

COLUMNISTS

Difficult reconciliation process examined

The Jubilee Year is offering us time to reflect on a number of themes. One of the most interesting is the whole idea of reconciliation. This word has always intrigued and puzzled me. I think its very sound has led me to retain some mistaken notions about it. In fact, I think until recently I've retained a falsely simplistic notion of what genuine reconciliation actually entails.

As we know, reconciliation involves overcoming an estrangement that has occurred. The estrangement might be between individuals or groups. Separation and alienation need to be overcome so that healing can take place. I used to think that in most cases one party would be in the wrong, so the only thing necessary for reconciliation would be for the wronged party to forgive the "evildoer" and everyone could go back to the way things had been before the rift.

I've learned differently, however. In fact, reconciliation requires that both sides of a conflict need to enter into a process of transformation. It's not just the wrongdoer who needs to change in order for the relationship to become right for the future. Both parties need to be transformed, both becoming "a new creation" in order for true reconciliation to take place.

Furthermore, the customs, patterns and structures surrounding a given relationship will have to be revised as well. Most often, reconciliation requires a shift in the "power" available in a relationship so that an entirely new situation can be created, allowing each party to carry both the responsibilities and the "assets" of the relationship in a new and different man-



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BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

ner.

Second, I had always believed in the adage "forgive and forget." It sounded like a good idea to me: sort of like employing the delete button on the computer. Simply erase from consciousness the hurts and injuries that are part of a relationship. I treated the fact that I could rarely do that as a flaw on my part. Now I've come to think that forgetting is not really a part of reconciliation at all. Instead, the painful memories of separation and estrangement need to become reordered so that they no longer feed a need for revenge or vengeance, but instead become a source of healing. As such, the memories themselves become part of the new relationship that will come into being. The memories of estrangement and suffering need to become sources of personal or communal liberation so that those who remember now become transformers and liberators and reconcilers themselves.

Third, I had come to think that reconciliation meant restoration of the status quo. It implied to me a "going backward," simply reinstating the relationship as it had been before the breakdown. I now believe firmly that reconciliation isn't at all

about going back, but it's really about going forward together in new relationship, as changed people. In many ways, a kind of liberation needs to take place within both parties as a kind of prerequisite or condition for the possibility of reconciliation. The individuals or groups that have been part of the alienation need to examine their own issues and free themselves up from whatever compulsions have led to the breakdown, from whatever needs for domination or control or power have contributed to the loss of friendship or love.

Fourth, I had not understood very well at all that the process of reconciliation itself becomes part of the new relationship that is created. Every relationship has a history, and the fracture that had been allowed to become the most significant aspect of that history must take a back seat to the acts that come to constitute the reconciliation. It is this process that then becomes a source of nurturing and sustenance for the new alliance that will take the place of the splintered one.

My enthusiasm for the Jubilee Year invited me to reconsider a number of personal relationships that need "fixing." In my almost naive approach to what that might entail, I embarked on a plan that I now view as far too simplistic.

Unless both parties of a relationship are in a position to work on personal change, on creating new structures to enable a new relationship to unfold in a new way, reconciliation is impossible. To whatever extent painful memories are not yet able to be transformed into sources of healing, reconciliation is not possible. To whatever extent either party is not ready or able

to enter into paying a very real "cost" that must be part of genuine reconciliation, it simply will not come to be.

In the midst of all this abstract reflection on the reality of reconciliation, I am now fond of recalling one very concrete symbol from our common history. That symbol is the freeing of Nelson Mandela from a South African prison after 27 years, which took place 10 years ago.

The freeing of Mandela became a sign that there could be "no turning back." His liberation gave a signal that a new South Africa was about to be born. It wasn't just the white Afrikaners who would have to change; it was the native black population as well. The goal was not to reinstate some previous state or situation. There needed to be a new arrangement with new structures, laws and patterns of operation. It wasn't that either group could "forget" the history of brutality and oppression that had taken place. What had to happen was that the captivity of Mandela, along with so many others, and their liberation, would now have to become part of the foundation for the new relationship that would carry both black and white countrymen together as a new nation.

Before ending, I have to remark that this all sounds pretty easy as an essay on paper. As we all know, however, genuine reconciliation is a difficult, costly business. It requires time and enormous good will. We should avoid any temptation to trivialize what is actually entailed in bringing it about — for individuals or for communities.

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Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

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