrängung (1915). In: *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 10, Frankfurt 1963, pp. 248–261; idem: Das Unbewußte (1915). In: *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 10, Frankfurt 1963, pp. 264–303.

<sup>14</sup> Goleman, op. cit. (above n. 12), p. 208.

with those facts goes a parallel and ignored chart of one's emotional life, what we have felt, where we were when our countries fell into war, what we experienced and what that felt like, for example. The challenge is finding a constructive way to include the feelings and emotions into the post-conflict, reconciliation work.

Not only do the dialogue group participants benefit from a more personal approach, but the internationals or foreigners present in post-conflict societies also learn much from the storytelling. It may seem to be stating the obvious to say that people who are from the conflict areas and live there usually have much greater insight on the subtleties and complexities of the social and political problems of their own societies, even if they take one extreme side or the other. But this fact is often bypassed. Unfortunately, often the internationals who are there trying to help, fail to learn from the local community the underlying issues, the issues that genuinely move people, beyond just the facts of the conflict. Sometimes the local knowledge does not transfer to the internationals who are present. Consequently, engaging in a process of personal storytelling as a way of working through political and collective hostilities would be beneficial both for the people who are part of the local society, and for those internationals to learn from too.

A better understanding of the psychological processes that are part of inter-ethnic dialogue in post-conflict societies would improve the initiatives in this field. It is not an easy subject to deal with, and could cause more trouble than not if it is handled poorly. Digging up the past without proper guidance or without the proper focus or context, can be destructive. Perhaps women are more prone to undertake this work, being more comfortable to talk about feelings and emotions, especially in a macho culture and a patriarchal society. Although the centuries-old storytelling tradition in the Balkans, 'guslari', which is a formulaic recital accompanied by music, is a male-tradition. This practice has been likened by scholars to oral epic poetry, and could serve as a type of communal psychotherapy. As Mircea Eliade has expounded extensively, myths and the traditions that accompany them such as recitation, are a form of collective 'going back' and serve much the same function to the community as psychotherapy does to the individual.<sup>15</sup>

What Brian Bacon was doing when he asked the youth participants to chart their lives was to walk through their own process of emotional learning from birth to today. He genuinely engaged them as whole people, emotions and intellect. He facilitated their sharing emotions with each other in a process of guided personal storytelling. Sharing in small groups connected the individual with the larger society. We do not know yet if the individual and group healing process will also result in a societal healing or recovery after war in the former Yugoslavia. There are too many variables at play. The people undertaking successful inter-ethnic dialogues, even without knowing if their work will result in helping the society recover after war, seem to be motivated enough to continue their work by knowing that it is a possibility.

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<sup>15</sup> Eliade, op. cit. (above n. 5), pp. 76–79.