Schools of Forgiveness and Reconciliation
(English version)

Constructing Peace

By Leonel Narváez Gómez

The subject of forgiveness and reconciliation is, in a certain sense, new. In today's world, a variety of specialists study this subject in different universities. Psychology ignored this subject for a very long time and only recently has begun to give importance to the personal processes of forgiveness and reconciliation. Throughout the years, forgiveness was thought as something upon which priests and churches had a monopoly. In Bogotá, forgiveness workshops promoting interpersonal reconciliation, have become popular as an important contributor to the construction of peace in Colombia. These workshops, Schools of Forgiveness and Reconciliation, are known by their Spanish acronym ESPERE—which in Spanish means "hope."

I met with him a couple of times, but they were quite significant meetings. I remember on one occasion, I was trying to suggest that hatred and anger primarily affect the person who experiences those feelings. The man snapped, “Get down from the clouds, priest...you do it, you pay for it!”...That man was Manuel Marulanda, also known as Tirofijo, chief director of the FARC (Colombian Armed Revolutionary Forces), who was remembering with bitter rage all his family members who were cruelly murdered during the violence of the 1950s.

He was and is still now nicknamed Tirofijo—sure-shot—because he knew how to avenge himself by flawless shooting. Every time I saw him I was perplexed by the contrasting expressions on his face. On one hand, he had expressions full of hate and resentment towards the official government. But on the other, one would see in his eyes a nostalgic desire for peace and tranquility in his life. In Genova (Quindio), the town where he was born, the elderly still comment: “the rage and the desire for vengeance ate him up.”

These words “Get down from the clouds, priest” are still resonating in my mind. Could it be that in reality vengeance is a human necessity or more to the point, a collective blindness? Could it be that forgiveness is possible? Could it be that reconciliation makes some sense? How can one achieve forgiveness and reconciliation without sacrificing truth and justice? Isn’t punishment another way of perpetuating injustice?

I felt uneasy about the fact that the social sciences didn’t worry enough about such a common and yet complex subject. I very well understood that in the case of violence in Colombia, political peace alone was not enough, and that in addition it was necessary to construct social peace. How then can we popularize forgiveness and reconciliation and not allow them to remain solely as a privilege of those who were close to their churches or who could pay the high costs of psychologists and psychiatrists?
The studies conducted on violence normally give more weight to its objective causes (socio-economic and political deficiencies) than to its subjective causes (settling accounts, emotional manipulation, including rage, hatred, resentment and the desire for vengeance). The fact that rage at being poor makes that person even poorer is something that is commonly ignored. It is not a matter of anesthetizing social conscience, but rather of finding constructive ways to achieve justice and peace.

It is not a matter of forgetting since the mere act of forgetting one’s pain is impossible. It is a matter of remembering but with other eyes. In fact, the individual rage and resentment of a person end up accumulating over time, rather than being forgotten, and even worse for communal development, this rage and hatred are also collective, ethnic, and among groups.

At the crux of these reflections, I began to understand that forgiveness and reconciliation could not continue to exist as a monopoly held by churches and priests. On the contrary, it was necessary to convert them into indispensable elements of everyday life. For many years, we were taught to practice forgiveness and vertical reconciliation (with God) and soon we forgot about forgiveness and horizontal reconciliation (with our neighbors).

At Harvard University, with the support of experts in various disciplines, in the year 2000 we were able to formalize the prospect of the “Schools of Forgiveness and Reconciliation” (ESPERE). Our thinking was that while the government and institutions—reasonably enough—worried about achieving political peace in our country, in the whole drama of the conflict and violence that Colombia suffers through, other initiatives to construct social peace at the base of Colombian society were necessary as well.

Thousands of Colombians have suffered through the cruelty of violence; they keep the rage, hatred, resentment and desires of vengeance to themselves. The victims, failing to positively develop their rage and hatred, as shown by recent statistics in the case of Bogotá, run a high risk of claiming justice by their own hands and thus, converting themselves into victimizers.

In the last three years, 59 neighborhoods in the most violent and conflict-ridden zones of Bogotá have been implementing these so-called Schools of Forgiveness and Reconciliation (ESPERE). The backbone of this project is the training of animadores or motivators. Animadores are the heart and soul of this initiative. The animador comes from social, political, religious, or cultural grassroots organizations or is a person with a strong interest in eliminating the difficulties of society's cohabitation. Last year, 180 neighborhood animadores were educated and trained in methodologies of forgiveness and reconciliation. After they complete their training, they inaugurate neighborhood schools of forgiveness and reconciliation. These schools are made up by 10 to15 people personally chosen and motivated by the animador to begin the journey of forgiveness and reconciliation.

To that end, ESPERE designed a 10-module methodology that takes about 80 hours of work (8 hours per module) to complete. The motivator along with the chosen students get together in private homes, in classrooms, in churches, in public spaces or in agreed upon places and tries to replicate the experience that he himself has previously lived through
during his training. It is then a form of group exercise, where the accumulated wisdom of the participants is converted into valuable support for those individuals that have been victims of all sorts of violence.

Until now, the social sciences have done a laudable job with regards to conflict resolution, mediation, conciliation, arbitrage, and similar activities. In fact, theoretical work of great value and trained personnel both exist in that sense. However, people's hearts have yet to be reached by touching those spaces where effective solutions are created and fostering the ability to coexist on a long-term basis. The ESPERE training seeks to reach those spaces in everyone's heart. The heart is where violence is born, and thus it is there where peace and agreement can be reborn. The participants of the ESPERE schools basically learn to transform their rage, their hatred and resentment, and thus to promote concrete actions that take them not to the escalation of violence but to a state of forgiveness and reconciliation.

The ten modules mentioned have been carefully designed to facilitate the difficult and complex road to forgiveness and reconciliation. These 10 steps are:

1. Motivation and agreements of total privacy
2. I decide to move from darkness to light
3. I choose to forgive
4. I see with new eyes
5. I share the pain
6. I accept the other within me
7. I construct the truth
8. I guarantee justice
9. I agree on a pact
10. I organize the celebration.

These ten work modules are structured within a common framework: a safe environment, case presentation, theoretical inspiration, commitment and ritual. These modules and the route they take are filled with a strong symbolic concentration, where the colors, aromas, music, rituals, games, representations, and agreements play an important role.

Without pretending that the ESPERE schools are some sort of miraculous cure, significant changes are being noted in the transformation of familial and neighborhood conflicts. Violence within families seems to have decreased, along with a marked strengthening of personal and communal relationships.

Those attending the School of Forgiveness and Reconciliation talk about important changes in their own reality: they regain a sense of meaning in their lives, their sense of security, and community belonging. At the end of the 80-hour course, participants usually prepare a celebration of memory and restitution. In this celebration, those who have been victims of any form of violence or injustice have the opportunity to bear witness to their tragedy, to receive recognition for their pain along with restitution, most of the times symbolic, offered by their neighborhood community.
The *animadores* of the ESPERE Schools have now begun to receive the support of university students, especially those in the social sciences, in providing more professional support to those people that have suffered through complex traumas. This service has been named “*consultorios de paz*” (peace consulting-rooms).

It is important to note that the *animador* is initially chosen by the Board of Communal Action of the Neighborhood; the same board most of the times provides all necessary support to the *animadores*.

To guarantee the sustainability of the ESPERE Schools, a professional team facilitates communication and integration among various ESPERE schools, performing follow-up and providing methodological and theoretical reinforcement. The ESPERE Schools have begun to diversify their services over time with schools for teenagers, smaller children, church groups, and priests, as well as other religious representatives. The ESPERE Schools are currently in 14 city locations. In each one, a coordinator completes the tasks of motivation, support and management.

Daily practice has allowed the appropriation and development of even better conceptual and methodological tools, which have begun to be used by other institutions that work towards peace from other perspectives. In association with REDEPAZ—the largest Colombian network of initiatives for peace—on one hand, and with the Colombian Catholic Episcopal Conference, on the other, this service soon will be offered in other Colombian cities, especially those with the highest rates of violence.

For centuries, the strategies of peacemaking and citizen security have strongly emphasized rationality and law enforcement. ESPERE Schools want to offer a different paradigm by designing communal work techniques that are sustained through the strengthening of the emotional intelligence.

Without overlooking current theoretical discussions about the root causes of Colombia’s increased criminality (the inefficiency of justice as a product of generalized anarchy, dramatic poverty in the majority of Colombian citizens, the pernicious influence of drug trafficking, a rise in organized crime, and matters of attitude, among others), the ESPERE Schools have chosen to concentrate on three sets of individual and collective dynamics in the work towards forgiveness and reconciliation: the problem of emotional control, the lack of institutional mediators in the community and the lack of knowledge of conflict resolution techniques.

Frequently, crime and violence increase because positive institutional mediators don’t exist or simply don’t work. Instead, negative institutional mediators are being strengthened (subversive groups, juvenile delinquency, organized street crime). Therefore, the social capital for peace is converted into the social capital for violence. In this sense, the ESPERE Schools are gradually creating positive social capital that works both as an institutional mediation for the prevention of violent behavior and as also much as the assertive negotiation of various conflicts.
Certain paradigms have begun to form part of the everyday language of the ESPERE Schools. Against the irrationality of violence it is necessary to propose the irrationality of forgiveness, as well as demonstrate that cities are built from inside out, that forgiveness is not forgetting but rather remembering with different eyes, that without reconciliation there is no future, that hatred and resentment have grave somatic and psychological effects, that truth and justice are indispensable elements of reconciliation, and, finally, that compassion and tenderness must be reinstated as basic elements of the culture of peace.

Quite possibly, some day I will run into Tirofijo again and this time I will be the one to say with great respect: "Get down from the clouds, Don Manuel: without forgiveness and without reconciliation there is no future. Not for you, and not for anyone!!!"

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