

The Role of Cultural Competence in the Creation of a Culture of Nonviolence

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Using stories from her personal experiences and drawing on historical and contemporary voices of non-violence, the author discusses the importance of developing cultural competence in order to build a non-violent society. She posits that cultural competence is a corner piece in the puzzle of a culture of non-violence because it fosters cross-cultural communication, validates people's lived experiences across different cultures and groups, and empowers them to work together to reclaim their humanity.

INTRODUCTION

When I saw Alice after eleven long years in forced exile, her tearful and nostalgic smile almost successfully masked the physical and emotional pain that had shattered her simple but satisfying existence. She had fallen victim to a cruel attack by Tutsi soldiers who had besieged her family's modest dwelling one fateful foggy day shortly before dawn. The unscrupulous soldiers ransacked her house, stealing whatever they could find. When Alice attempted to escape through her back door, she was struck with a sharp machete, which almost severed her right upper arm. The Tutsi soldiers ran off, leaving the helpless mother of six to bleed to death on the cold and dusty ground. Some brave neighbors found Alice when they returned from hiding at daybreak, and helped stop the bleeding. The clinic nearby had no means to operate, so they helped Alice the best way they could. They bandaged her arm and gave her some painkillers. Alice learned to live with relentless pain. When I saw her two and half years after this murderous incident, she never spoke about her almost severed upper arm or about the ensuing pain. The constant groaning in her sleep said it all.

Alice is a Burundian woman. She is a wife and a mother who defines her sole purpose in life through these roles. She did not partake of Western formal education. She can neither read nor write. Why did the Tutsi soldiers seek to take her life, you may wonder? She had neither the knowledge nor skills to become a political rival. She is Hutu. Alice's story illustrates the untold tragedy of Burundi, a small but greatly troubled landlocked country located in the heart of Africa, amidst the Great Lakes region.

The history of humanity bears the unconceivable scars of violence. From the crusades, to the world wars, to the contemporary wide spread civil wars across continents, to the Burundian genocide of 1972 and the Rwandan genocide of 1994, to gang violence and domestic violence in our communities and neighborhoods, to violent television programs and video games in our

homes. Violence is so pervasive that it has wrongfully defined the human experience. Violence has generated such powerful confusion that it is often used to define its clearest antonyms such as bravery, security and even peace and entertainment. Humanity has been immersed in a culture of violence for so long that a healthier alternative sometimes seems fuzzy and unreal. As Deats (2002:267) observes, many people “persist in thinking that in the final analysis it is lethal force, or the threat of it, that is the decisive arbiter of human affairs”.

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the historical and contemporary voices that frame and promote the vision of a nonviolent society. To this effect, I will discuss five main points. After looking at the face of violence through socio-cultural lenses, I will define cultural competence. Then, I will explore the complex nature of the quest for a culture of nonviolence and discuss how developing cultural competence can help build a nonviolent society. I will conclude with a call for individual and collective action.

THE FACE OF VIOLENCE

What does violence look like? This question may sound superfluous and quite naïve especially when posed in a paper whose sole and ultimate goal is to promote a culture of nonviolence. It is a question that must be asked, however, because it reflects the need to take a long and hard look at the face of violence in order to catch a glimpse of nonviolence. No disease can be cured until it is explored and exposed. And violence in its many forms is a societal disease of unprecedented might because it claims more human lives than all known diseases combined. To borrow and paraphrase the words of Martin Luther King Jr. in his April 16, 1963 letter from Birmingham jail, like a boil that can never be cured as long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its pus-flowing ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, intolerance, oppression and violence must likewise be exposed to the light of human conscience and the air of global collective opinion before they can be cured.

While most people readily recognize the face of violence in armed conflicts and other physical altercations, I intend to unveil the hidden face of violence that is perpetuated through intolerance and oppression. People who are repressed often turn to violence. This statement is not meant to condone violence in any shape or form. Instead, it is meant to hold perpetrators of intolerance and oppression equally responsible, if not significantly more responsible, for the acts of violence that often ensue from such repressive dispositions. Intolerance and oppression degrade and devalue the lives of the victimized and thus condemn them to “a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and lovelessness” (West, 1994:23). As Cornel West argues, “life without meaning, hope, and love breeds a coldhearted, mean-spirited outlook that destroys both the individual and others (West, 1994:23). Martin Luther King Jr. (2002:105) further explains that “there comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the bleakness of corroding despair”. He adds that whenever repressed emotions fail to come out in nonviolent ways, they will come out in ominous expressions of violence (King, 2002:109).

Let me illustrate the relationship between intolerance and violence with a familiar story, which though simple, carries a deep meaning. It was almost going to be yet another fall day of teaching in a middle to upper class predominantly white junior high school in the sunny south

west region of the United States when an urgent telephone call rushed me out of my classroom. Bobby, a boy who was very close to me and in the fifth grade at the time of the call, haltingly explained as he urged me to rush home, “I know I’m not supposed to fight, but it was all in self-defense”. The story unfolded rapidly when I pulled up into the driveway of the only home on the street occupied by people of color, particularly a black family. Jordan, a white fellow fifth grader, had spent the entire school day nagging Bobby and calling him names. They were on the same bus route. Since Jordan was to get off the bus one stop earlier, Bobby hoped to get an emotional break. To his greatest surprise, his tormentor stayed on the bus and got off at Bobby’s stop. At that point Jordan uttered the insult that drove Bobby to the edge, “You are a Nigger and your mom is a Nigger too”. At that point, Bobby drew a fist and punched Jordan in the face. Just the other day, I spoke with Bobby, now a young adult, to confirm the authenticity of the story. Not only did he vividly remember the incident, but he also added, “And I pushed Carl off the swing, too”. When I inquired about the details he responded, “He was saying that Blacks were not allowed to swing on it”. Carl was another one of Bobby’s white classmates in the fifth grade. The swing in question was located in the common playground in the apartment complex where Bobby, Carl and their families lived.

On a larger scale, intolerance turns into oppression, which is an even more devastating form of violence because it destroys the body and the soul of the victimized. Nelson Mandela, the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize winner and first democratically elected black president of South Africa, relates the relationship that exists between oppression and violence. In his response to President Botha’s oppressive government’s contention that they could not negotiate with Mandela’s African National Congress until the latter had abandoned their armed resistance to the Apartheid system, Mandela clarified that, “the state was responsible for the violence and that it is always the oppressor, not the oppressed, who dictates the form of the struggle” (Mandela 1994:468).

At the risk of being misunderstood, I dare take a second look at the atrocities that claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Tutsis and moderate Hutus in Rwanda in 1994 while the world watched in horror. I do so to encourage us to pose questions that have perhaps never been asked before. Could the oppressive colonial system that subjugated the country and the region for generations have anything to do with contemporary conflicts between the Tutsis and Hutus? What may have been the impact of the oppression of the Hutu population by the Tutsi government as well as the 1972 genocide and the cyclical massacres of the Hutus by the Tutsi dominated government and the mono-ethnic Tutsi army in neighboring Burundi on the escalation of violence in Rwanda?

This article posits that cultural competence is a corner piece in the puzzle of a culture of nonviolence. It urges all of us to articulate and raise new questions in order to uncover the face of violence and explore ways to build a nonviolent society. To this effect, the following section discusses cultural competence and the complex nature of a culture of nonviolence. Then it explores how developing cultural competence may help create a nonviolent society.

CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Many of the societal conflicts and the resulting destruction of human lives that the world has witnessed and continues to witness have often been caused by the failure of humanity to manage cultural diversity effectively. I use the term culture to refer to “the acquired complex knowledge that individuals and communities use to affirm and interpret the values, beliefs, customs, and practices that distinguish them from other people and groups in society” (Ndura, 2004:10). Conflict often ensues when the intersection of different cultures brings together people or groups that lack cultural competence. Cultural competence refers to the informed dispositions, behaviors, and practices that validate the individual and collective identities and narratives of culturally different people and communities.

Based on the work of the School Leadership Learning Community (2004), cultural competence can be defined in terms of the knowledge, skills, and attributes that a culturally competent individual should exhibit. Defined from a broader perspective, culturally competent individuals possess awareness and understanding of societal patterns of discrimination, inequity and injustice, and the resulting benefits and liabilities to different groups. They know and are willing to question their own values, commitments, beliefs and use of power, influences, and prejudices. They understand the cultural history of their communities and society. They have an informed global perspective that inspires and shape their worldview, dispositions, behaviors, as well as their interactions with other people and their environment. Culturally competent individuals have the skills necessary to break down systems of practice that perpetuate inequities. They are cultural brokers capable of positively and constructively engaging people from different cultures. They can articulate and communicate a culturally competent vision. They have the capacity to trigger and catalyze societal transformation. Culturally competent individuals must also exhibit certain key attributes. They are caring and have empathy for their fellow human beings across cultures. They are firm individuals with the capacity to confidently approach change and manage complexity. They are neither intimidated nor frightened by cultural differences. They value different cultures. They are agents of societal transformation in words and deeds.

THE PUZZLE OF A CULTURE OF NONVIOLENCE

The historical voices of Henry David Thoreau, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr., as well as the contemporary voices of Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Nelson Mandela have taught of the nature and power of nonviolence. Through their words and actions, they have demonstrated how to lead nonviolent struggles against domination, oppression, and injustice. From these mighty teachers, we have learned that the pillars of nonviolence are truth, harmony, brotherhood, justice, fearlessness, and the capacity to sacrifice.

Yet, building a culture of nonviolence continues to appear as a puzzle whose pieces are impossible to construct and assemble. The complexity of this puzzle can be illustrated with two contradictory analogies: blame vs. responsibility first, and strength vs. weakness next. The history of humankind has been shaped by innumerable human tragedies and a pronounced tendency to rationalize their occurrences. Some of the discourses surrounding the enslavement

of the sons and daughters of Africa provide a prime example of this tendency. Instead of assuming and acknowledging responsibility for slavery as the worst atrocity ever known to Africa and the African people, some westerners argue that the slaves were sold by their own people and that practices of enslavement were already wide spread across the African continent before the white man arrived with his beads and rum. Similarly, instead of admitting the role that white dominance plays in the lives of people of color in the United States who, confused and disempowered by a society that often negates their ultimate humanity, sometimes turn to violence, some members of the dominant group blame the victims' fate on inferior intellect and weak family structure. They must draw comfort in blaming the victims.

The second analogy that illustrates the complex nature of nonviolence is the strength vs. weakness duo. We live in a society that values physical strength and elevates physical might above the power of the spirit that Gandhi describes as innately nonviolent. In commentaries that followed the 1972 genocide of the Hutus by the Tutsi-led government in Burundi for instance, folk stories circulated in neighboring countries and the West that portrayed the Hutus as a docile, weak, helpless people who let themselves be led to mass graves. The reality is that little was known about the victims and the thinking that shaped their seemingly subdued behaviors. Most of the victims were men. Their silence and resilience have often been mistaken for a weakness, without any thought that many of them may have chosen to die defenselessly in the hope of shielding their wives and children from Tutsi – inflicted violence.

The pervasive culture of violence in the American society and many other parts of the world is perpetrated through the immortalized heroes of the entertainment industry, the politics of conquest and imperialism, and even on the sports field. Somehow, society continues to teach our children that walking away from a physical challenge to fight is a weakness and that respect and honor are earned through violence. This violent societal mindset complicates the puzzle. It is obvious then that as a complex endeavor, a culture of nonviolence can only be established through the development and use of complex strategies. Developing cultural competence is one of the strategies. As I discuss in the following section, cultural competence is indeed a corner piece in the puzzle of a culture of nonviolence.

DEVELOPING CULTURAL COMPETENCE TO BUILD A NONVIOLENT SOCIETY

The work of Martin Luther King Jr., Dalai Lama, and Thich Nhat Hanh reveal four crosscutting themes that form the pillar of a culture of nonviolence. These voices of nonviolence teach that our understanding of our shared destiny, human interdependence, universal responsibility, and the development of a non-discrimination mind will determine the success of the nonviolence movement. Cultural competence has the potential to enhance this understanding. Two essential questions clarify the relationship that exists between cultural competence and nonviolence.

First, why is developing cultural competence critical to the building of a culture of nonviolence? Similarly to any other process or movement that advocates for social change, the quest for a nonviolent society requires a major shift in our individual and collective dispositions and practices. In this respect, developing cultural competence is a corner piece in the puzzle of a culture of nonviolence for several reasons. It is an enlightening process that empowers

individuals to challenge the status quo by questioning taken-for-granted policies, attitudes, and practices.

In addition, cultural competence enables individuals to gain informed and critical understanding of their cultural identities and life experiences as well as the cultural identities and life experiences of other people and groups. Thus, developing cultural competence is essential to the nonviolence movement because the process helps individuals develop a broader and more flexible perspective. Moreover, cultural competence increases the capacity of individuals and communities to reframe and redefine the divisive discourse that has often led to violent confrontations, thus bringing their human relations to a more constructive, collaborative, and humane era. Finally, cultural competence is vital to the nonviolence movement because it recognizes and validates the most intimate and defining attribute of all human beings: their cultural identity. Hastings (2004:183), one of the champions of nonviolence, indicates that “identity is the source of both pride and prejudice” and that “we use our group identity to achieve great positives and to inflict great negatives”. Cultural competence enhances our ability to use our group identity to achieve greater positives.

Second, how can developing cultural competence impact the pursuit of a culture of nonviolence? The process helps provide opportunities for and establish patterns of cross-cultural communication among culturally diverse individuals and groups of people. Through their engagement in cross-cultural communication, individuals and communities develop awareness of and appreciation for themselves and others. They also gain mutual understanding and respect. Cross-cultural communication allows for the exploration, examination, and questioning of the “official and folk histories” (Spring, 2004) that often fuel division and misunderstanding among culturally different people and communities. Therefore, cross-cultural communication validates every human voice, thus contributing to the quest for local, national, and world peace.

Additionally, developing cultural competence helps build a nonviolent society by validating the narratives of culturally different individuals and communities. Through the process of self-discovery and self-exposure that is made possible in cross-communication contexts, individuals learn to listen to and accept other people’s voices. They share and learn to validate other people’s cultural frames of reference and ways in which these shape their perceptions of self and others as well as their worldview. As a result of the newly acquired understanding, they progressively free themselves from the dismissal and blaming mindsets and learn to validate the storied and lived experiences of the ‘other’. Hence, cultural competence enables the individuals and communities to regard those who are culturally different not as threatening strangers that must be eliminated but as valuable members of the shared humanity that need to be embraced and sustained.

Moreover, cultural competence contributes to the quest for nonviolence by empowering individuals and communities to work together to restore humanity within and among all people. Developing cultural competence allows individuals to uncover the nature and magnitude of the losses and destruction that man-made divisions and enduring conflicts have caused across generations. The process also enhances individuals’ capacity to appreciate and value the increasing human interdependence that defines the human experience at the local, national, and international levels. The common sayings that ‘no man is an island’ and that ‘what goes around

comes around' become apparent realities as individuals begin to see the extent to which these simple words of wisdom define every person's daily-lived experiences. Consequently, by strengthening their awareness and understanding of these realities, developing cultural competence helps individuals to articulate and resolve to assume their responsibilities for combating and eradicating the social inequities and injustices that have often fueled conflict and violence. Thus, cultural competence empowers individuals and communities to build a nonviolent society.

A CALL TO ACTION

What good is our yearning for cultural competence and the culture of nonviolence that it inspires if our lives are not transformed so as to embrace the cause of nonviolence in our daily actions and interactions? This section is an individual and collective call for all who are concerned with the future of humanity to seek nonviolent alternatives in all conflict resolution contexts, to join hands with the victims of violence, and to formulate, raise, and expect new answers for new questions.

Violence is dehumanizing for both the victims and the perpetrators. As Freire (1993:26) argues, "dehumanization marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also those who have stolen it". Violence is also oppressive. And Freire (1993:26) contends that it is "the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed to liberate themselves and their oppressors". He explains, "[t]he oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both". A personal story will best illustrate this perspective.

The story bears the emblem of the vulnerability of human nature and the distorting power that acts of intolerance can exert on the human mind. I arrived home on a beautiful and warm Friday afternoon anxious to rest and enjoy a relaxing weekend with my children after a long week of teaching at an ethnically diverse high school in the southwest of the United States. To my most unwelcome surprise, my neighbor, Tim, had parked his white pick-up truck right along my front yard, almost obstructing my driveway. After maneuvering my family van around the pick-up truck and parking in my garage, I walked back out to take a closer look at the flag that was hanging on the inside of Tim's truck windshield. I called my son out to confirm what I thought I was seeing. I was right. It was the confederate flag. Suddenly, all the memories of my family's numerous past and current experiences with racism in the schools and community came rushing into my mind with such a force that I was almost overtaken by dizziness. Then, it was an equally sudden urge for action, so strong that it sent my entire body into a shaking frenzy. I had to do something to shield my daughter from this unwelcome message. She was due home in a matter of minutes. Among the uncontrollable rushing alternatives, one became more persistent. Images of me breaking the windshield with a hammer and setting the unsightly flag on fire flashed through my mind at the speed of light, almost blurring my vision. As I opened the front door to my home, a frightening revelation overtook my soul. I had just experienced a temptation to carry out a criminal act. Confused by such an uncharacteristic reaction, I ran into my study room, closed the door, and dropped to my knees to ask the Almighty for urgently needed help. I embarked on a five-mile walk shortly after my daughter got home, trusting that the long route

should calm and inspire my raging mind. In addition to the realization that the temptation would have brought some pretty damaging consequences onto my family, the long walk unveiled the negative and unpredictable impact that intolerance and oppression may have on the human mind. Six days later, after pouring out my pain and disappointment in several calm, but firm conversations with Tim's wife, and then with Tim himself, I drove off to school with my children breathing a little more easily. The haunting flag had been removed. The pick-up truck was still parked along my front yard, but I could handle that. Pursuing nonviolent alternatives to resolve conflicts empowers and humanizes both the victimizers and the victimized. I would like to believe that my conversations with Tim and his wife empowered them to think about how their choices could affect other people's lives.

Effective nonviolent alternatives must be inspired by principles of cultural competence. This call to action also invites us to join hands with the victims of violence in our mind and heart. This requires that we develop and enhance the knowledge, skills and attributes that are characteristic to culturally competent individuals. We cannot successfully advocate for a cause that we do not fully comprehend. Therefore, in order to become effective advocates of nonviolence, we must seek to increase our knowledge base of the cultures, the societal attitudes and practices, as well as the ensuing cultural frames of reference of both the perpetrators and the victims of violence.

We must ask ourselves individually and collectively - What can I do to help break down systems of practice that perpetuate social inequity, injustice, and violence? How can I utilize my social position to contribute to the quest for a culture of nonviolence? What opportunities for exposure and engagement do I need to seek out and pursue in order to develop greater empathy for my fellow human beings across cultures locally and globally? What attitudes and behaviors do I need to develop and exhibit in order to truly become an agent of societal transformation who is committed to the culture of nonviolence?

In addition, this is an urgent call to each one of us to liberate ourselves from the status quo by raising new questions and expecting new answers as we attempt to restore our humanity that has been defaced by the many forms and dimensions of violence. What is the fate of the widows and orphans who have been left desolate and uncared for in the cyclical massacres and genocide of the Hutus by the Tutsi government and military since 1965 in Burundi? We must ask. What will the international community do to help restore humanity and unity between Tutsis and Hutus in the villages and cities of Rwanda now that the 1994 genocide has faded from the media headlines? We must ask. What will happen to the millions of African American men and other people of color in the United States whose lives are wasting away in prison and who have been rendered voiceless as victims of intolerance, oppression, and discrimination? We must pose these and many more new questions and demand new answers from each one of us individually and collectively. We can no longer make or accept excuses for avoidance and inaction.

CONCLUSION

Opposing violence is not sufficient to build a culture of nonviolence. The quest requires a willingness and commitment to dig deep and expose the roots of violence, especially the hidden roots that are shaped and fortified by socio-cultural forces. In the words of McGregor (2005:2),

we must develop “an everyday attitude of non-violence, and fierce determination to defend human rights and human dignity” in order to create a culture of peace in our neighborhoods, nations, and the world. The familiar stories used in this paper illustrate the importance and relevance of socio-cultural factors in the pursuit of a culture of nonviolence. The paper acknowledges the complexity of the quest in a society that is all too often caught up in the contradictory paradigms of blame vs. responsibility, and strength vs. weakness. It affirms that cultural competence is a corner piece in the puzzle of a culture of nonviolence. Developing cultural competence is vital to the quest for a nonviolent society because it is a process that fosters cross-cultural communication, validates the narratives of culturally different individuals and communities, and empowers people to work together to reclaim their humanity. The resounding individual and collective call to action is an urgent invitation to humanity to seek and pursue nonviolent alternatives to the many conflicts that threaten the very existence of our families, communities, and the world. It is a call to all who dream of a nonviolent future to join hands with victims of violence in mind and spirit, and to raise new questions and expect new answers.

Our shared and inevitable quest for a nonviolent future must be inspired, guided, and affirmed by the lessons that we have learned from the historical and contemporary voices of nonviolence. Our ever increasing human interdependence is one of the lessons we can no longer afford to ignore, because in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., victims of violence everywhere are acclaiming, “abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America and the destiny of the entire world” (King, 2002:112). We are a “global family”, proclaimed Dalai Lama, the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize winner, “and because we all share this small planet earth, we have to learn to live in harmony and peace with each other and with nature...we are dependent on each other in so many ways that we can no longer live in isolated communities and ignore what is happening outside those communities” (Lama, 2002:118). As Thich Nhat Hanh, a Zen master and chairman of the Vietnamese Buddhist Peace Delegation during the Vietnam War, reminds us, “the life of each one of us is connected with the life of those around us” (Hanh, 2002:127).

The quest for a culture of nonviolence requires that we develop “a sense of universal responsibility” (Lama, 2002:118) and a “non-discrimination mind” (Hanh, 2002:126). In other words, we must enter in communion with victims of violence everywhere, for it is by making their suffering and their hopes our very own that we will feel and affirm the urgency of the honorable cause of nonviolence upon which rests the salvation of humanity.

Notes:

1. This paper is adapted from an invited lecture presented at Portland State University, February 26, 2005.
2. All the stories told in this paper are true, but people’s actual names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect individuals’ identities.

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