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Reflections on Peacebuilding and Radical Hope

I recently was privileged to participate in a national summit of 170 invitees gathered together to help to design a National Peace Academy for the United States. The group convened in Cleveland, Ohio for three days to consider how a dream, now more than 30 years old, might finally be realized. Despite the long-lived character of the goal and irrespective of the fact that it is easy to be “for peace” in the abstract, this undertaking still felt groundbreaking. It remained, even after all these years of advocacy by committed, well-intentioned and deeply passionate people, a singularly audacious idea. This was so, or so it seemed to me as a relative newcomer to this diverse fraternity, as I participated in the effort to draw upon the wit and wisdom of those attending to design this new institution, the result of the complex character of its central aim: peace.

It doubtless also felt bold because there is so much strife around the world as to seem to give the lie to the hope. Nepal, Serbia, Rwanda, Sudan, Indonesia, Somalia, Madagascar, Sri Lanka, Congo and Afghanistan, among other nations, have all experienced severe conflict in recent years. Amidst such evidence not only of conflict, but also of accompanying cultural devastation in many instances, it is difficult to conceive how people could imagine coming to live in peace, let alone begin taking the steps that might help to secure that result. What is less difficult, and therefore far more frequently articulated, is to criticize proponents of peace as dewy-eyed romantics unconnected with the ruling passions, cruelties and interests of human beings living in the “real world.” After all, these “realities” are daily everywhere evident in social conflicts around the globe and their results too plain to ignore. Such critics might say, “Why don’t these peace-folks go sing ‘Kum Ba Yah’ in the corner while we who understand the complexities of human beings see to the real challenges, pointless jealousies and conflicts and hostilities that are unavoidable among our kind.”

But this dismissive formulation is both too clever and too shallow to stand. One simple way to think of peace is the absence of conflict. But a moment’s reflection suggests that such a situation, while surely an improvement over active hostilities, is not adequate to ensure conditions of long-term stability and mutual respect among populations, especially diverse ones. Instead, peace, like so many phenomena borne of the interaction of human intelligence and emotions, requires a constellation of supporting factors if it is to arise and to endure. It requires, among free individuals at least, a similarly unfettered set of choices to discipline what may otherwise be ready impulses to violence in favor of dialogue and conversation with others who may be wildly different, in virtually every sense of that term.

Ultimately, that challenge demands an ontology of hope that continues to act *as if* possibilities for more fulsome exchange and understanding are possible even in the face of grave odds and much evidence to the contrary. It is this far-reaching idea that most struck me in conversations with those attending the Peace Academy Summit. This belief appears to have captured the individual and collective imagination of those who have worked so long on behalf of an abstract and complicated idea. It is at once a daunting and very realistic aspiration that does not wish away the darkness characteristic of the human condition.

As it happens, not long before heading to the Peace Academy Summit I had read Jonathan Lear’s thoughtful book, *Radical Hope*. The text chronicles the thinking and

leadership of Chief Plenty Coups of the Crow American Indian tribe as his nation transitioned from a nomadic and warrior-like existence to one situated on parcels of land that were primarily to be farmed. Plenty Coups had to help his people not only address social change, but also to grapple with the loss of an entire way of life while nonetheless retaining the profound sense of honor that had long underpinned their shared social imaginary. They had literally, in this sense, to endure cultural catastrophe and nonetheless (re)construct and maintain a shared identity. Lear frames the question that confronted the Crow nation this way:

Unlike an anthropological study, I am not primarily concerned with what happened to the Crow tribe or to any other group. I am concerned rather with the field of possibilities in which all human endeavors gain meaning. This is basically an *ethical* inquiry: into how one should live in relation to a peculiar human possibility. But it is also what philosophers call an *ontological* dimension: if we are going to think about how to live with this possibility, we need to figure out what it is. (2006, p.7).

Lear also notes that this issue is hardly a historical one alone. Rather, it is a ubiquitous challenge that has very much to do with a collective sense of vulnerability revealed as conflicts of various kinds unfold:

We live at a time of a heightened sense that civilizations are themselves vulnerable. Events around the world—terrorist attacks, violent social upheavals, and even natural catastrophes—have left us with an uncanny sense of menace. We seem to be aware of a shared vulnerability that we cannot quite name. I suspect that this feeling has provoked the widespread intolerance that we see around us today—from all points on the political spectrum. It is as though, that without our insistence that our outlook is correct, the outlook itself might collapse (2005, p. 7).

It is just such a sensibility that would-be peacebuilders of all stripes see themselves daily addressing in very real, if seemingly very commonplace ways—family and community mediation services, conflict management classes for primary school students and the like. We would do well to remember that it is in precisely these settings (and in others to be sure) that our society shapes its collective meaning. If conflict is epidemic due to our sense of vulnerability, as Lear suggests, perhaps we would do well to recall Chief Plenty Coup's efforts and determination to lead his people to a new way of life, however unclear and terror-filled that path was at the moment in which he and his nation embarked on the journey. Plenty Coups was under no illusions. Still, his flinty determination and radical hope in human possibility provide a profound exemplar for would-be peacebuilders everywhere. I was struck in Cleveland that this philosophical lesson has been taken to heart by many engaged in the practice of peacebuilding. I count that shared awareness an important step in efforts to secure more peaceful social conditions in an array of cultural contexts around the world.