

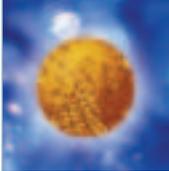


A Summary Report to the Fetzer Institute

Social Healing for a



© ROBERT BENGTON



Fractured World

Since 1997, a worldwide series of dialogues has taken place among a diverse group of practitioners engaged in reconciliation, restorative justice, trauma healing, peacebuilding, educational development, and human rights approaches for addressing and transforming collective social wounds. These conversations were funded by the Fetzer Institute and co-facilitated by Judith Thompson, an internationally recognized peacebuilder and researcher, and James O’Dea, now president of IONS. Earlier this year the results of these dialogues were delivered in a report to Fetzer. We feel privileged to share the findings with you.

AROUND THE WORLD, new ideas and initiatives are arising to address intractable conflicts and complex intergenerational wounding. Previous approaches to “social transformation” have much wisdom and insight to offer, but their solutions are often incomplete, leaving out the fullness of human experience and the influence of larger social systems. Methodologies directed at justice-making, conflict resolution, and social change have all matured as disciplines in an era of specialization. Political psychologists, for example, in keeping with the dominant paradigm for understanding the psyche, have often overlooked the spiritual dimension of human life. Traditional diplomacy has generally focused on negotiated settlements that ignore festering resentments and thus do little to heal the underlying social wounds. While each has mastered part of the required skills for social healing, they neglect other essential dimensions. But things are changing.

Social wounds involve multiple dimensions of societies and individuals. Many now believe that to truly heal the greater social body requires addressing the healing needs of individuals and the transformation of social institutions

concurrently. Truth, justice, compassion, and peace all appear to be necessary elements in social healing. This means drawing intelligently from the insights of psychologists, peacebuilders, human rights advocates, religious leaders, and traditional healers. Healing a social wound at the root level asks for an integrated approach that honors all facets of our nature and offers strategies for the use of various tools.

WHOLE-SYSTEM CHANGE

The primary element that makes the emerging discipline of social healing unique is its intrinsic holism. It understands both humans and societies as complicated systems. It sees the importance of structural reform in tandem with more personal work around trauma, shame, and violence. Social health, it claims, must take into account all dimensions, from the personal to the political, from the biological to the spiritual. Legal redress is not enough. Personal forgiveness is not enough. True social healing involves change on many levels.

This holism extends to epistemology: Practitioners regard information that comes from bodily experience,

from ritual, from relationship, and from spiritual knowing as valid sources of data. The role of inquiry and dialogue is vital to this process—a form of participatory discovery that emerges when people have a chance to interact with each other.

A coherent vision of social healing thus has begun to emerge, developed by a diverse and international group of visionaries and practitioners. We witness people like genocide survivor, artist, and peacemaker Arn Chorn Pond from Cambodia, whose consistent and often painful self-reflection, public testimony, and work in the field have produced a deep and intimate understanding of the inner processes of “the wounded healer.” South African Reverend Michael Lapsley, who was severely maimed by a bomb meant to kill him, has gone on to create a worldwide movement for “the healing of memories,” bringing together former aggressors and victims to facilitate acknowledgement, apology, remorse, truth, compassionate witnessing, and forgiveness.

Second-generation Holocaust survivor Mary Rothschild and former Hitler Youth Gottfried Leich have journeyed through the fear, trauma, shame, and guilt of the past to a miracle that Gottfried called “a bridge across the abyss” and which Mary called “emotional restitution.” These two individuals and others from the organization One by One have taken to heart Martin Buber’s invitation to meet on a narrow ridge where “I-Thou” encounters reveal the “in-between”—that place where a greater knowing and truth reside.

Father Leonel Narvaez is starting schools of forgiveness and reconciliation in Colombia, bringing to a culture of violence seeds of new possibility through honoring the humanity in guerilla fighters, paramilitary youth, and victimized villagers alike. Abdul Aziz Said, Director of the Center for Global Peace at American University, is teaching the power of love to graduate students at one of the most distinguished training grounds for diplomats. Career diplomat Joe Montville, an early pioneer in this field, has been altering the landscape of diplomacy and international relations by challenging old models of top-down negotiating and encouraging a multiplicity of nongovernmental approaches to peacebuilding.

Through dialogue, storytelling, compassionate listening, and healing circles, such exemplars are helping individuals to overcome their sense of “otherness” and to move from suffering to joy through connection to the whole. In this way, the work of social healing is helping to soften our well-habituated identity frames and open up a door to a greater sense of “We.”



© ROBERT BENGTONSON

THE FIELD TAKES SHAPE

As an emerging discipline, social healing does not yet have commonly accepted definitions. For now, it is most accurate to talk about the emerging *contours* of the field.

The first broad contour relates to the recognition of “mind” or “consciousness” as a core aspect of the social healing process, both individually and collectively. Just as medical research has discovered the links between a person’s mind (thoughts, feelings, emotions) and body, social healing views the social mind—our commonly held images, attitudes, beliefs, and collective traumas—as instrumental in shaping and creating either the repetitive feedback loop of victim/perpetrator or the liberation from it. In the same way that spirituality, forgiveness, healing, and love play a pivotal role in social healing on a personal level, organized efforts to build peace cultures can create language, images, and processes that promote awareness and loving-kindness on the collective level.

Social healing is thus seen as multidirectional and includes an assumption of *micro* (individual), *mezzo*

Individuals

from the organization One by One have taken to heart Martin Buber's invitation to meet on a narrow ridge where "I-Thou" encounters reveal the "in-between"—that place where a greater knowing and truth reside.

(cultural institutions), and *macro* (societal) relatedness. It follows from this assumption that social wounds are, in some sense, held in the social "body"—the shared structures of meaning that bond societies together. As a result, the healing process for social groups requires not only the transformation of personal consciousness, but also intersubjective and system-wide transformations, which are themselves interactive and interdependent.

This means that social healing looks at structural issues together with spiritual issues and understands that they are linked. Traditional structural issues of justice—economic, political, social, and cultural—are all honored as primary to social healing. They are seen as seamlessly connected to the quality of our awareness, the expression of compassion in action, and the truth of interdependence. Social location (as conferred by race/birth), privilege, and power are "spiritual concerns" that we must embrace as aspects of being in the here and now of our own culture. The truth is that "We are all one" and "We are not all one." Both absolute and relative realities must be held simultaneously; both universal and particular lenses are necessary to perceive what is true and meaningful to the project of social healing.

Social healing practitioners in the United States, for example, need to be mindful about not overlooking our own context of power in the world or the legacy of systematic imbalances created by a history of slavery, genocide of native peoples, discriminatory policies, and an ongoing mentality of punitive and retributive reactions to wrongdoing. A social healing awareness must extend to our responsibility for the greater whole and the impact that our own privileges may have on others. In other words, truth and reconciliation are crucial

processes to take seriously in all contexts. In that spirit, social healing practitioners honor the role of truth in countering false narratives and myths that provide the foundation for systematic oppression and dehumanization. From the Nuremberg Trials to *Nunca Más* (focusing on the "disappeared" of Guatemala) to South Africa's addressing of apartheid injustices, a truthful recounting of the past is a necessary antidote to the systemic lies that often shield social wounds.

THE WORK BEGINS . . .

Human evolution is replete with widespread trauma and wounding. We carry into the 21st century the burden of hundreds of millions of people who have experienced the ravages of genocide, human rights violations, racial oppression, and ethnic conflict. At the same time, before we have reached the halfway point of the first decade of the new millennium, new wars, violent strife and neglect have added millions of additional victims to the toll of those who are psychologically, emotionally, and physically scarred and wounded. Some psychologists have suggested that human culture as a whole has been saturated by unhealed wounding, which, if unchecked, will continue on a downward spiral toward inevitable violent disintegration.

Transitioning from violence and massive social wounding to building peaceful and just futures is no easy journey; the complexity lies in finding the balance between truth, justice, peace, and mercy. All of these are necessities for healing and none can be ignored. Reconciliation is also a multigenerational task, not an immediate fix. In the end, each attempt at social healing on the macro level offers not only more insights into how it might be done better, but elicits more reflection, creates a deeper conversation, and gives birth to new ideas. 🌍

JUDITH THOMPSON, PHD, *directs the Compassion and Social Healing Initiative, in affiliation with the Kanna Center for Peacebuilding. She is a former Peace Fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies at Harvard, co-founder of an award-winning youth leadership organization, Children of War, and is currently assisting the Greensboro (North Carolina) Truth and Reconciliation Commission.*



JAMES O'DEA, *president of IONS, is the former director of the Washington, DC, office of Amnesty International, and former executive director of the Seva Foundation. He speaks to groups around the world on issues of personal and global healing.*