

PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

A PsySR Statement on Peacebuilding and Reconciliation

The twentieth century opened with the Armenian Genocide, witnessed the Holocaust mid-century, and closed with the genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda. In that same period two world wars and countless smaller ones between and within nations decimated stable communities, killed tens of millions and displaced still more. Oppressive regimes in South Africa, the Soviet Union, and many other countries created victim and perpetrator populations--often overlapping, within every community.

When the genocide, war, oppression, and violence come to an end there is an urgent need for focused work to promote individual and social healing and to reconstruct the psychological, social, economic, and justice foundations of shattered communities. It is only through such processes that neighbors become fellow citizens and a long-term path to reconciliation and a "strong peace" becomes possible.

Without such work, cycles of revenge, despair, and rage undermine attempts at healing and community building, often leaving the way open for profiteers of chaos, fear, and violence to gain control. Building peace and pathways to reconciliation after violence are thus crucial factors in preventing future violence. They also play key roles in the happier tasks of creating human well-being and communities that transform their divisions into groups that can collaborate together.

The tasks of peacebuilding are everywhere beset by difficulty, and these difficulties often seem to be embedded in the particular place, time, and history of each post-violence society. In one case, violence has opened centuries' old memories of ethnic enmity. In another there is no shared identity except for wholesale refugee displacements from communities now gone forever. In a third, fiefdoms of violence profiteers undermine all attempts to create peaceful co-existence.

And yet across the world extraordinarily strong people emerge from every war torn society, and if given a chance, they are capable of leading traumatized, confused, impoverished people into healing and community construction. Across the world, mediators and peacebuilders from within and outside recovering populations have been able to link with positive forces and resilient people to create places where recovery, caring human relationships, and satisfying communal life have a hope of taking strong hold.

Reconciliation practices have developed alongside insights into the patterns of contemporary violence, where revenge is fueled by powerful collective narratives and advanced by opportunistic leadership. These insights and a gradually growing body of knowledge about how reconciliation and peacebuilding practices work or fail may be our best hope for social healing and violence prevention in our own cities and worldwide communities.

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Despite the enormous need and continual requests for facilitation and training of local people everywhere, the psychology of peacebuilding, violence prevention, and reconciliation are seldom taught in standard psychological training. Nor do workers on the ground--local or from outside--generally have the benefit of insights from their counterparts in other areas, or from the theories that have been emerging from the problems tackled.

PsySR's Peacebuilding and Reconciliation Action Committee hopes to create dialogues and mutual projects to deepen professional knowledge of the realities of varied places where individuals and communities are trying to build a "strong peace" in the wake of war, massacres, or oppressive regimes. We aim to equip outsiders willing to work in such areas with the best practices, the critical debates, and a close analysis of the personal and community reconciliations that have succeeded and failed. Overall, our goal is to contribute to the quality of work and the number of people able to work, think, and write in this field.

For more information about PsySR's Peacebuilding and Reconciliation Action Committee and its activities, please contact co-chairs Paula Green (paula@karunacenter.org) and Jancis Long (jancislong2004@yahoo.com). We encourage new PsySR members to join us in these efforts. Media inquiries are also welcome.