



Basic Theory of Reconciliation: A Practitioner Methodology

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Basic Theory of Reconciliation:

A Practitioner Methodology

James Patton, MDiv, MALD

“In the simplest expression...*reconciliation* is the *progression of a damaged relationship to one that is less damaged.*”

Social reconciliation at the community level¹ is a complex concept and an even more complex practice in the context of violent conflict. It involves untangling the pain, pride, fear, righteousness, hatred and justifications that are the psychological aftermath of violence. In the simplest expression, however, the following methodological framework suggests that reconciliation is the progression of a damaged relationship to one that is less damaged.

In this articulation, reconciliation is not an end-point but rather a process, and one that can (and one hopes that will) continue throughout the life of individuals who were parties to an adversarial relationship. The ideal for a reconciliation practitioner is to help cultivate a relationship that is less conflictual, more collaborative, and more socially integrated. This often involves changing identity narratives and perceptions that have permitted dehumanization into ones that allow for coexistence. This, in turn, means helping those in conflict to see something of themselves in one another. These gentle evolutions of perspective are not an easy prospect when individuals and communities are steeped in the pain and hatred that characterizes the aftermath of violent conflict – but helping to generate this possibility is the task of a reconciliation practitioner.

¹ This is in contrast to formal government processes of reconciliation, such as truth and reconciliation commissions.

It is important to note that reconciliation is not limited to a process between individuals but can be conducted between whole communities. In fact, even if done at the individual level, results will intuitively be more sustainable if community members, family members, and others are constructively involved. Nor is it only in the climate of violence that reconciliation is a relevant practice. In this article, I will largely be reflecting on violence, however.

**“...in truth,
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I will use the terms “perpetrator” and “victim”, which seemingly oversimplify the reality of violent conflict to a binary when, in truth, over the long arc of violence, many people are both victims and perpetrators. I also frequently use the generic term “other” to indicate either party to this conflict. My intention is not to ignore the nuances of violence or reconciliation, but to generate a simplified structure that can absorb that nuance, described through an emblematic, discrete incident of violence in which one side was the perpetrator and the other the victim. This allows for a more streamlined presentation of ideas. However, in real reconciliation practice, the multiplicity of identities of the parties to the process, role of the wider community, complexities of collective violence, etc. will demand careful layering of the process elements that I describe below. Unpacking the history of violence, for example, may require that a victim admit her own destructive actions or that a perpetrator recognize himself as also suffering due to his actions. Additionally, while there is room for punishment in the practice of reconciliation (which will be addressed further on), reconciliation is fundamentally a restorative justice practice, with the goal of recovering social cohesion. This is a much deeper structural goal than simply identifying a legally or socially appropriate punishment for an action, and requires skillful reconcilers or facilitators.²

The facilitator of reconciliation must be focused singularly on the end goal of improved relationships, and cannot fall into the inviting trap of being partisan. While this is challenging for anyone with a knowledge of the details of violence, and unavoidable empathy for victims of violence, it is not the place of the reconciler to be committed to any particular understanding of reality, history, truth, or appropriate actions that constitute justice. Rather, the reconciler is committed to an improved, healed relationship, *however the parties to the conflict define that*.

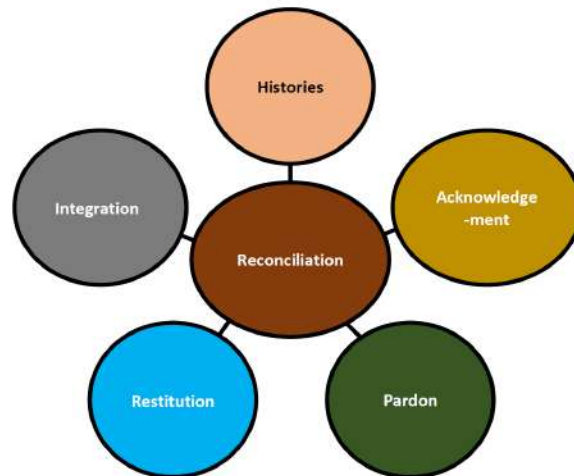
² In the context of this article, I use these terms interchangeably.

“The *facilitator* of reconciliation must be focused singularly on the end goal of improved relationships, and cannot fall into the inviting trap of being *partisan*.”

This may mean that parties to the conflict arrive at a different conclusion to their adversarial relationship than the reconciler might have recommended or hoped for, but it is not the place of the reconciler to be an interested party in anything other than the transition of a relationship from broken to more healed, and the attendant reduction in conflict and violence associated with that change. The skills of the reconciler should be brought to bear to produce a change that is sustainable and as expansive as possible, and that positively affects the other relationships of the parties to the conflict. This may require that the reconciler challenge parties to question their own experiences, to test their limits, or to acknowledge difficult truths, but these challenges should be meant only to facilitate the transformation of the damaged relationship. The fundamental theory is that a new relationship based on a changed image of the other will break cycles of retributive violence as well as begin healing processes.

Although each case will have its own nuances, just as each conflict and act of violence is distinct and each person and their psychology is distinct, the fundamentals of reconciliation can be described through five core elements.

It is important to mention that these elements do not necessarily proceed in a linear fashion, although progress in some may advance progress in others. In some cases, these elements are iterative, with advances in one area necessitating revisiting an element that was already “dealt with.” For example, an individual might have a clear sense of their own experience before engaging with their former adversary, but have that understanding shift when they hear an alternative viewpoint that provides them with different insights. Additionally, not all of these elements are essential to successful reconciliation, although the more that they are present, the more effective the reconciliation is likely to be. Reconciliation will ultimately take as many forms as those who are reconciled, however. The five core elements, described below, are: *Histories*, *Acknowledgement*, *Pardon*, *Restitution*, and *Integration*.



Elements

Histories

Histories refer to the “story of what happened” and *the process by which an individual or group comes to articulate their experience of an event*. These histories do not necessarily reflect a universally accepted reality, and this part of the process should not be seen as an effort to establish the “objective” truth of an event. Rather it is meant to allow for the articulation of a personal or community narrative about the perception of the experience, including the impact of that experience on their well-being. The process by which parties come to understand their own stories is very important, as it will determine much of what they require from and may offer to a reconciliation process. These histories are not always fixed and can shift with time, particularly if parties become more sympathetic to the experience of former adversaries or as their own recollection evolves. Exploring these histories can be delicate and difficult, and each party will likely need to conduct this part of the process with the support of the third-party reconciler, separate from their perceived adversary. This also requires a great deal of trust-building by the facilitator. The creation of a safe space, with expert facilitation by a trusted third party, is crucial, so that those involved might feel secure enough to go through a difficult process of recall and interpretation without feeling that they are being scrutinized and judged. The facilitator can play a very critical role in determining when adversaries might be able to face one another and hear each other’s accounts, grievances, and needs. This moment of “ripeness”³ is very delicate and if that engagement is rushed it can do more harm than good, such as reinforcing destructive stereotypes of the other.

³ For more on *ripeness* see the work of William Zartman, inter alios.

“...[*histories*] is meant to allow for the articulation of a *personal or community narrative* about the *perception* of the experience, including the impact of that experience on their *well-being*.”

In order to best establish this sense of security, facilitators must be mindful of psychological barriers to remembering, exploring, and analyzing the traumatic past. It is likely that psycho-social or spiritual professionals can provide significant support to this process, as can innovative techniques, such as artistic representation of emotions related to the trauma.

An essential aspect of this element is grounded in the concept of separating the perception of the other from the experience of violence, particularly for the victim. The reality of an act of historical violence will never change, nor will the role and agency of a perpetrator. However, if the act and the actor remain synonymous, a change in the perception of the other and an improved relationship is literally impossible. This element tries to achieve a decoupling of the act from the actor - while the person “did” what they did they “aren’t” what they did. To achieve the possibility of reconciliation, they need to be untied from that act to be free to evolve into someone else in the mind of the victim. In the case of victims, this might mean dealing with fear, pain, resentment, and hatred, ultimately opening up to the possibility that, if the following elements fall into place, the perpetrator might be a different person in the world, no longer representing the threat of a similar action. With a perpetrator this could easily mean grappling with self-justification, dehumanization of the other, self-loathing, and selective amnesia. It is in this process that the facilitator can begin to assist with disentangling authentic grievances and fears from prejudicial generalizations about the other individual or group.

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Acknowledgement

Acknowledgment refers to the process by which one party hears and understands the historical views, experiences, and personal narrative of the other. The truths that are shared in this element are not meant to be absolute truths, or capital “T” truths. In fact, it is almost certain that the adversaries will hold different accounts of the same history, and undoubtedly their subjective experience of those histories and their aftermath will be distinct. The goal of acknowledgement is not to come to agreement on truth, but to recognize that the perception of the other is important because it is their perception and, inasmuch, is meaningful in understanding the motives and sentiments that drive them. This is a delicate process which requires a predisposition by all parties to recognize that their task is not to contest or debate those stories, but to acknowledge that they represent the truth for the other and, as such, are critically important to reconciling. Oftentimes, parties engaged in a reconciliation process begin to soften their attitude toward the other after they feel that their own histories, with their attendant grievances and needs, have been authentically heard. This is an opportunity to seize on falling barriers and identify common ground around which to build toward a new understanding of the other and a new relationship.

While it is important that adversaries are able to witness to the truth of the other directly, an effective reconciliation practitioner must be able to discern when parties are ready to not only share their history but hear another’s history without debating it – at least not directly to the adversary. Here is where a facilitator might return to a segregated engagement of the parties to the conflict, to help them process what they have heard, including grappling with probable frustrations arising from the other’s account of their shared history.

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There are a number of techniques that can be employed prior to that direct engagement. The first is a kind of “shuttle diplomacy” to prepare the ground. Bringing perceptions from one side into conversations with the other, if the facilitator is considered an impartial third-party, is a way to gauge reactions, explain intentions, and work through resistance. In this way, ripeness can be achieved for an actual direct engagement. One technique that should be carefully explored in advance of adversarial groups meeting is that of “compassionate” or “active” listening. This is a technique that teaches a listener to use inquiry to deepen understanding and clarification, while avoiding judgement and combativeness over assertions of experience and perception, and without debating the accuracy of historical claims. For instance, instead of saying “you’re wrong!” a listener might say, “my understanding of that is not the same; would you please explain more about why you see it that way?”

Pardon

Pardon is a term I use consciously in this reconciliation methodology to avoid the use of the term forgiveness. I do so because forgiveness has become burdened with misunderstandings, and this has created controversy around its practice. One way in which forgiveness has been misapplied is the implication that a victim of an incident of violence is in some way obliged to forgive. It may certainly be the conviction of the reconciler that spiritual and mental health will be greatly improved if a victim forgives. As a saying attributed to many people, not least of all the Buddha, goes, “holding on to anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.” However, to burden a victim with a sense that they are obliged to forgive can amount to revictimizing them. This can be particularly toxic if it is also mistakenly implied that forgiveness is a singular act in a discrete moment in time. The subtext of that framing is that one forgives and from that moment “moves on” into a future unburdened by the past. This is neither factually accurate nor practical. If the future does not ground itself in the past, it will be uninformed and suffer the kind of functional amnesia that invites repetition. A new future must be grounded in the truth of a broken past, but not inexorably tethered to it.

“One way in which *forgiveness* has been misapplied is the implication that a victim of an incident of violence is in some way obliged to *forgive.*”

Pardon, on the other hand, is understood in this methodology as a process that begins the moment the aggrieved person or the aggressor first *opens themselves to the idea that a perpetrator of an offense can be distinct from the act that they committed*. Pardon is the initiation of a process that lasts as long as the relationship of an individual or group with their past lasts – which is to say the life of the person in question. This bears repetition because it is crucial. When one begins to separate the actor from the action, one allows that the actor can be understood as distinct from the act that they committed. This means that history can be dealt with, remaining pertinent and relevant, but that the perpetrator’s identity is not wholly equivalent to that history, and is free to change and evolve and have those changes be recognized by the other. Without this separation there can be no pardon, because the perpetrator will forever be equated with the act that they committed – an act that will never be erased from history, no matter how much forgiveness is sought or offered. In this scenario, the person could never truly change in the eyes of the victim, since the act can never be undone. The effect of an act of violence may never cease to have impact upon a victim, despite this process of pardon. If the identity of the perpetrator is not inextricably linked with the action, however, that can be true simultaneously with a less broken, or even positive, relationship growing between the parties.

“When one begins to separate the actor from the action, one allows that the actor can be understood as distinct from the act that they committed.”

Pardon might require “giving up on the hope that the past will be different.” However, pardon is not a discrete moment of transition. Rather it is the initiation of a process. As such, it best flourishes when it includes a verifiable promise of “non-repetition”. The cessation of further offenses is inextricably connected to the demonstration of a change in a person’s attitudes and the authenticity of their desire for a changed relationship.

In a counterintuitive way, it is important that the perpetrator recognize this distinction, also. If they can’t divorce their own identity from the act that they committed, then they may also remain trapped in that history. In my experience, repentant perpetrators who have not grappled with how to transform their own self-perception in this way feel like they have to fight against a negative “inherent nature” if they wish to avoid recidivism.

Rather than seeing themselves as positively transformed, they see themselves as an inherent risk, a perception that leads to a sense of the need for constant vigilance against destructive actions rather than one of potential positive agency for change. If the former is the case, a perpetrator might be more resigned to the “fact” that they will probably commit such acts again, which lowers their resistance to those behaviors. Alternatively, the latter will encourage an intention to apply their own experience and transformation as readily available source of constructive influence on others who might face the same destructive behavioral risks.

“If [*perpetrator*] cannot divorce their own identity from their committed act, they may also remain trapped in that history.”

Restitution

Restitution means more than just material support or other actions on behalf of a victim or victims of violence. Restitution fundamentally refers to a means by which a party demonstrates their *authentic willingness to pursue a restored relationship by making amends*. This often means relinquishing something precious. As with each constituent reconciliation element, however, this can take a myriad of forms. Restitution might be as simple as discarding justifications and admitting the wrongful nature of one’s behaviors, or as complex as the person losing their freedom and being removed from society through jail time, or it may include a meaningful financial penalty. The perspective of the victim is critical in determining how this manifests. Since the purpose of restitution is to authentically demonstrate remorse and a desire to heal a relationship on the part of a perpetrator, it is essential that the aggrieved party be involved in the decision-making process that determines the nature of that restorative action. There is a serious risk at this stage for a reconciliation mediator to influence the process based on their own visceral sense of justice. It is critically important, however, that one refrains from doing so. Only if the restitution process is governed by the victim will it authentically reflect their needs for healing.

“*Restitution* might be as *simple* as discarding justifications and admitting the wrongful nature of one’s behaviors, or as *complex* as the person losing their freedom and being removed from society through jail time, or it may include a meaningful financial penalty.”

One of the fundamental characteristics of violence is a loss of control and self-determination experienced by the victim. A perpetrator exerts power over a victim. The act of returning decision-making power to the victim returns some measure of control to them. This is a delicate element for the facilitator, as it is important that mere vengeance not be the driving factor in deciding what restitution should be made. This does not mean that punishment is not a factor, but restorative justice practices require that any punishment or sacrifice promotes the possibilities of generating an improved relationship and regenerating social cohesion, not just “getting even.” It is very helpful if activities that advance some measure of rehumanizing and empathy have taken place in advance. As mentioned in the discussion of pardon, however, there must be some mechanism for holding people accountable for not only the restitution that they agree to, but for a promise of non-repetition of their transgressions.

Integration

Integration represents the practical evidence of moving away from a broken relationship toward a more healed one. While integration fundamentally refers to an improved, more pro-social relationship between the parties, it might also mean greater social cohesion in the broader community. This relational change moves adversaries from attitudes and interactions that are grounded in acts of violation (of rights, safety, liberty, sovereignty, etc.) to those that are grounded in a healthier, more empathetic, and more respectful attitudes. This progression might be reflected by something as simple as giving up the desire for retributive violence, or as complex as working together for mutual social or financial benefit. The key here is not that a relationship must achieve a certain quality – such as regular collaboration – to “qualify” as reconciliation. Rather, success is measured by the progression of the relationship away from adversarial tendencies.

In some cases, adversaries have to work through difficult hurdles before they might be willing to soften their attitudes. In other cases, however, some degree of integration might happen at the very outset, laying the groundwork for the other elements. Sometimes it isn't until the adversaries begin to connect over mutual interest and benefit that they break down barriers to sharing histories, for example.

“...one of the more powerful tools to advance *integration* is *collaboration* on something of *mutual benefit*.”

In fact, one of the more powerful tools to advance integration is collaboration on something of mutual benefit. While this can often manifest as a joint economic project, for example, which has the added benefit of enhancing personal and community economies destroyed by the conflict, there are many possibilities. In some cases, former adversaries will jointly implement a community improvement project, seek ways to dissuade others from committing violence, or establish a service project for others impacted by the violence. It must be recognized, however, that a new relationship will always be grounded in the adversarial experience of the past. No amount of improved relationship will wash away the historical acts that took place. This is important for a reconciliation practitioner, and the adversaries, to recall. But changing history is never the goal, establishing a better future is. This means that a certain quality of interaction must be reached between those striving to build this kind of integration. Critical among them are trust, authenticity, and empathy. Former adversaries will be most careful of one another and their transformed relationship, avoiding errors of the past that led to confrontation, if they have developed a true sense of empathy for one another. The longer a relationship is positive, the more that trust will grow between the parties.

Conclusion

This methodological framework is presented as a means to take a complex concept and even more challenging practice and streamline its essential elements. It is not intended to refute or supplant other understandings of reconciliation, of which there are many, but rather to provide a possible tool for approaching reconciliation that may be useful in application or in informing other methodologies. Despite the effort to establish a practical distinction between these five elements, there are undoubtedly areas where the line between one and another is blurred, where it might be required to apply more than one at a time, or where there are gaps that other practices will fill. In the end, reconciliation is about improving relationships, and a practitioner must use all the techniques at her disposal to drive toward that goal.

It should be clearly stated that reconciliation is not an obligation but a tool that may be used to improve broken relationships when this is considered a meaningful goal. One of the primary purposes of reconciling adversaries is to prevent cycles of retributive violence or prejudice that continue to deteriorate social cohesion. This may mean that a practitioner must make compromises in terms of perceived justice, but only if the parties consciously encourage seeking a better-integrated relationship. After all, the quality of justice is best determined by those who have suffered injustice.

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