Resiliency and Healthy Communities
An Exploration of Image and Metaphor

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If I make the lashes dark
And the eyes more bright
And the lips more scarlet,
Or ask if all be right
From mirror after mirror,
No vanity's displayed:
I'm looking for the face I had
Before the world was made.

W. B. Yeats

Introduction

The topic of these Fetzer-Wilson Center discussions aims ultimately toward the question, "What makes for healthy communities?" Clearly there exist a wide variety of ways to talk about what might be meant by "healthy." Some would be inclined toward "harder" quantitative measures and indicators when comparing communities, like employment or poverty rates, access to education, clean water, housing and healthcare. Others may argue that in spite of an indicator like high poverty, people may still be "happy" and would be inclined toward the notion that having good or even the best access to material wealth has rarely in fact translated to healthy communities. Within the wider debate the qualifier chosen for this particular discussion focuses around the concept of resilience that when observed across settings and cultures suggest a capacity to build and sustain healthier communities.

Rather than discuss empirical comparative evidence this brief introductory paper will take a step back and down in order to explore the ways in which we organize our thinking around the concepts of "health" and "community." This purpose requires that we engage the metaphoric language that surrounds the discussion. As a professional I work as a scholar-practitioner in the fields of conflict transformation and international peacebuilding with a particular focus on communities facing deep-rooted conflict and seeking ways to creatively respond to violence. While these communities may appear to represent the polar opposite phenomenon of this wider initiative, I suggest that in exploring the challenges and realities faced by local collectives struggling with cycles of sustained violence we paradoxically may locate, in their response to adversity, insights into the deeper significance of resiliency.

Colombia: Resiliency in the midst of violence

As a peacebuilder I have had opportunity to accompany local communities as they seek ways to respond to the impact of war on their lives in places as diverse as Nicaragua and Northern Ireland, Somalia, Mindanao in the Philippines, and Nepal. However, most notable in this list has been a longer-term relationship with local communities in Colombia, the land of sustained half-century wars, and in particular during the past five years my involvement in

the explicit effort to develop peacebuilding initiatives with and from so called "victim" communities heaviest hit by violence. On top of historic structural injustices, poverty, political exclusion, and a lack of basic services that many would take for granted, these communities have found the very fabric of their lives assaulted by cycles of open violence and physical displacement.

Our attention would not normally be drawn toward these contexts as holding the promise, potential, or lessons for "healthy" communities. Yet in my experience these settings and people hold seeds, buried and unnoticed, but pregnant with life-giving energy that instructs our inquiry.   The very nature of a seed, a living-dormant container that simultaneously is fruit and promise, draws our attention toward the hidden characteristics of collective wellbeing and the qualities of resiliency that contribute to health.

Colombia reaches most of our daily newspapers through the images of violence, cocaine and narco-terrorism. The chronological reporting of their national journey and ethos does not stretch before us an appealing canvass: Sustained open warfare dating back to the 1950's, the proliferation of armed groups battling for territory and allegiance, a narcotics trade that sustains the war capacity, continuous human rights abuses, kidnapping, massacres, and millions of people forced from their homes.

Much less visible and rarely making the news is the web of people and communities whose life stories vibrate with courage in the midst of these sustained challenges. Often referred to as "victims" and "victim communities" those most hard hit by the violence represent instructive processes that while primarily seen from the outside as a narrative of survival contain important elements of resiliency and flourishing. In a word, to survive the waves of violence that pound over the mostly invisible yet ever present sea-bed of structural injustice, poverty and exclusion, local communities must be enormously creative. As described in a number of books, the keys to those communities' abilities to transcend cycles of violence came from their willingness to risk an innovative capacity exemplified through their solidarity to undermine the law of silence imposed by armed groups, from how they sought engagement through dialogue within and outside their communities, from how they mobilized around a deep sense of belonging, and how they creatively brought into existence spontaneous nonviolent processes of change.i

What does the challenge of violence feel like from within these communities faced with such overwhelming odds? What does it feel like to face this level of violence and how might the experiences of communities so hard hit by violence in Colombia be instructive for understanding the topic of community resiliency?

I am always impressed how the answers emerge in the everyday language embedded in the stories from places like Colombia, everyday expressions that rise time and again from their fundamental search to survive and the requests they place before anyone who will listen. Most mentioned are three lived experiences that shed light on the nature of what they face and feel as their primary challenges: displaced, insecure, and voiceless. To recast these concerns positively, their daily search is this: How to locate a sense of place? How to feel safe? How to find a voice? As metaphor, these words --   place, safety and voice -- provide insight into both the deep reality of violence and the nature of resiliency, and I believe point us to important aspects of what a healthy community might entail. Each merits a brief exploration

Place: Locating oneself in the world

Literally and figuratively violence displaces people. When discussed in shorthand of international lingo and statistics Colombia represents a country with millions of people labeled as "IDP's" -- internally displaced people. Bantered about and taken for granted as an organizing category for counting the number of people forced from their homes and communities, the phrase IDP carries meaning at more than one level, particularly if we penetrate the hidden caves of lived experience. To accommodate the categories of reference where resources are delivered to victims, people who find themselves forced off their land and out of their homes often make use of the term IDP to call attention to their plight: "We are displaced. And we are people" read a recent sign carried in a street demonstration in Bogotá. I would suggest however that the category "internally displaced people" metaphorically provides much more than a useful way to count demographic numbers. It functions as an archetypal metaphor with numerous and simultaneous levels of meaning reflective of the experience faced by those affected by violence. Consider at least three levels of meaning.

First, as a phrase "internally displaced people" connotes the literal loss of place, the physical experience of being forced out of their homes and off their land. As they say in Colombia, this creates forced "human mobility." People flee. They run. They walk. They try to find a "place" to settle, often at considerable distance from their homes of origin.

At a second level, often beyond words to express it, displaced connotes the lived experienced of feeling lost inside. It is a paradoxical experience. To not have a place means that a person and often an entire community is lost while still being in a place, as in a "country," that is familiar but no longer known. In other words, to be "displaced" means you do not know where you are or what "your place is." You have no place to belong. By its very nature then, to be displaced forces a journey of discovery. People must find their way. They must locate themselves and their "bearings" in a land to which they belong but in a geography that is unknown and without maps. In this sense, "displaced" provides a metaphor about locating oneself, a process that literally requires people to find a place to "land and live."

Figuratively, belonging functions at another level, one that searches not just for a physical accommodation but more importantly a sense of purpose. "Finding a place" symbolizes the journey to locate "bearings" or "coordinates" that permit people to "land on" and attach meaning to their lives. In this sense, people search for the significance often in pursuit of finding an answer to the question: "Who are we in this unknown social landscape?" "Where" we are, then, is always intimately tied up with figuring out "who" we are. Inevitably, health and well- "being" are intimately tied up with the idea of place in both the literal and figurative senses of the word. When we have our bearings we know where we are and have a sense of who we are. Finding place in this deeper sense represents the life-long journey toward health as belonging, having a place, and sensing purpose.

Finally, the word "internal" poses a double meaning in this journey. On the surface, "internal" means that people are physically displaced within their own country. At a deeper level internal captures the lived experience displacement as feeling lost within oneself: "I no longer know who "I am" in large part because "I cannot locate myself" in this experience.

Physically, psychologically and spiritually the inner and outer journeys through uncharted geographies are reflective mirrors. In the poem cited at the start of this essay Yeats captures the deep and eternal struggle to find ones true self.ii "Mirror after mirror" he wrote, is not about "vanity." Rather it is about looking to find "the face I had before the world was made." I am on a search to find, to locate myself. On the outer journey, the displaced must locate a physical place to live. At the same time this search reflects the inner, deeply spiritual search for finding meaning and place. The journey to find oneself --   place as metaphor -- represents the archetypal journey of health: When we find our place we touch, in and out, a sense of location, purpose, and meaning.

Safety: Feeling at home

People living in contexts of open violence watch constantly for their personal and collective security. They search for ways to feel and be safe, to find protection. Violence produces enormous insecurity and requires hyper-vigilance. As metaphor the search for safety and security creates more than one level of significance.

On the surface, in settings of violence the most immediate meaning of security emerges around physical safety vis-à-vis the presence of violent threat. People look for physical spaces and mechanisms that provide them protection.

At another level insecurity creates the permanency of feeling uncertain. Uncertainty goes hand in hand with the experience of unpredictability. Seeking safety, people suspend trust in what is happening around them. Insecurity produces both internal and external uncertainty. Insecure means I no longer have a clear sense of myself and must for my own safety suspend trust in others. Deeply suspicious for my own good, I no longer can take at face value even the most common things around me. At the level of metaphor, insecurity then poses a challenge of how to recuperate any basic sense of trust in my social landscape and myself.

At its deepest level insecurity produced by violence signals the loss of everything that was understood and known. What was assumed, taken-for-granted as "normal" on a daily basis has disappeared. In a word, people suspend, or outright lose the capacity to feel at home.   As metaphor, at this level, those things that at one point surrounded a person with a sense of wellbeing, shelter, and unconditional acceptance are gone. Notable again in the geographies of violence and war, we find the word "disappeared" used as both verb and noun. People disappear, meaning they have been kidnapped or perhaps killed. They were disappeared means they were killed but nobody knows when, where or how, creating a surreal suspension: presumed dead without conclusion. A category captures this state of animation: The disappeared. In these contexts, "at-homeness," a warm blanket that once held us, evaporates, like a fog burnt off suddenly.   In the blink of an eye, we find ourselves exposed, visibly naked without protection or shelter.

The archetypal search and hope for security points to another key aspect of health: Safety is not only locating oneself but is expressed in the search to find a way home, to reconstruct the capacity to feel "at home" in the world, to feel once again a sense of being surrounded by love and acceptance, that we can trust ourselves, others and our social landscape.

Voice: Close enough to be heard

        In settings of protracted conflict the most common thing I hear from local communities when they talk about "the peace process" is expressed through a simple observation: "Nobody listens to us. We do not have a voice." As metaphors, voice and voiceless function simultaneously at different levels of meaning.

        At a first level, the dominant concern of most victims of violence is that they do not have a voice in reference to processes happening around them often portrayed officially as being conducted on their behalf. Their primary point of reference rises from the feeling of being left out: They experience a profound sense of exclusion. They are talked about but not talked with, giving rise to a feeling deep powerlessness, especially in political processes purporting to deliver peace to a conflicted country.

        At a second level, voice as metaphor evolves in a spatial and sonic context. Voice infers a proxemics of space and relationship. It means that people are within hearing range, the shared space of a conversation. A conversation requires a spatial distance wherein the words -- sound externalized -- are accessible and interactive. As such, to have a voice suggests that people and significant processes affecting their lives are proximate, close enough that the vibrations of sounds touch each other, create echoes that bounce and resonate. Metaphorically, the sensation of "being voiceless" always refers to finding oneself in a space too expansive, too distant and remote to feel the vibration. What is happening "out there" is so distant that sounds formed and sent, hoping for a "bounce back" and "reverberation," fall into an abyss, never reaching the other side or returning with any sense of meaningful connection. Voice requires a localness of context and space within which people feel the vibration of sound.

        At the deepest, perhaps most complex level, voiceless refers to losing touch with our very personhood. When we no longer feel our voice, we no longer feel human. As metaphor, voiceless at this level suggests a falling out of touch with meaning, the disappearance of significance. Voiceless creates the experience of being numbingly speechless. This is particularly true of violence that silences life itself, the loss of which reaches below and beyond words. Here we enter the terrain of the unspeakable, the search for finding ways to touch and re-feel the naming and meaning of things experienced that defy and are never adequately expressed through rational explanation and words.

        In these levels of meaning voice as metaphor suggests other key aspects of health found primarily in the need to feel close enough to processes that affect daily personal and collective life so that a sense of meaningful conversation is actually possible. Voice necessarily requires a context of community, a localness of spatial distance where participation and dialogue create direct experiences of connection, exchange and responsiveness. We feel the vibrations, the bounce back of echoes, and the internal sensation of feeling our sound rise, enter a space, touching others and returning to touch us, and in the process we participate in creating meaningfulness in and around us.

Resiliency as Metaphor

        We turn now to a brief exploration of resiliency. As a scientific term, resiliency comes to us from the descriptive language of physics and metallurgy. It is applied to a special family of metal that when placed under extreme heat will lose shape, soften and meld,

but when re-cooled has an amazing capacity to find its way back to its original form. In the study of plants, this capacity has also been noted, particularly in crops or grasses, that when beaten down by winds or the weight of trampling feet, find the way to rise back to their purpose and form.

Resiliency describes the quality to survive extreme conditions yet retain the capacity to find a way back to expressing the defining quality of being and the essence of purpose.

Crossing over into the social sciences resiliency has primarily been studied as a phenomenon in developmental psychology and social work.iii Here, researchers were interested with the study of children who while unavoidably living in vulnerable and high-risk situations -- parents with mental disorders, conditions of poverty, or violence -- still found their way toward expressively healthy childhoods and eventually a balanced, responsible adulthood. In discussing the characteristics within the child and the environments that nurture this journey, authors often include key ideas like adaptability, resourcefulness, and a capacity to face and creatively negotiate risky situations.

When applied to the community level, particularly those local collectives who experienced life-damaging events or contexts -- natural disasters, human generated traumas such as war, or social, economic or political structures that produce poverty and exclusion -- resiliency describes the capacity to forge solidarity, to sustain hope and purpose, and to adapt and negotiate creatively with the challenges presented. In a word, the local collective becomes pro-actively engaged in purposeful ways that help them recuperate a sense of place, at-homeness, and voice. Their life journeys represent a quality of positive deviance that defines the very essence of resiliency: against the odds these people and communities flourish. In identifying what contributes to this transcendent quality researchers chose the word resilient because it describes this capacity to "bounce back."

By its very nature, resiliency as metaphor suggests a journey that is both internal and outward bound that rises from a quality of character and spirit. To place the term in a life journey, resiliency suggests that no matter the difficulty of the terrains faced by the traveler, s/he stays in touch with a core defining essence of being and purpose, and displays a tenacity to find a "way back" as a "way forward" that artistically stays true to his/her very being.

We could say the defining quality of resiliency is the capacity to stay in touch.

To return to the words of the poet, Yeats refers to this as "looking for the face I had before the world was made." In this sense, resiliency, as applied to the challenge of the life journey requires finding a way back to humanity, the sense of personhood and community that creates authenticity and purpose. In a word, health as viewed from resiliency suggests the character of personhood and quality of community that faces, moves through, and bounces back from difficulty, damage, or destructive experience with a spirit that pursues and stays in touch with purposeful life and meaningful relationships.

Conclusion

The above metaphor discussion suggests a number of key ideas that may be useful for thinking about guideposts for community health. Perhaps most significant is the basic notion found in the idea of resiliency that "community health" may not exclusively nor primarily be found in comparative quantitative advantage but rather correlates with the less tangible dynamics of how people and communities locate creative and pro-active capacities for responding to challenges they face. Resiliency is seeded in the capacity of response to

challenges based on character, interaction and space found locally. Those who face great challenges in terms of violence, poverty or exclusion in fact provide insight into some of these intangibles. As guideposts they may include:

- The process of finding place as both an inner and outer journey that fosters the capacity to locate place and purpose as mechanisms that nurture and solidify a sense of belonging. The inverse is the sustained experience of displacement ultimately creating a sense of being lost while living in places that are known.

- The dynamic search for security as ultimately fostering and re-building trust in self, others and the lived social landscape, creating a feeling of community as at-homeness. The inverse is the experience of being disappeared: the quality of being lost and unconnected, living in a constant vigilance driven and governed by fear.

- The development of local social spaces that encourage and sustain a quality of dialogical interaction wherein people feel they can touch, shape and be shaped by accessible conversation. This suggests a combination of localness and proximity that helps people stay in touch, while reaching from the local to more distant less accessible space as collectives. In such spaces, people feel a sense of voice that reverberates and creates resonance with events and processes that affect their lives. The inverse fosters spaces of voicelessness defined by distance and experienced exclusion translating into isolation and a pervading sense of powerlessness.

- The cultivation of hope over grievance, requiring a pro-active capacity for proposal, engagement, and sustaining relationships in the midst of external challenges and internal polarization. In many regards, the primary quality of resiliency mobilizes the imagination of the community as a healthy whole while encouraging the journey toward finding authenticity and purpose for diverse individuals through place, trust and voice.

In an image, the metaphors surrounding resiliency point us toward healthy communities characterized by touchable spaces filled with people who are in touch.

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[i] See Hernández Delgado and Salazar Posada, *Con La Esperanza Intacta*; Garcia, *Hijos De La Violencia*; Hernández Delgado, *Resistencia Civil Artesana De Paz*; Lederach, *The Moral Imagination.*
[ii] W. B. Yeats. Taken from the poem, *Woman Young And Old*, from section ii, titled, *Before The World Was Made*.
[iii] Several key texts include: Greene, *Resiliency*; Bernard, *Resiliency What We Have Learned*; Kehayan and Napoli, *Resiliency In The Face Of Disaster And Terrorism*.

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