

INTRODUCTION



Several years ago I attended a series of UN-sponsored national reconciliation conferences addressing the Somali conflict. In one of those conferences, a close Somali friend, who was participating as a delegate representing Somali nongovernmental organizations, met his cousin in the corridor. The cousin was chairman of one of the key political parties in Mogadishu.

“Mr. Chairman,” my friend cajoled his cousin with typical Somali humor, “how is it that you warlords think that one of you has the right to be president?” He was referring to the political haggling and resulting impasse that seemed to set in at every Somali peace conference over what clan, and ultimately what person, would rise to the presidency. “Don’t you know,” my friend continued, “that without a frame the roof of a house collapses?”

“You know as well as I,” replied the chairman, deftly shifting metaphors as the Somalis in their oral tradition do so well, both in poetry and proverb, “the key to a healthy body is a good head. I have never seen legs walk or arms move without a head.”

“Dear cousin,” my friend replied with a deep note of sadness, “the house has collapsed. The legs have been crushed, the arms are bled clean. There is no body to be head of.”

This exchange captures both the dilemma of pursuing peace in war-torn Somalia and the challenge that faces so many war-ravaged and violently divided societies around the world. In essence, the challenge is one of how to build and maintain the house of peace. It is this challenge I wish to address in the following pages.

My inquiry is based on three primary questions: What is the nature—what are the key characteristics—of contemporary armed conflicts that divide societies across our globe? What are useful concepts and perspectives for building peace in the midst of these conflicts? What are practical approaches and activities that move us toward peaceful and constructive transformation of conflict and have the potential for sustaining that movement?

I have a rather modest thesis. I believe that the nature and characteristics of contemporary conflict suggest the need for a set of concepts and approaches that go beyond traditional statist diplomacy. Building peace in today's conflicts calls for long-term commitment to establishing an infrastructure across the levels of a society, an infrastructure that empowers the resources for reconciliation from within that society and maximizes the contribution from outside. In short, constructing the house of peace relies on a foundation of multiple actors and activities aimed at achieving and sustaining reconciliation. The purpose of this book is to outline a set of ideas and strategies that undergird sustainable peace.

I wish to clarify from the outset that my thinking and approach emerge from the standpoint of a practitioner rather than a theorist. Although there are numerous places throughout this book where theory is employed—where I present ideas about how things work, are related, and can be more clearly perceived by using a variety of lenses—my theoretical endeavors are not aimed at suggesting hypotheses to be tested. My approach is more inductive in nature, representing attempts to bring together lessons learned while facing real-life dilemmas of peacebuilding and mediation. What I wish to bring to the broader discussion of peacebuilding in the international arena are ideas emerging from a practice-oriented learning process.

Accordingly, I draw examples from the regions around the globe where I have had direct experience. In the past fifteen years I have worked in more than twenty countries across five continents, providing training in conflict transformation and a variety of services related to the design and support of peacebuilding initiatives. The framework of this book is strongly influenced by my experiences in Nicaragua as a member of the team that mediated between the Sandinista government and the East Coast indigenous uprising during

the late 1980s, by my intensive involvement with the Somali crisis in the early 1990s, and by my longer-term work supporting peacebuilding efforts in Colombia, Northern Ireland, the Philippines, and the Basque country. In all of these areas, I have functioned chiefly as a nongovernmental actor working in various forms of what is broadly referred to as “second-track diplomacy.” My hope is that the basic framework for peacebuilding that this book presents will encourage both practitioners and scholars to reflect on their own experiences and areas of expertise.

The three primary questions on which this book is based also shape its overall structure. The first part of the book is an overview of the characteristics of contemporary conflict, both across our globe and within divided societies. The second part lays out the fundamental perspectives and concepts of peacebuilding that have emerged from direct experience. Part II includes a description of key operational concepts and more specific suggestions about how an approach to sustainable peace can be constructed. The book concludes with a chapter written by John Prendergast, who applies some of the concepts discussed in part II to four instances of contemporary conflict.

