

From Truce to Transformation
Live Issues 5
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*Truce: A temporary cessation from arms; fidelity to a promise,
good faith, assurance of engagement and covenant.*

The Compact Oxford English Dictionary

Introduction

Four years ago, nearly to the date, seated around a lunch table in the midst of *Live Issues 1*, I had a minor epiphany. I have a hobby of listening for poetry in conversation. It is surprising how often insights emerge unexpectedly in everyday exchanges. I don't recall who spoke them, but commenting on the current state of affairs on this fine troubled Island, two sentences popped out. That evening I scribbled them down in my notebook. Months later I added two words, "he says" and a title. They formed a perfect haiku. Poets and peacebuilders are thieves, in the business of noticing the unnoticed, stealing from craic and conversation, and then serving them up as if they are new. So here, to start *Live Issues 5*, I serve you the haiku.

Rainbow's End?

"Maybe," he says, "This
"is as good as it will get.
Peaceful bigotry."

Belfast
October 22, 2003

The length of a breath, this haiku summarized something of the moment. For better or worse some moments have extended life expectancies. This poem, for example, seems to capture the topic of our conference today, some four years later.

The two sentences are a perfect summation of the common understanding of *truce* as a cessation of armed struggle. In settings of protracted conflict a truce is often watched by many with suspicion and held at arm's length as something fundamentally untrustworthy. Take the following which first came out as the ending sentence of this

paragraph but seem more appropriately presented in poetic form of something of the suspicion of what "truce" means for many.

The Truce

*Whilst we hold close
the steel bitterness of our weapons
past and future*

for the time-being

*we agree
not to use them
and will
in unspoken mutual accord
take up our battles
by other hostile means.*

Returning to *Rainbows end?* the title appeals to a horizon of hope and beauty but crashes into a deflating question: *"Is this it? Is this the **change** that for three decades we have waited for? Where is the pot of gold?"*

So we have it, in a couple of lines the dilemma our conference seems to pose: Is it possible to end open violence **and** move beyond peaceful bigotry?

Understanding Key Concepts

Our two terms, truce and transformation, merit deeper exploration as a way to answer the first, perhaps central question, of those posed to me in preparing for this Live Issues Conference: What is the difference between truce and sustainable peace? If we dig a bit deeper into the images and experiences of these terms they may share unexpected qualities and point some directions, for the word truce, in particular holds some intriguing paradoxes.

The Oxford English dictionary suggests several definitions. Truce: *"a suspension of hostilities between armies; and an intermission, or more loosely freedom from something irksome, painful or oppressive."*

The first part of this definition lifts out three important aspects of our inquiry. First, it places emphasis on '*armed actors*' creating and holding the truce. Second, in such a context the word '*hostilities*' refers to open, direct violence, which by way of the truce is now held in check. Third, '*suspension*' creates the sensation that we are observing something has stopped but is not over.

Correspondingly, we can point to important aspects by which this notion of truce is woefully less than a sustainable peace, particularly in places with deep rooted and protracted conflict. Sustainable peace in settings like the one we are in require the robust participation of many sectors, people, and levels within the society. It requires a vision that includes the ending of open violence **and** the building of a shared, desired future. And it must translate the opening afforded by the cessation of violent hostilities to move permanently and vigorously toward platforms that make a return to violence not only logistically difficult if not impossible, but more importantly, *unthinkable*. That is, sustainable peace represents *the permanency of dynamic and respectful interaction between different, even opposing but ultimately interdependent people -- who recognize they are -- to build flourishing lives and communities together*. We will return to several of these ideas as they suggest the kind of changes envisioned in the movement from truce to transformation.

The second definition of truce creates a different image: "an intermission, or more loosely, freedom from something irksome, painful or oppressive." For settings of protracted conflict this understanding no longer ties "truce" to armies and armed actors. Rather, the definition points to a wider population affected by the violent conflict, in which the "truce" releases people from those things that are, on the one hand, just downright annoying to those aspects of the conflict that create on-going pain and oppression. While this includes the relief experienced when threat and fear of open violence ends, the image also captures a sense of freedom from oppression, not as a personified oppressor and oppressed, but rather as a weight lifted for all -- inasmuch as a whole society is freed from the bondage of open violence as the *de facto* Definer, the Framer, the God of their daily realities. We must admit, that whether you take note explicitly or not, this certainly is one of the transformations most apparent in Northern Ireland: Daily life is no longer defined by the immediate fear of open violence about to happen at any moment. It has in fact drifted from the minds of most, though not from the emotional memory.

A third, perhaps least expected definition, traces back to the linguistic origin of the word. Truce was a derivation of *true*, as in “fidelity to a promise, good faith, or assurance of truth, engagement, and covenant.” In this unexpected combination of root words we find bridges that link truce, transformation and sustainable peace.

The notion that truce builds on good faith and provides assurances of engagement and covenant establishes a foundation that may lead toward constructive interaction and the re-weaving of a healthy social fabric. The key seems to lie with the notion that truce by virtue of its commitment to stay “*true*”, creates the **spaces for new forms of relationship to emerge**, one of the keys to transformation.

The particular challenge of sustainable peace may in fact rise in the inherent tensions of what *truce creates and affords* a society. A transformational view of conflict suggests the key to sustained peace is found by focusing on the processes and platforms that keep constructive change moving. In other words we are dealing with dynamic change processes not a static end state.

In protracted conflict the lens of transformation watches for the big picture changes wherein whole societies move from the dynamics of:

- 1) A stagnant *status quo* characterized by repeated cycles of violence rising from and exacerbating deep-rooted identity-based polarization; to
- 2) Innovative spaces that catalyze and support de-escalation and ending direct violence but may have little impact on the deep identity divisions present within the historical context; to
- 3) Platforms and social capacities that respect diversity and cultivate healthy, generative social and political interaction capable of equitably and inclusively addressing the needs of people and communities.

Truce emerges between one and two, creating new spaces in level two but rarely, on its own, addresses the historic burden of the social divide.

Transformation concerns itself with how the whole of the movement takes place from levels one to three.

Sustainable peace suggests the challenge of assuring the permanency of this dynamic movement in a constructive direction toward the robust interactive and generative relationships described in level three. And to repeat, this vision of peace is not of an idealized end-state but rather assuring the permanency of a constructive and generative dynamic.

Where are we now?

In late 2007, nearly a decade since the Good Friday Accord, where exactly is Northern Ireland in this big picture? This may serve as a good starting question for the small group discussion to follow. I would argue, though I am but an intermittent interloper in this place, that you are somewhere between two and three.

However I hasten to add more confusion to our picture.

While presented here as a linear snapshot of change in protracted conflict, something akin to levels 1 – 3, I believe change processes are in reality more circular than linear. In the *Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, which you have in your packets, you will find a series of diagrams illustrate this idea. First, is a diagram of the experience of change in deep-rooted conflict. There I suggest four common experiences best described as circular. This circle of experience happens repeatedly, not necessarily chronologically, and in various levels of intensity: Feeling like 1) we are moving forward; 2) we just hit a wall, 3) we are going backwards, and 4) everything collapsed around us; and to re-emphasize, 5) going around again. In our fine English language we say that going in circles is going nowhere, or is it?

If we turn this circle on its side, let me use a Tibetan singing bowl to illustrate this, then the metaphor shifts to include a range of ideas about change too often ignored or poorly understood. Sound and echo rising from millions of vibrations require circling to create combined depth, then expansion that moves in more than one direction. That is to say, like the sound rising from this bowl, social change is based on thousands of frictional bumps, multi-faceted in location, multi-directional (in other words we cannot always predict what will be touched or changed) requires a depth, or a maturing, and must be coaxed continuously as opposed to fashioned once and left as an artefact of history.

Returning to the three stages, paradoxically and necessarily, the movement out from stage 1 requires the presence of 3. By this I mean that in some nascent form, imperfect and incomplete, respectful platforms generative of new relational spaces and interaction are needed for the movement from 1 to 2. Social change is like an apple: Simultaneously fruit and seed, in a continuous process of producing and renovating.

Transformative Platforms

Let's return to the idea of platforms. As I have described them, in essence, platforms are relational spaces. They may be informal or more formally organized and institutionalized. In the *Little Book* I suggested the genius of transformative platforms is found in their capacity to continuously **generate** processes and initiatives that respond to the presenting problems or crises, and yet are rooted firmly in a vision focused on making an impact to change the deeper relational context and patterns that produce the crises, particularly around the historic identity divides. In the book I refer to the visible crises as symptomatic *episodes* that rise from the *epicentre*, the deep places in a given context that generate destructive energy though not always visible.

In case this sounds like too much mumble jumble let me summarize the key points. Transformative platforms:

- work at both the symptoms and the causes of historic polarization;
- they adapt to new situations and continuously generate responsive processes to support constructive change;
- they bring together strategic, often improbable alliances and sets of people;
- who understand the epicentre of the social conflict while having the genius to recognize, adapt and generate creative processes responsive to new crises rising from historic divisions.

Northern Ireland is filled with the potential of these platforms, formal and informal -- from sectors like housing, education, ecumenism and policing to professional approaches of mediation, restorative justice and work with trauma healing, to community-based activities whether on issues of development, youth or community relations. Post-agreement, significant effort is often made to formalize or institutionalize some of these platforms in order to sustain their services, though by my view an over reliance on

institutionalization and a culture of bureaucracy can numb the genius of the generative capacity and constant vigilance is needed to promote the key element of fostering the creativity necessary for short and long-term transformation.

In my view, among the most difficult aspects to embedding peace processes is to create an understanding that the dynamic spaces and processes needed to spark the potential for change are required in an on-going way. I have suggested the use of the term, *process-structure*, which comes to us from the new sciences and the study of natural phenomena that are simultaneously *dynamic processes* and *structures* with form and purpose. Our skin and bodies, a river, the great Seas are all examples of adaptive, ever moving organisms with form and purpose.

Peacebuilding requires this kind of dynamic social organism, or what I have referred to as platforms. Our difficulty? We more readily understand the need to adapt dynamically in order to create the "truce" and move toward agreements. Once in place, the agreement is perceived too much as an end state, and formalization and institutionalization to support it become more structure than generative creativity. In a word, bureaucracies are rarely known for being adaptive, innovative, or creative. In the post-agreement, post-truce era, we often end up the shell of a process-structure, but not always the dynamism that created it. The challenge is to find ways to sustain the dynamism, to create and continuously re-created generative platforms and process-structures.

Key Questions

Let us pose several remaining questions to these ideas.

How do we balance historic competing interests, demands for justice, while holding onto relationships?

What is the role of politicians, community activists, and economics in sustainable peace?

What should be our expectations for timelines?

Starting with the first, the answer, simply put, runs in reverse: Hold and innovate relational spaces in order to create the basis from which contentious issues can be addressed and transformed. Return for a moment to the Tibetan bowl. Among other things it gives us a

startling metaphor with a question: What is the container that holds the conflict, and releases energy to transform it?

My personal view is that the container is less the political world than the world of local communities. We tend to believe the opposite, that formal politics is the container that holds our spaces and realities. I think politics and politicians rise on the consensus, formal and unspoken, afforded them by their constituencies and communities. If there are weak communities, there will be floundering, manipulated and exaggeratedly destructive politics.

When I look back across the history of the Troubles it is my contention that the single most important aspect that made the processes of transformation stick and overcome considerable obstacles in the 1990s-2000s as opposed to similar efforts that collapsed at various points in the earlier three decades is found in the community based webs of people, relationships, and activities that were not nearly so robustly present in earlier timeframes. Local communities and the cross-stitching of communities, represents a central, if not the key aspect to sustaining constructive change.

This is not to say politicians and the political process are unimportant. Politicians need however, and here I address myself globally, to approach their role with greater humility and their core responsibilities with greater clarity and commitment, for too few understand the central ideas of service and the building of a wider common good.

Politicians are key in forging the necessary processes and spaces to solidify the deeper changes needed in a divided society, particularly around equality, equity and public services. Given their visibility, their attitudes, capacity for articulating a shared vision of the future and vulnerability to courageously explore responsibility and recognition of past wrongs they are often in a most strategic location to provide an example for the public and the stage for a wider and healthier social transformation. Unwillingness to engage this, or a tendency to use the past to promote fear and blame of the other in order to solidify a constituent base will have an inverse affect, creating stagnant social dynamics that at best would be described as peaceful bigotry.

The hardest thing for politicians and leaders at any level is to live by and build a capacity for ***constructive differentiation***. This idea is based on three important dynamics or principles, what some call a nonanxious presence. When in settings of conflict:

- Define yourself pro-actively, not in reaction or retreat;
- Do not become anxious and reactive when others define themselves differently, interact don't react; and
- Stay in relationship with those who differ and are different from you.

The challenge is in holding these three energies together for they relate more to the ***quality of presence*** in a system and with others than to intellectual capacity or authoritarian use of political power.

Edwin Friedman, in a book published after his recent death, *A Failure of Nerve* states that the most important aspect of leadership is "presence and being not technique and know-how" (Freidman, 2007: 17). He suggests that vision is emotional rather than a cerebral phenomenon depending more on a leader's capacity to deal with anxiety than his or her professional training or degree" (Friedman, 2007: 18). And in his strongest words, applicable to us all, he believes visionary leaders should focus "first on their own integrity and on the nature of their own presence rather than....manipulating or motivating others" (Friedman, 2007: 13).

For highly visible leaders, like politicians this requires one to focus creatively, differ with respect, and stay in relationship in order to sharpen a capacity to vigorously pursue the common good with others. It also requires that one propose and interact with ideas rather than reacting to and blaming others. And in contexts of historic division, it requires a capacity to recognize the power of identity divisions and to refuse, by principle, to play on or appeal to the symbols and emotions of that division for their personal gain.

A word now to activists and the wider public -- let us be clear in setting high standards for leaders and in articulating the great horizons of hope for changes we must pursue in our divided communities. And let us be equally committed to bring our part and to be realistically measured about our expectations of how fast things change.

Ghandi is said to have remarked that people want political change to give them everything they need without asking them to change.

Abdul Aziz Said, a prominent peace studies professor at American University, reminded us in his *Bridges, not Barriers*, of the crucial aspect that personal choice and responsibility plays as part of the wider change we seek. The dominant belief, he notes, is that we

tend to believe that our “human problems are due to structural inequities within political and social systems, not to personal egoism, desire, anger and greed” (Said, 2006:28). This creates a serious challenge for sustainable change precisely because it fosters a cultural tendency toward blaming “large impersonal forces” and minimizes the responsibility we all have to contribute to the wider changes we seek.

Finally, let me make a brief observation about timeframes of change and expectations. Generally speaking the expectation gap is significant between our image of needed change, what we perceive to be changing and the pace by which it should happen. It may have to do with perception, because I find that many people don’t notice the changes around them. But, having said that, I think it is important to hold a tri-fold leadership paradox in hand:

- Continue to put forward a visionary horizon of changes needed;
- while managing, even lowering expectations of rapid change (demanding rapid change can counterproductively arrive as quick fixes) by realistically presenting the complexity of change; and
- explicitly and publicly recognize important, though incomplete steps accomplished in the change process.

The challenge for us all, quite frankly, is to remember that we live in an imperfect world with enormous complexity. In other words, even in the best of societies, institutions, public services, and governments are incomplete and imperfect.

A Case in Point

Let’s take a case in point from this context, policing. Now before any of you places my head in the guillotine for what I am about to say, a small dose of reality. I have lived in small and medium sized towns, in large dense cities, in a half dozen countries, mostly considered peaceful. I currently am involved in several places with open wars and historic conflicts. In all the places I have been police and policing are always under public scrutiny and rarely are perceived as functioning to standard the public seems to want. In fact, you will note, the example given at the end of the *Little Book*, coming from our idyllic mountain town in Colorado, relates a conflict swirling around expectations of local policing. Policing is and remains an interesting platform, but one that often suffers from a gap between expectation, perception and performance.

In this context, clearly policing was and remains an important and strategic process and platform of change. By my view the beginnings of this change started with a more serious push in the early to mid 1990s. The Patten Commission submitted a report in 1999. Sinn Fein joined the Policing Board in 2007.

Changes in policing over these years came in a multiplicity of small and larger incremental steps. Friction, thousands of bumps, are present at every step. The change process has had multiple sources of inspiration, support, training and preparation. It pursued personal, relational and structural changes. It required significant cultural re-orientation, in fact the whole culture of policing in Northern Ireland has been in flux.

Is the policing change process complete? NO. But then it will never be, because policing in any context is a dynamic platform of finding ways to ensure local human security, prevent violence, and foster a context for healthy relationships and accountability in and with the communities where they live.

Has policing in Northern Ireland been a platform and an example of transformative change? YES, by all accounts.

If we take policing in Northern Ireland as an example, the overall process suggests a core principle: In contexts of protracted conflict, transformational approaches to sustainable peace will need to think about strategic structural change processes in decades and double decades.

I have argued since the 1980s that we need to move from a project mentality (1-3 years maximum) to a decade capacity when thinking and planning for change in these contexts. Three years ago, for the first time, I was approached by a Foundation to make a ten-year peacebuilding commitment to Nepal. This suggests the need for a more realistic systemic understanding that respects the complexities of change from practitioners, donors and the wider public.

Conclusion

As a conclusion it may be interesting to ask if these range of ideas propose signposts of sustainable peace in settings of protracted conflict. Several come to mind and may provide some gist for the small group discussion when contextualized to Northern Ireland. The sign posts:

1. Violence as mode to pursue political change is unthinkable.
2. Across historic identity divides:
 - Participation in local and national political processes and in public service bodies is open, fair, transparent, and equitable.
 - Parity of access to public services and economic life are increasingly open and equitable.
 - Local communities have an increasingly robust, constructive, and cooperative interaction across former identity divides.
3. Politicians demonstrate an increased capacity to transcend the historic identity pitfalls, engage less in blame games and focus more creatively and cooperatively on the common good.
4. Strategic public institutions (e.g. policing, housing, education) have shown significant progress toward constructive change in reference to the historic divides that has improved community life and cross-community relationships.
5. Significant transparent, public and innovative spaces and processes have increased a wider capacity to understand the past together, even in the absence of consensus, including public forms of recognition of wrongs and reparation of injustice, leading to an increased sense of social healing.
6. Key social and public platforms have capacity to address rising crises while strategically developing long term processes that address the deeper identity divide.
7. Visionary leadership is found at all levels of society with capacity to pro-actively articulate ideas and stay in relationship with those who differ or come from different identity backgrounds.

I look forward to listening for the haikus that are sure to come in our subsequent discussions and over lunch.

Thank you.

Bibliography

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