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The Art of War and Peace:

Theories of Creativity and Conflict Resolution

Although not technically within the borders of Central Europe, Bosnia and Herzegovina shares many characteristics with its neighbours to the north and west – not least of which, unfortunately, is a history of tension among several nationalities trying to share the same space.

This tension most recently erupted into full-fledged conflict during the Bosnian war for independence from the former Yugoslavia in 1992–1995. A country which prided herself on her multinational character was torn apart in the most vicious fighting seen in Europe since World War II.

Destruction and Dissolution

So how does one go about putting back together the pieces of a broken country? It is not an easy question to answer, but a great many efforts have been and are still being made. I moved to Mostar, the main city of Herzegovina, in the fall of 2002 for the purpose of working with one such effort: a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) known as “Mladi Most” (Young Bridge).

Mladi Most bills itself as an “open youth space for culture and reconciliation.” It aims to bring together young people of all nationalities into a neutral space where they participate together in creative activities – theatre, cinema, photography, writing, music and assorted others.

While this is a somewhat non-traditional methodology for peace building, it was enthusiastically embraced by the youth population of Mostar and enjoyed modest success from the outset.

I also enthusiastically embraced the artistic-cultural approach without ever really stopping to think about why or how it worked.

It was not until it became painfully evident that its success was waning rapidly, that it occurred to me to contemplate the precise nature of the relationship between art and reconciliation – or even if such a relationship does in fact exist.

The connection is not immediately obvious; in fact, upon initial examination artistic creation even appears counter-productive in the post-war setting. Is it not an act of monstrous frivolity to expend such time and energy on the arts in the face of so many other real and urgent needs – fiddling while Rome burns? How, concretely, does making art contribute towards the healing of a fractured community?

For me, a defining moment in answering these questions came during a creative workshop I was teaching for the young women’s group. Formerly these workshops had been one of the most popular activities in MM, drawing women from throughout Herzegovina.

There they found a forum to express their anger and fear and helplessness in the post-war environment – a way to turn those emotions into something constructive, rather than letting them escalate into violence.

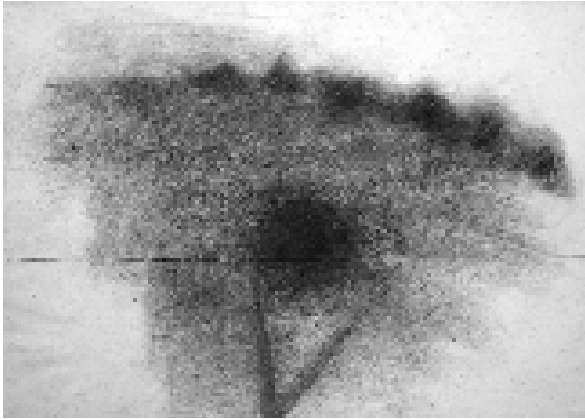
But the particular workshop I was leading that evening had exactly one participant, a young woman named Almira. And even she came more out of habit than out of interest, so after a while we abandoned the creative project and began talking about the situation of youth in Mostar.

I asked her what had changed, why people were no longer interested in such activities. Her answer was devastatingly simple: “Young people here just are not creative anymore.” I was honestly dumbfounded.

Creativity is something I had always considered innate to human beings, a fundamental part of being alive. Although I recognise that not everyone creates in the artistic sense, I was convinced that at all times someone somewhere feels the need to create something. So it was unfathomable to me: how does an entire generation lose the will to create? Could that too be a casualty of war?

Creativity in Conflict

Johan GALTUNG, the noted Norwegian peace studies professor, comments on this same phenomenon in his studies of post-violent conflict situations. He writes: “A major casualty of violence in general and war in particular, is conflict transformation capacity. More particularly, the three basic capacities, for non-violence, creativity and empathy, are eroded.”¹



It is important to note that we are speaking here specifically about instances of *violent* conflict, or conflict which has escalated to the point where it is harmful or destructive to the parties involved.

Thus the key distinction between conflict and violent conflict is the element of destruction present in the latter. Not only is it present, though, but destruction actually *defines* violent conflict; it is the necessary and sufficient condition.

War is the most evident, though certainly not the only, mode of such conflict, and therefore it is primarily with destruction and all its attendant consequences that efforts to heal post-war communities must concern themselves.

Set in these terms, it becomes clearer that creation, as the antithesis of destruction, has a special role to play in the peace building process. As described earlier, GALTUNG counts creativity, along with non-violence and empathy, as the three crucial constituents of a “peace culture” – a culture which fundamentally promotes harmony rather than conflict.

Cultures which have these qualities in abundance are able to cope with conflict before it escalates into violence; and even more

significantly, following violent conflict they are better able to achieve resolution and reconciliation.

Unfortunately, however, the detrimental effect of violence upon these capacities means that the post-conflict societies which need these capacities the most are frequently left without them.

“Wars and violence are travesties on these virtues”, GALTUNG writes. “The point about non-violence is to respond to violence and destruction with something constructive. Wars rule out that response as treason. The bottom line remains destruction, of life and property.”²

In this context, Almira’s simple statement is no longer so difficult to comprehend; in fact, the difficulty comes in comprehending the colossal challenge of building – or rebuilding – the capacity for creation in a world where destruction pervades every aspect of life: not merely physical, but also psychological and social.

“The best way of building creativity is by practicing it,” says GALTUNG, “which is only possible if as many as possible are encouraged to take on the challenge of finding ways out of deeply entrenched conflict, and of doing reconstruction and reconciliation.”³

Clearly the making of art is one activity which can promote creativity, and thus it is easier to conceive a role for it in communities recovering from violent conflict. This connection, however, is tenuous at best; creativity comes in many forms, of which art is only one.

There are really two issues at stake here: not just, Why create? but also, Why create art? As the two often overlap in actual practice, sorting them out can be a difficult process; therefore we will first address the nature of art with asides on creation, before turning to the nature of creation with asides on art.

Art as Innovation

The question “Why create art?” is not an idle one in this context: as traditional peace building methodologies prove themselves inadequate to effectively resolve complex conflicts, peace workers are increasingly turning towards more novel approaches, including arts-based work. This is especially true in areas where the conflict is ostensibly rooted in culture, for example in the ex-Yugoslav countries and Northern Ireland.

Generally, however, these approaches treat art at a superficial level, focusing on it as the *product* of creation, rather than the process. Art is simply a tool for the production of new cultural artefacts intended to replace the old cultural artefacts, which have become ideologically loaded through the course of the conflict.

1 GALTUNG Johan, *After Violence: 3R, Reconstruction, Reconciliation, Resolution – Coping with Visible and Invisible Effects of War and Violence* (1998). www.transcend.org. 103.

2 *Ibid.*, 25. / 3 *Ibid.*, 104. / 4 *Ibid.*, 94.

Thus art is valued solely for its quality of innovation: creation becomes synonymous with newness, freshness, originality. The only attribute that matters is a focus forwards rather than back, to the future instead of the past. If history is contaminated, only by wiping it out and starting again might resolution be possible.

The value of this approach should not be underestimated. Indeed, in situations of cultural conflict where the conflict has been building up over generations, release from the captivity of the past is a necessary prerequisite to any kind of progress towards reconciliation. But it seems to limit art to a very narrowly defined role, corresponding to a very narrow definition of creation.

If creation is conceived as a process as well as a product, it opens the door for art to play a much more significant role in conflict resolution. But to go beyond the simplistic answer of making new things to replace old and destroyed things, creation as process (ie. creativity) must be specifically located within the larger scheme of peace building.

In Johan GALTUNG's model, the aforementioned triad of peace building capacities correspond to and counteract a triad of violence types: direct (physical), structural and cultural violence. Non-violent actions by definition contradict violent ones. Empathy, the ability to identify with all conflict parties, in the same way counters the self-centered monomania of cultural violence.

It is the middle pair, however, which concerns us most. Creativity is paired with structural violence: that is, the ability to conceive things creatively is necessary to transcend structures which promote or even embody conflict.⁴ Abstractly speaking, the most striking example of such a structure is dualism or polarisation.

If conflict is defined as a set of incompatible goals, polarity is the structure by which incompatibility is established. It is the paradigm which mandates that east is east, and west is west, and never the twain shall meet.

Because art operates outside the dictates of logic, it can reject this fundamental premise of opposition and creatively conceive paradoxical solutions to apparent antitheses. As sculptor Celia GERARD remarks:

"There are interesting similarities BETWEEN the processes of both making art and conflict resolution. It is often concerned with bridging disparate concepts, both abstract and literal. Resolving tensions to form an integrated whole is central to both art making and conflict resolution."⁵

The interest here is in developing new ways of thinking, of see-

ing the world, in hopes that conceiving alternatives to inherently conflict-spawning dichotomous worldviews will allow for the development of new and peaceful mentalities. In other words, renovating the process will renovate the product; altering the means will necessarily alter the ends.

Changing the emphasis from product to process might camouflage the fact that even in this new context, creativity's function runs parallel to that described above – except that what is being created are new ideas, rather than new things. The shift, however, from the realm of the tangible to the realm of the intangible illumines an aspect of art that carries great import: its multiplicity of essence.

Art as Renovation

Finally, we have arrived at what might be considered a unique aspect of artistic creativity, as compared to creativity in general. That is, art making occurs simultaneously on both the physical and mental planes; artistic creations are born into existence through a mystical harmony of form and idea – *kalokagathia*, the unity of body and mind.

The significance of this point, though, cannot be fully appreciated in the strictly secular perspective of GERARD and other artist-peace scholars in the same vein.⁶ British author, literary critic and Christian apologist Dorothy SAYERS, tackling the topic from a spiritual perspective, first glimpsed its importance in a series of essays exploring the theology of art and creation.

SAYERS notes that there are two distinct types of creation operating at the two levels. Creation at the physical level requires coincident destruction – it is necessary to destroy a tree to create a table – while creation at the level of ideas is *agglutinative* – it is not necessary to destroy a Hamlet to create a Falstaff.⁷

"The components of the material world are fixed; those of the world of imagination increase by a continuous and irreversible process, without any destruction or rearrangement of what went before. This represents the nearest approach we experience to

5 GERARD Celia, *Addressing Otherness: The Role of the Arts in Peace Education* (2003). http://gseweb.harvard.edu/~t656_web/peace/Articles_Spring_2003/Gerard_Celia_ArtsInPeaceEd.htm.

6 Cf. PRIETO Lyndee, *Time to Do Our Peace Homework: a Paper on How Culture and the Arts Are Indispensable in Peacebuilding* (2004). www.mindanews.com/culture/views/homework.shtml. Or NEWTH Mette, *Art as an Arena for Investigating Conflicts* (2002). www.humiliationstudies.org/news/archives/000015.html.

7 SAYERS Dorothy L., *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World*. Grand Rapids, 1969. 105.

'creation out of nothing', and we conceive of the act of absolute creation as being an act analogous to that of the creative artist."⁸

Unfortunately, SAYERS' writings do not fully explore the consequence of her insight into the dual mental–physical nature of art. Her emphasis remains on art as the mental act of creation which most closely approaches the Divine Creation. The physical act of creation, tainted by the destruction implicit within it, is acknowledged as a necessary evil in a fallen world but certainly not something to be extolled.

Happily, this idea was extended by another British author (and SAYERS devotee), Michael EDWARDS, who realised that the apparent flaw in this aspect of artistic creation – its "present-worldliness" rather than Other-worldliness – is in fact its strength.

His theology of art is grounded on rejection of the dichotomy of the two worlds, instead simultaneously taking full account of both of them: uniting the creation–destruction of this world and the Creation of the next.

"To phrase it in dialectical terms, literature begins in the perception of a conflict between *grandeur* and *misère*, and of a disparity between things as they are in a fallen world and things as they might be. It is the patterning of past, present and future, the attempt to deliver a new world out of the loss of an old."

This treble dialectic, which melds past–present–future and Eden–exile–Paradise, centres around the idea of art as a redemptive work, one which construes creation as re-Creation: not naïve and escapist, nor world-weary and cynical, but rather rooted in reality while transcending it. It prefigures the ultimate act of reconciliation: that of a fallen humanity with an unfailing God.

Creation–Destruction–Redemption

Weaving together these two Christian theories with that of GALTUNG, we can arrive at a plausible hypothesis regarding the role and importance of art in conflict resolution. To do this, we must return to the origins both of Creation and of Conflict, which, significantly, appear in close proximity in the Christian narratives.

Genesis 1 begins with the story of God Creating: the heavens, the Earth, all living creatures, humankind. Regarding this last one, God explicitly notes that humankind was designed in God's image and likeness: "So God created humans in God's own image; in the

image of God, God created them; male and female God created them" (1,27).

Using this passage, SAYERS contends that creation is *the* fundamental characteristic of humankind, as God's Creative nature is the only aspect of God asserted in the lines expousing the establishment of humanity in the likeness of God.¹⁰

Thus, humans' ability to create constitutes the primary analogue between them and the Creator. This perspective gives creation not only a divine sanction, but also a divine mandate. To be human is to create, as God Creates.

Taken further, this idea hints at a metaphysical explanation for GALTUNG's observations regarding violent conflict and its heavy toll on the human psyche. If creation is not merely an external act of humankind, but rather something intrinsic to being human, then the loss of creativity which accompanies violence – the internalisation of destruction – signifies an integral conflict: a fundamental loss of self.

In fact, taking up EDWARDS' thread, this testifies to the truth of the Christian myth, which proffers just such an internal conflict in the story, barely two chapters later, of humanity's fall from the divinely Created state in an act of open rebellion against God. The result is a creature haunted by a memory of what he once was, "at every moment both himself and the opposite of himself."¹¹

All conflict throughout the long history of humankind has sprung forth from this primordial Conflict – both the conflicted dual nature of humanity and the external conflicts which tear apart nations and communities today.

Outbreaks of violence and strife, in the Balkans and elsewhere, are exaggerated manifestations of the Fall, the first rift in an integrated Creation. Consequently, any attempts at practical conflict resolution must synchronously address this integral conflict; to do otherwise is to treat the symptoms rather than the disease.

Thus we can infer that the act of creation, insofar as it functions to resolve the pervading Conflict of a universe at war with its origins, also functions towards the resolution of conflict in the here and now.

The empirical correlation between conflict and (lack of) creativity, as well as the many parallels between art making and peace building, provide corroborating evidence. Peace building, according to GALTUNG, requires a tripartite approach: *reconstruction* of physical damage; *reconciliation* of the parties in conflict; and *resolution* of the underlying conflict.

⁸ Ibid. 105.

⁹ EDWARDS Michael, *Towards a Christian Poetics*. London, 1984. 147. Although EDWARDS writes primarily about the literary arts, it is clear he intends this vision to embrace all the artistic disciplines.

¹⁰ SAYERS. 101.

¹¹ EDWARDS. 2–3. My apologies for the gender-insensitive language.

He explicitly draws attention to the “re-” with which each term commences: it obviates the inference that these processes have happened before and must happen again.¹² Strikingly, the particle “re-” in and of itself embodies EDWARDS’ model of art rooted in three temporal states.

By definition, its subject reflects what was once the status quo, and, although suffering inversion in the present, yet seeks a future reversal of that reversal. It echoes resoundingly in EDWARDS’ depiction of art:

“[Art’s] function here, in a Christian perspective, is to explore not a lost Eden or a past Golden Age, nor a realm elsewhere of Ideas, but a *re-creation* for the future of the here and now.”¹³

A fourth term is implied here by the Christian dialectic, a term which corresponds with and subsumes GALTUNG’S triad: *redemption*, the underlying theme to all of Christianity. Redemption here is renewal (not quite an oxymoron) – the power by which things past are re-made, not as they were (which would slander contemporaneous reality in denying it), but as they could be in a perfected evolution. It is a supernatural capacity, not attainable in human terms; but by the power of God it refutes our natural inclination – or rather, condemnation – towards entropy.

As redemption in the Christian sense suscites the unfolding history of humankind, redemption in its earthly sense gives hope to a despairing world. It effects the transmutation of destruction into creativity; ugliness into beauty; and brokenness into wholeness. Art itself stands as a tangible sign of this transfiguration, a curious amalgamation of this world and the one yet to come.

Suggested Reading

EDWARDS Michael, *Towards a Christian Poetics*. London, 1984.

GALTUNG Johan, *After Violence: 3R, Reconstruction, Reconciliation, Resolution – Coping with Visible and Invisible Effects of War and Violence* (1998).

www.transcend.org.

GERARD Celia, *Addressing Otherness: The Role of the Arts in Peace Education* (2003).
http://gseweb.harvard.edu/~t656_web/peace/Articles_Spring_2003/Gerard_Celia_ArtsInPeaceEd.htm.

SAYERS Dorothy L., *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World*. Grand Rapids, 1969.

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12 GALTUNG. 7. / 13 EDWARDS. 148.