

## **The Intrinsic Meaning of Conflict Resolution- Drawing our Common Lines Across the Corridor and Disciplines- HONORING PROF. SUHEIL BUSHRUI**

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I have been for many years at CIDCM a next door neighbor to Suheil Bushrui. Sharing a Middle Eastern identity, we are an Arab and a Jew both reaching out towards the “Other”. I could see how our global visions of peace and coexistence also meet when talking about our deeply suffering nations in the region of the world most plagued by wars.. In this short and modest contribution, I would like to put forward some of the many points of convergence, using often illustrations from the home-front. Our shared understanding include the importance of the non-tangible elements of conflicts; a deep concern about the current negative and appreciation of the potential positive role of religions; the avenues for solving protracted disputes through reaching common ground; paths towards reconciliation and real time ‘healing’ resulting from violence; the relevance of communications skills in facilitation; the contribution of spirituality in conflict transformation; sharing human rights as a common standard for all nations. Last but not least, the search of unity in diversity across cultures. Many of such values in Prof. Bushrui may be found in the Baha’i faith that he professes and the importance attributed to conflict resolution, but I also believe that he himself has further elaborated them and in many cases he creatively contributed new aspects based on his personality, life experience and intellect.

The challenge of the rational choices of our fellow humans has been recognized by the presence of cognitive elements in our behavior. This is even more so at times of violence, a common feature in the deep-rooted communal conflicts that affect us. Within this context, we share an understanding of the centrality of the *non-tangible* elements of conflict and the need to address them in order to reach some initial solution and eventually, reconciliation. I may like to start explaining this non-quantifiable dimension, through which my knowledge of his work and the irradiation of his personality have been rich source of inspiration.

All protracted communal conflicts carry a painful element of past or present violence against innocent civilians. The deep feelings related to the death of the love ones and the compatriots, humiliation and depravation escalate exponentially the *tangible* components of the roots of such conflicts. The inner feelings of anger, irreparable loss awake the emotional drive towards retribution. What we see as observers to be an illogical and fruitless revenge is an added layer of grievances that are difficult to erase. As the current Intifada al Aqsa comes as a sad reminder of this principle, over the years, stopping the senseless violence becomes the primary objective. And yet when it stops, the open wounds are hard to heal. Material

compensation is only but one element of reconciliation, most what needs to be done belongs to the realm of non-tangible dimensions

There is no point in denying that some resources can be considered by their very nature to be finite. Thus, for the parties the sense of survival in zero/sum conflicts encourages a power struggle of “us” versus “them”, preventing the development of what we call “win/win” options. Land and water have been highlighted as a cause of such disputes. However, in the spirit of cooperation and creativity we could see how often our own “Partners in Conflict” (a term coined at CIDCM to describe the stakeholders that take part on our projects, separate across the national, religious or ethnic divide, but with a shared identity, be profession, gender, age, location, etc.) came to a consensus. Just to give couple of examples: Peruvian and Ecuadorian partners looking to overcome the impasse in the demarcation of their border, suggested in one particular area, to develop eco-tourism in a “transnational park” managed by both. In the complex issue of sovereignty over the underground water disputed between Israelis and Palestinians, have continued to fight over the aquifers and already misused them, abuse them and pollute, them causing irreversible damage, the academics of the Truman Institute and a Palestinian university came up with the concept of the joint management of the shared aquifers which grants minimal equal rights to water indiscriminately to Arab and Jew at an affordable price gradually increasing the cost according to the levels of consumption, up to reach the supply high cost of the desalinization of the abundant sea water.

In the same vane, Segal, Levy, Said and Katz analyzed the opinions of both Palestinians and Israeli Jews about sovereignty over the holiest place for both in Jerusalem, the small area known respectively as Haram el Shariff/Temple Mount. Given that the meaning of sovereignty is often interpreted as one horizontal line that determines that part of the surface would be attributed to one or another party, what are the consequences if we use our imagination to look at the issue through a vertical axis. Nations have sovereignty over the air space above us, the surface and the underground. Hence, one could translate the current visualize the idea of jurisdiction at different levels of the same hill, which would be keeping the status quo, the Muslim controlling the top where the two mosques of Omar and Al Aqsa are, and the Jews retaining their possession of the lower Wailing or Western Wall. The concept of “two-store sovereignty” is possible, the “upper floor” for the Arabs and the “lower” for the Jews.

The same example of the dispute over the Holy Place could be used, factoring- in religion as a unifying factor. As much as hard to believe, the more religious sectors among Jews and Muslims would have both a preference in leaving the Temple Mount/Haram Al Shariff under the “sovereignty of God”, leaving the current situation as a temporary arrangement. Such exploration shows again how much the notion of “sovereignty” is a construct that helps mapping nations, its flexibility and eventually explaining how the delineation can be changing over time

This brings us to prevailing dimension of religion in many of the protracted communal conflicts. Looking at the global picture, we have seen that nearly all the main religions – in terms of numbers of believers- have seen themselves involved in a violent strife against other groups. The dictate of propagation of the faith, and triumphalism have driven what was often genuinely believed to be a civilizatory mission, legitimating oppression, force and lately worldwide terror, These features have been brought up in a deterministic way within the context of the predicted “clashes of civilization” broadly speaking between the West versus the “rest” . Such confrontation has been salient between Islam and Christendom has been explained by Bernard Lewis as absolutist reading of religions that consider they to posses an absolute truth that their noble purpose is to propagate their God . While many of the officials of the latter have come to terms with the existence of other religions, this is not the case in the rather important relevant fundamentalists' circles in the United States. As for Islam, the need to look for pluralistic interpretations has led to the acceptance of tolerance but mostly as a concession by the ruler rather than an expression of equal rights. Prof. Bushrui’s work has been a major contribution towards the understanding of the common heritage of humankind has shown the many intersections among religions, and the unity that emerges needs to be further shared worldwide.

Furthermore, the stereotyping of religions needs to be rebated. Particularly after September 11, 2002, the case has been advanced about the incompatibility between Islam and democracy. Such broad generalization cannot be acceptable, given the trial and error processes towards such goal taking place in Indonesia, the largest Muslim community, and in other countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, and even Iran. However, such claim has been made in relation to the Arab Middle East, where democratization has not taken place in any significant rate as compared with the East and Central Europe, Latin America, East Asia, and even Sub-Saharan Africa. While it may not be easy to identify the causes for such apparent lagging behind, Prof. Bushrui’s book about “The Wisdom of the Arabs” is showing a constructive approach of highlighting the best of each culture. Reminding the Arabs about their rich heritage and about their contributions in the past to the world civilization is an important effort to re-gain the self-esteem needed to confront the current crisis in the region.

According to Ignatieff, “*reconciliation* means breaking the cycle of intergenerational violence. IT means substituting the vicious downward spiral of vio9lence with the virtuous spiral of mutually reinforcing respect”. Our agony is how to do it NOW, when the leadership of both nations, as well as the extreme and fundamentalist activists are setting the tone.

Reconciliation requires many acts of both sides, to include apology and forgiveness, acknowledgment and acceptance, symbolic or real restoration or compensation, transcending the grievances into a lasting relationship that strengthens the often tenuous peace agreements. In our own languages, “Shalom Emet” and “Sulha” describe such ultimate stage. Today it seems to be more remote than ever. Revenge, retaliation, “breaking them” are official albeit undeclared policies with

great popular support. Squeezed by irresponsible leadership and by abominable acts of violence encouraged by extremists within the grass roots of our own nations, the civil society elements struggling for peace and eventual reconciliation seem totally isolated.

At times when team-teaching with my Palestinian colleague Prof. Manuel Hassassian at College Park, it is the sensitivity of Prof. Bushrui that injects us with faith and determination. When back to Bethlehem and Jerusalem respectively, when unable to meet because of fear and curfews, the frequent transatlantic phone calls from Suheil to both of us help keeping the morale, and sometimes, our sanity.

In order to achieve reconciliation these stages often require the contribution of a third party to work with the sides to the conflict to be able to transcend their often deadly antagonism. The personality of the third party has a lot to contribute to such process. Prof Bushrui has those profound human qualities and a perfect style to assist in such process.

There have been many studies and projects about post-conflict reconciliation. Progress in resolving protracted conflicts worldwide, a special NGO focusing on Transitional Justice has come into being. Inspired by the South African process, Truth and Reconciliation was rightly identified as an important part of peacebuilding, particularly when it is known that about only 50% of the peace treaties are not fully or partially implemented after five years. But what if the lack of reconciliation does not make possible reaching a peace agreement. In the long Oslo peace process planned for seven years, there was no much attention paid to real-time reconciliation during the process. Things started to get worse when the fundamentalists Hamas and Jihad Al Islam try to paralyze the peace processes already when Israel was still under Rabin's premiership with suicide bombing, the first time to be introduced in Israel. Before the suicide bombers, most Israelis were used to see their wars fought in the borders of Israel. Even if the small country paid heavy casualties over the years, 95% of them were military, and the understanding that the uniform carries a risk of war was clear. Now, paradoxically, when we were engaging in a peace process 2/3 of the casualties have been civilians, the home front was everywhere predominantly within the "small" Israel within the pre-1967 border, including in coastal cities such as Tel Aviv or Haifa. Whereas the official predicament of the Palestinians was to get rid of occupation, the provocative and expansionist Jewish settlers of the West Bank and Gaza were not the main target of the suicide bombers, most of the civilian victims including many youngsters in discothèques, women in the markets, senior citizens and children in buses, most of those were tragically dying within the confines of the "smaller Israel" of before the 1967 Six Days War. At the verge of the January 2003 elections there were about 700 Israeli casualties and thousands of wounded?

On the Palestinian side, the retaliation of the Israel Defense Forces has been massively felt, affecting not only their physical suffering by causing a much larger 2,000 death, mostly civilians including large numbers of women and children. "Co-lateral damage" in fighting alleged terrorists has been extremely high, and what often was called officially an "accident" became a consistent pattern of Israeli action, regardless the cost of innocent lives. Furthermore, the frequent closures preventing

them from moving out of their cities, the long curfews keeping the Palestinians for weeks indoors, the losing of jobs, all that caused profound misery to the whole population.

Facing such picture, shall we wait for reconciliation until peace is concluded? Can peace be concluded among nations in which the hatred of the other is getting stronger and stronger? What can one do for real time reconciliation?

Together with Palestinian friends we tried to deal with this important priority in 1995 and started a project on **“HEALING- Sharing the Grief of the “Other”, and Learning to Cope with Terror and Violence”**. The many meetings and contributions were gathered in a manual that was geared to providing some guidance to all others in Israel/Palestine and worldwide that care for acting upon the suffering without waiting for the end of violence. May I pay tribute to Prof. Bushrui’s concern with the issue and the suffering of his brothers and sisters and bring up some of the lessons learnt in a genuine attempt of “real time” reconciliation.

Time and again violent acts by Arab and Jewish fanatics, deranged individuals or extremist groups' have had a negative impact on the peace process. Moderates tend to be paralyzed when tragic events such as terror attacks or structural violence occurs. This paralysis is- due to shame, awkwardness, or ignorance of the “appropriate” codes of behavior. As a result, opportunities for expressing empathy by publicly or privately partaking in grief are lost. In an even more insidious way, chances for manifesting solidarity are missed whenever we fail to comfort the victims of structural violence, bloodless, but psychologically no less damaging.

Addressing the psychological dimension of protracted social conflict is a key to its resolution. Reconciliation builds on overcoming the scars of past injustices and victimhood. When members of the "victimizing" community express acknowledgment of victims' suffering, the process can move forward. However, in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, each side subjectively considers itself the major or even sole victim, thus acknowledgment is often difficult to elicit, as it is associated with “weakness.”

During the first year, HEAL realized that condolence and comfort visits to victims require a significantly higher level of preparation than originally anticipated. The challenges were both of a tactical and a strategic nature. Entering an environment of mourning, often mixed with a formula of cultural difference, rage and racism—taxed not only the logistical possibilities but also the psychological skills of HEAL volunteers. In understanding the deeper meaning of political violence through condolence visits, publishing articles and holding seminars, Palestinian participants exposed the flagrant issue of “structural” violence to the Israelis.(namely the daily suffering that is not measured by killed and wounded but by the lose of mobility, unable to go to hospital treatment, malnutrition, and other ways of long-term suffering) This subsequently altered the objectives of the project, and served to restore symmetry to the equation of HEAL in its second year.

Under the premise that repeated, small-scale human encounters have greater impact than one-time demonstrative visits, HEAL action in its second year was built up by gradual stages. Sensitivity-enhancing dialogue is just as legitimate and effective in

alleviating human suffering as more visible and concrete interventions such as condolence visits, practical, logistical help for the sick and wounded (in cases of closures), contacting victims of (impending) house demolitions, mediating in legal aid, articles through various media venues.

To start with, we are aware that this type of project is ideal to initiate after a secure, viable and just peace has been achieved: after borders have been drawn, after suicide bombings stop—unequivocally, after closures and housing demolitions end—and after structural violence purveyed through the systemic discrimination of Palestinians by Israel’s occupation is addressed. Real time intervention has proven to be more difficult than post-conflict healing. Our assumption was if we start this process now, we can reduce the level of hatred felt among Israelis and Palestinians and alleviate pain. We chose to act without waiting for formal agreements to be finalized.

While intense suffering, repression and trauma persist and its byproducts continue to affect both populations, we are aware that contending with issues of intergroup healing is premature. Unfortunately, closures and other restrictive policies of the occupation often impeded the rhythm and execution of project HEAL. However, we do believe it as imperative to begin the process of healing, despite the strains imposed by virtue of the ongoing ethno-political conflict. Lastly, our objective was to represent concerns, perspectives and aspirations of both Palestinians and Israelis in an evenhanded and objective manner. Given the structure of the protracted conflict, this was not a simple task. Our most challenging intention was to overcome the obstacles of asymmetry and strives to maintain a formula of symmetry throughout the project, however, we were not always able to accomplish this objective.

One of the participants recalls that, near the Damascus Gate, I had the opportunity to meet E.A., and hear his take on peace. A Palestinian from East Jerusalem, he was jailed from 1994-1996 for committing a crime (non-political). During this period, he experienced true peace--for the first and the only time, since he was jailed. “We had no choice. We became equals, we became friends. Living together, drinking coffee from the same cup, sharing the TV, helping each other when sick, and confronting the management, confronting each other. There was no difference between Ahmed and Yitzhak.” E.A. recalled sitting with some 150 prisoners in the recreation room, fervently goading the soccer players from behind the TV screen. The game was interrupted for a news bulletin: 30 killed, 80 injured by a suicide bomber in Hadera. The men comforted the Jewish prisoners, empathizing with their grief, offering an apology for the agony their fellow prisoners were experiencing. Here, E.A. was able to recognize the pain resulting from political violence. “However, outside of the golden cage of jail, there is no peace between Jews and Arabs. I prefer to be in jail to see a Jew as my brother, my equal, than to be free, and see him as my occupier.”

This story is similar to that of a participant in HEAL who retells of an incident at Rachel’s Grave wherein soldiers employed bullets to disperse riots, and a Palestinian boy, age 8, was killed. HEAL participants went to a refugee camp in Beit Jala to convey empathy and stand in solidarity with the family against random, unnecessary

violence. The boy's father is a man who continues today to do business with Israelis and deeply believes in peace. Together they discussed the need to receive compensation for the loss of life, and the need to prosecute the soldier who used live ammunition. A lawyer was referred to the family to advance this case.

But in most cases, this project served non- tangible needs, processing traumatic political structural violence while shifting from protracted systematic injustice, to a higher consciousness emphasizing human rights, reconstructing human values and redefining human identities. It served to raise awareness to different nuances of the conflict, and it provides an insightful formula to advance rapprochement and address suffering. It is hoped that you find this material provocative and insightful.

This innovative and insightful volume was never published. It was submitted to the Norwegian donors with the specific request of the Palestinian NGO not to go public at this stage.. Around that time, the second Intifada Al Aqsa has started. The wave of violence has now deteriorated even further the de-humanization of the " Other". About 70% of Israeli Jews and Palestinians are for acting/reacting more violently, so "teach them a lesson" since the only language "they" understand is the language of force. As a Jewish taxi driver in Jerusalem said to a friend of mine "we will beat them and beat them until they stop hating us". While supporting even more violence against each other, a similar 70% in both societies believe that there is a "two-state" solution to our conflict, the Jews agreeing that Israel should withdraw from Gaza, dismantled settlements. Palestinians overwhelmingly praise democracy and see Israel as an exemplary case. How to move them from adherence to causing pain to the "Other:" into dealing with the negotiation over a better future. There is when "real time" reconciliation becomes a must.

Prof. Bushrui as a *communicator* has important conflict transformation qualities. Knowing him personally makes more than the summation of the parts of his writings. performing and oratory skills are widely recognized both when conceptualizing his own thoughts as well as when reading prose and poetry of the classics, or quoting from religious sources. What could be seen to be theatrical qualities, his story telling, anecdotes, sayings and old proverb convey a blessed expression of his popular roots, producing an instant bridge to include the audience in a shared magnetic attraction. Being involved now in conflict transformation workshops in the Middle East, Latin America, Africa, South East and Central Asia and the South Caucasus, I have witnessed the effect of these expressions as analogies in a better understanding of the issues at stake; the self-realization through a role-playing done with an authentic theatrical traits, impacting the consolidation of rituals and ceremonies of healing, closure and reconciliation. Often not understood from a Western viewpoint,, when looking across cultures, faiths and traditions, Prof. Bushrui's added performing dimension needs to be acknowledged as an asset.

*Spirituality* also acts to the non-tangible dimensions of conflict as a tranquilizer. Prof. Bushrui use of his reading of poetry in the purity of the message, the works of Gibran, the interpretation of the Koran, and even calligraphy have a therapeutic effect on the

listeners and viewers, and as such he is a born conflict resolver. Very few in our field possess this gift and trying to learn from his unique way of transmitting warm feelings of friendship and unity is an imperative for many of us dedicated to work in this area.

One case in point has been when a group of Palestinian and Israeli student leaders, from Bir Zeit, Bethlehem and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who got engaged in 1993/4 in a project with the University of Maryland “:A Christian/Jewish/Muslim Dialogue toward an Israeli/Palestinian Peace”. After receiving a diverse group of student, faculty and staff from College Park in Jerusalem, they reciprocated with a two week visit to our campus, working together towards the search for common ground. One morning, the news were devastating, the case of innocent civilians randomly killed by the “Other”. I was unsure how to break the news to the group and continue our work. Asking Suheil to come and spend the first hour healing the wounds was a most moving moment to our workshop, the participants with wet eyes opened their hearts to each other and promised not to remain idle when such tragic events occur. And indeed in the next months to come after their joint experience, we have seen the students exchanging among themselves and us faxes and phone calls of condolences when killings took place.

After teaching for two decades *human rights* courses from a social science perspective, it was for me a privilege to socialize Prof. Bushrui into our disciplinary understanding of the concept and the relevance to world politics. A man above politics, Prof. Bushrui was able to absorb the meaning of human rights and discuss it in a unique book. Universality, a common standard for all nations, the acceptance of equality among gender, ethnicity, religion, language, nationality were all within his special understanding of the common heritage of all civilizations.

Finally, a point of disagreement. Suheil as an individual is the antithesis of conflict, his natural personal reflex is to yield. He is not alone within his people. I have seen not a few within his own Baha’i community avoiding taking a public stand on contentious issues, perhaps shying away from perceived “political” behavior. As much as I respect such stand, I beg to differ and to side with those around him, specially the young that consider that one needs to stand up and publicly embrace the defense of the good causes they so passionately believe in. The struggle for the respect of human rights is an issue of empowerment, in fighting for our own rights as well as of other human beings. And what may be even more difficult in an identity driven conflict, fighting for the rights of the “Other”.

In the Jewish tradition, we wish each other to live “up to 120 years”. The legacy of Suheil is already extremely rich, but still unfinished. The many generations of disciples, within which I count myself, would like to continue drinking the pure waters of his well of wisdom and learn from his tolerance to strife *together* for a better world, his own vision of humanity.