

WHAT IS RECONCILIATION?

LIVING WITH IT
JON HATCH

*A Theology of Reconciliation
for what Doesn't Go Away*

THINK PEACE 9

The Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky's poem 'Fine' begins:

*This is time humming taut as a telegraph wire,
My heart, alone with the truth, whole and sole.
This happened- with fighters, with the country entire,
In the depth of my own soul.*

Much of the reality of working for reconciliation is in those lines. There is tension. There is a heart, lonely and holding on to its irreducible truth. There are the actions of fighters, actions that affect all of us at some level, but affect some to the depths of their soul.

But first of all, there is time.

Conflict and reconciliation are played out in time. If reconciliation, at some level, involves facing up to conflict- what led to conflict, what happened to those involved, and how we move forward- it involves all aspects of time- past, present and future.

Some aspects of conflict in Ireland and Northern Ireland are in the past. The partition of Ireland- and the creation of Northern Ireland- was, for many, an experience of marginalisation and alienation, suspicion and threat. The breakdown of social and political stability after 1968 very often involved trauma and violence, fear and anger, and long-lasting pain and bitterness.

In the present, while life since the Good Friday Agreement is significantly less violent, more stable and certainly more pleasant, it is still a dismaying maze built out of all that came before.

With all that in mind, it is unsurprising that reconciliation- the process of living well together after violent conflict in the past, and in the midst of a present marked by structural sectarianism and deep social division- is so difficult. How do we start? Perhaps more fundamentally, what is it we want?

A common starting point in theologies of reconciliation is the imagery of healing. 'Healing'- literally to 'make whole'- is the process of restoring physical and psychological health to a body that is diseased or damaged. In a context that is moving from conflict to peace, this imagery can be very beneficial, particularly in the context of personal injury, trauma, and loss. It does, however, carry the assumption there was a healthy and normative state to which the body can be restored. However, for many conditions this is not the case and the theological language of 'healing' becomes problematic.

In a place like post-conflict Northern Ireland, which in many ways does not have a normative, shared, unified position to which to return, another image of 'healing' might be beneficial. I am suggesting an understanding of 'healing' in the context of living with conditions that arise from birth or development, or from a genetic or neurological disposition that cannot necessarily be 'healed' in the same way as a wound or an infection.

We have many beautiful examples in the biblical text of Jesus and the apostles healing people of physical ailments and restoring them to their community. We have no images of Jesus delivering anyone from clinical depression, fibromyalgia, bipolar disorder, diabetes or autism- physical, mental and neurological challenges that are simply ongoing. Such conditions complicate our theology of 'healing' with different understandings- and different expectations.

Our 13 year-old son Iain has autism. He is intelligent, thoughtful, funny and, in his own manner, very personable. He does, however, struggle with social interaction and finds dealing with his own

emotions difficult. He is often not mindful of the thoughts and feelings of others, which means he can seem inconsiderate and impolite. He often misses the social cues that would indicate that people enjoy his company, which means he struggles with a low self-opinion. He becomes overwhelmed with personal interaction quickly, which means he can become agitated and angry.

Living with a person with autism is an ongoing, daily challenge for our entire family. Autism is not something Iain 'has', and there was never a point where he didn't 'have' it. Rather, autism is part of who he 'is'; it is a way of being.

Iain is not 'disabled'. Indeed, if he has a disability, it is often other people's inability- or refusal- to acknowledge his particularities with understanding or grace. The frequent thoughtlessness, obstinacy, and lack of understanding from other children, teachers, shopkeepers- even his family- are the source of most of his daily difficulties. Yet when his particularities are acknowledged with grace- a little bit of understanding, explanation and patience- Iain's condition fades into the background and the fun, capable young person he is emerges.

'Healing' in this context does not mean 'curing', returning to 'normal' or the condition disappearing - that will not happen. Rather, for Iain, his family and friends, healing involves commitment, determination, realism and courage.

Here, 'healing' and reconciliation equal understanding and grace, an acceptance of another's needs and our own expansiveness over the long term against a backdrop of continuing challenges. The acceptance of this should never be mistaken for fatalism. Rather, it is an ongoing process of establishing the parameters of what constitutes realistic hope.

It is 'living with it'.

I think that such an image of healing might help people in Northern Ireland to understand and live with the reality of a past that was never particularly normative or healthy and an ongoing present following in its wake. The legacy of political decisions made a century ago- the 'genetics' of this placed to a difficult 'birth' and development. It also colours a complicated present and a challenging future.

What can we do? We cannot go back to the better 'way it was'- there is no such place. Rather, we can realistically seek to live together well, in every situation, day in, day out.

We 'live with it'. We live with 'them'. We live with 'us'. And we do our utmost to 'live with it' well.

This will take grace and patience, images of which the biblical text has in abundance. Jesus became as we are, and he remains as we are. Being human, in a sense, is the ongoing condition that God lives with for all time.

We in Northern Ireland still find ourselves in time. And time, it seems, does not 'heal' all wounds. But this image of reconciliation might help us 'live with it', but 'live with it' better and to the full in the midst of who we all are.

And in time, it might even help us- as it does with my family- to love each other as we are.

Jon Hatch is a theologian, reconciliation worker and Corrymeela associate. He holds an M.Phil in Reconciliation Studies and a PhD in theology from Trinity College Dublin and has many years experience in post-conflict reconciliation and community development work. He lives in Belfast.

Corrymeela Community

VISION:

Embracing difference, healing division
and enabling reconciliation.

MISSION:

To provide open, safe and inclusive
spaces for dialogue, which moves
society towards social justice, positive
relationships and respect for diversity.

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