Beyond Tribalism

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A limitation of traditional third-party peace making intervention efforts is that they tend to view peacemaking as a "technical" matter, with reaching agreement viewed as success and the end of the third-party's role. I maintain that abandoning the parties at this stage is irresponsible and leaves them in a vacuum, facing a challenge that they cannot accomplish on their own.

The work facing groups at the implementation stage is not technical. It is what Ron Heifetz calls "adaptive" work - the process of mobilizing people to address problems that are not clearly defined and for which there are no clear solutions.

For example, the 1998 Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland resulted in the creation of a set of institutions for the good governance of the three sets of relationships (Ireland-England, Northern Ireland-Republic of Ireland, Nationalist-Unionist within Northern Ireland). From a position of having no form of self-government for thirty years, the people of Northern Ireland now have to learn to manage the reins of government. Whereas before they only knew how to seduce or resist the British government as a way of getting their needs met, now they must learn to exert leadership while managing authority. From a context of centuries of hatred, they must now engage with each other in building a new relationship for which they have no experience, no understanding, and no vision. Ideologies, values and norms that people have clung to for centuries are threatened. Identities are now at stake. This calls for a great shift in consciousness.

However, the negotiation process has not equipped participants at the peace negotiation stage with the leadership capacities required to mobilize their communities in the work of forging this new relationship at the implementation stage. Political and community leaders are not yet able to withstand the enormous pressure on them to revert to the status quo of polarization and enmity.

Imagine, for example, the challenge facing Northern Ireland Protestants who had to accept Martin McGuinness, a man whom they believe to be a former head of the Irish Republican

Army, a "terrorist" and "murderer", as the Minister for Education in the new Northern Ireland Assembly.

Leadership at this stage requires getting people in both communities to question their certainties – a profound challenge when both communities have done everything to avoid this. Being open to the "other" means accepting equal responsibility for the conflict, and accepting responsibility involves feelings of humiliation, guilt, and loss: humiliation because we must accept that we are not just innocent martyrs; guilt because our righteousness has caused death and suffering; and loss because our world as we have known it is crumbling. These are difficult feelings to bear.

Accepting responsibility for one's role in the conflict means making the transition from object to subject. Where before one had a defined role as "victim," in a social structure that operated largely mechanically, one now begins to find oneself in a fluid, evolving world full of untagged, unarticulated meaning - a world in which one has no certainty any longer about identity. If I begin to question my definition of myself as an "oppressed" Catholic who blames the British for all that seems wrong in Ireland, and instead begin to acknowledge that I also have a role in perpetuating oppression, then who am I? Likewise, if I no longer define myself as a Protestant, permanently under siege, then who am I? What are the consequences of acknowledging that the "other" has changed?

Compromise is extremely difficult in this system. Each side fears that concessions will be interpreted as "surrender" and they will feel humiliated. Each fears that the others will take advantage because they perceive them as weak or too easily yielding. The end result is a social system frozen in fear.

I think that what lies at the core of intractable conflict is what I refer to as *the paradox of identity* which goes as follows: *each group believes that in order to guarantee its survival it must maintain and protect its identity, yet it is exactly attachment to identity that each group must sacrifice if peace is to occur*. Ironically, it is the very actions each community takes to maintain identity that create the conditions that threaten identity. Unraveling the dynamics of this paradox

may help explain why some conflicts seem so intractable and why they prove immune to traditional techniques of diplomatic and political mediation.

I'm very interested in exploring what psychoanalytic concepts and insights can contribute to addressing this paradox.

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