

'BUILDING' AND 'CULTIVATING' PEACE: PRACTITIONER REFLECTIONS ON THE SUSTAINABLE PEACE NETWORK PROJECT

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Abstract

In this article the author reflects on an unexpected, far-reaching shift in language that emerged while he worked as the joint coordinator of the Glenree Survivors' and Former Combatants' programme (2002–2008). This programme increasingly included nature-based activities in the Wicklow Hills, the Scottish Highlands and the Imfolozi Wilderness in South Africa as part of what became known as the 'Sustainable Peace Network' (SPN; involving former combatants, survivors, and members of wider society from all sides of the conflict in and about Northern Ireland). In the process the dominant metaphor of peace 'building' began to resonate less with actual practice than more organic metaphors such as 'cultivating' or 'growing' peace. This article makes some sense of this lived experience by highlighting the metaphorical nature of peace language in general, as well as the strengths and limitations of the particular metaphors of 'building' and 'cultivation'. This practitioner challenge to the dominance of 'peacebuilding' language amounts to an argument for the use of multiple metaphors, for an enriched language of reconciliation, especially when it comes to relational peace practice. The shift from 'building' to 'cultivation' language within the SPN furthermore points to a growing awareness of the need to articulate a more sustainable and inclusive vision for peace and reconciliation practice.

KEYWORDS: *peacebuilding, peace cultivation, peace language, peace practice metaphors, sustainable peace*

Building peace?

The first cringe took me by surprise. For years I was comfortable describing the dialogue work my colleagues and I were doing at the Glenree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation as 'peacebuilding'. I easily identified with the Glenree mission statement at that time: '*Committed to peacebuilding within and between communities*'.¹ After all, this was the way most people working for peace on the island of Ireland and beyond were talking and writing (for example Lederach 1998). I was aware that 'peacebuilding' was the internationally accepted, UN-sponsored, shorthand to describe a whole range of state and civil society activities to transform and consolidate institutions and relationships after/in addition to 'peace making' (including ceasefires, peace agreements and political settlements) and 'peace keeping' (including the presence of military force

1. See www.glenree.ie

to back up fragile settlements, to keep recently warring factions apart).² Then, one day, out of the blue, I found myself struggling to use the word 'building' to describe my work as a joint programme co-ordinator of the Glenree Survivors' and Former Combatants' Programme. At the same time it started to grate when I heard others, locally and abroad, talk about peace 'building'. An often painful gap started to open up between, on the one hand, some of the connotations surrounding the word 'building' (precise control by builder, clear plans, working with inanimate objects), and, on the other hand, the messy, unpredictable, humbling realities of facilitating dialogue and enduring relationships between human beings affected by and involved in the armed aspects of the conflict in and about Northern Ireland. Thus the search began for terms that resonated better with my peace practice at that time.

In this article I reflect on this search by highlighting the metaphorical nature of peace language in general as well as the strengths and limitations of the particular metaphors of 'building' and 'cultivation'. I also point to the far-reaching connection between the metaphor of 'cultivation' and a more integrated vision of deeply 'rooted' peace than typically suggested by the language of peacebuilding.

'Peacebuilding' as a metaphor

There is indeed an obvious, literal sense in which the word 'building' can be used in connection with peace – providing a *literal description* of the physical, structural, visible aspects of post-war reconstruction such as rebuilding damaged houses, destroyed roads, broken bridges; restoring the shattered physical infrastructure of basic public services. But the expression 'peacebuilding' is often also used to bring to the fore the less visible, but no less important, challenges of '(re)building' the broken lives of individuals and the damaged relationships within and between families, communities, nations (Fisher 2005).

As we move from physical to psychological and social 'reconstruction' the word 'building' is clearly no longer used as a *literal description*. We have entered, instead, the realm of *metaphor* – an imaginative form of *comparison* in which one thing or reality stands in for another in order to bring greater understanding. A crucial, easily forgotten point about metaphors is that they do not suggest or pretend to offer a *perfect match* between the realities being compared (Zehr 2005, 52–60). However, repeated and widespread use of the expression 'peacebuilding' seemed to have 'plastered over' the metaphoric gap between 'peace' and 'building'. Typically we no longer blink an eye when seeing the expression peacebuilding.

2. See <http://www.un.org/peace/peacebuilding>. The UN Peacebuilding Commission, established in 2005, 'focuses on reconstruction, institution-building and sustainable development in countries emerging from conflict', through 'integrated strategies' it 'helps to close the gap between immediate post-conflict efforts, on the one hand, and long-term recovery and development efforts on the other'. Ramsbotham et al. (2005, 30) define these terms as follows: 'We use peacemaking in the sense of moving towards settlement of armed conflict, where conflict parties are induced to reach agreement voluntarily; Peacekeeping (traditionally with the consent of the conflict parties) refers to the interposition of international armed forces to separate the armed forces of belligerents, often now associated with civil tasks such as monitoring and policing and supporting humanitarian intervention; Peacebuilding underpins the work of peacemaking and peacekeeping by addressing structural issues and the long-term relationships between conflictants'.

Still, the widespread and continuing use of the building metaphor for peace suggests that, despite the risk of being blunted by overuse, this comparison remains a window on the complex dynamics of peace; 'construction' still provides a handy verbal tool to get a grip on the often intangible workings of peace. The comparison of peace with 'building' continues to stress that before and after violent political conflict, peace treaties and peacekeeping are not enough to ensure durable peace. In fact, according to Ramsbotham and colleagues (2005, 186), 'John Galtung invented the term 'peacebuilding' and meant it to characterise progression towards positive peace following the ending of war'. Nevertheless, 'building' peace remains a metaphor and *therefore not a full description*.

Remembering the metaphoric gap between 'peace' and 'building' is made more difficult by the tendency for a metaphoric comparison to be *less explicit* than its family members - analogies, similes or symbols. For example, it is easier to remember the limits of our language for peace when reading an unfamiliar, explicit comparison: 'The movement for a culture of peace is *like a great river, fed from diverse streams* – from every tradition, culture, language, religion, and political perspective...' (Fisher 2005, 138–9; emphasis added).

The above discussion helps to explain why I felt relief upon remembering that the expression 'peacebuilding' is also a metaphor; why this remembering brought encouragement in the search for words that better suit my peace practice at Glenree in the mid-2000s. Despite the dominance of the language of peacebuilding, there is more to peace than 'building'. In this regard Zehr helpfully points out the general need for ongoing vigilance in the use of metaphors: '[W]hile metaphors are very helpful in highlighting certain characteristics, they can also hide other characteristics. That is, they may be misleading because the 'match' between the two realities is never exact' (2005, 53–54).

'Cultivating' peace

Looking back at my experience as a peace practitioner at Glenree it is actually not surprising that cringing and grating came to be associated for me with the word peacebuilding. Discomfort with what I experienced as misleading 'building' language broke through the surface after a period in which the peace work that I was involved in organically and increasingly began to incorporate nature-based activities via the emerging 'Sustainable Peace Network'.³ Gradually metaphors such as 'growing', 'nurturing' and 'cultivating' started to fit better than 'building'.

3. Between 2004 and 2011, more than a 100 people from diverse survivor, former combatant and wider society backgrounds, linked to the conflict in and about Northern Ireland, participated in the Sustainable Peace Network (SPN) project. This project emerged from the Glenree Survivors' and Former Combatants' Programme, was co-facilitated by Brandon Hamber and Alistair Little and increasingly revolved around a 'Journey through Conflict' process developed by Alistair Little and Wilhelm Verwoerd (Little and Verwoerd 2013). The Journey through Conflict process involved SPN participants in annual cycles of storytelling, dialogue and relationship cultivation workshops. A key strand of this process was nature-based activities and journeys into the Wicklow Hills, the Scottish Highlands and the Imfolozi Wilderness in South Africa (Hamber, Little and Verwoerd 2017).

Some of the characteristics of peace work that in my experience tend to be painted over by the dominant ‘building’ metaphor and/or which are highlighted by ‘growing’ or ‘cultivating’ metaphors include the following:

‘culture of peace’ and ‘peacebuilding from below’. It was music to my ears to read, for example, this statement by a village elder from Mozambique: ‘You can bring us the culture of war in a plane and humanitarian aid in a truck, but you can’t bring us the culture of peace, because it is a tree with its roots deep in our land’(quoted in

Cultivating Peace	Building Peace
Role of grower/gardener/cultivator: Assist and support a natural process – water, good soil, sunlight needed, but the rest happens to a large degree ‘by itself’ <i>Invitation to humility</i>	Role of builder: Builder takes centre stage – without builder nothing will happen <i>Temptation to be ‘in control’, to impose from above</i>
Planning: Good gardening principles, even detailed landscape design, but not a fixed plan with standard measurements; plan remains adjustable, depending on weather, season, soil conditions <i>Encourages flexibility</i>	Planning: Detailed plans; predictability and precision required; same plan can be used in different contexts, repeatedly
Working with: Plants, soil, water, sunlight <i>Requires reverence for mystery, tenderness of life and growth, encourages a sense of wonder</i>	Working with: Building material – bricks, mortar, steel, wood – hard, dead objects, cut and shaped according to plan
Growing: Roots below the surface, in the dark; in different, opposing directions – deeper into the soil and towards the sun <i>Invites holding of tensions and embracing of contradictions</i>	Building: Foundations needed and fundamental to process, but once completed building takes place mostly above ground (including maintenance); requiring bright light; building from bottom upwards in one direction
Time: Growth can be encouraged, but normally dependent on season, weather etc. - takes its own time <i>Stresses need for patience</i>	Time: Building can be sped up – working “overtime”, nighttime lights, more contractors etc; quick progress is possible; largely within human control

Cultivating Peace	Building Peace
<p>Process: Cyclical, seasonal; from 3-dimensional point of view: spiral of returning again and again to same place, but at a different stage of growth</p> <p><i>Transforming legacy of violent conflict involves ongoing processes of reconciliation; forgiveness is not a once-off 'letting go'</i></p>	<p>Process: <i>Linear, mechanical process – brick by brick, one after/ upon the other; clear starting and completion times (though ongoing need for maintenance)</i></p>
<p>Links with natural world: Vulnerable to weather, connected to and dependent on natural environment</p> <p><i>Encourages sense of connectedness, awareness of being part of fragile 'web of life'; ecological, holistic peace</i></p>	<p>Links with natural world: (Most) buildings provide protection against elements, but typically waste energy, not in tune with landscape</p> <p><i>Encourages sense of 'apartheid' from natural world; limited peace</i></p>

Fisher, 138). And to see that a 'culture of peace' can be defined as consisting of 'values, attitudes, behaviours and ways of life based on non-violence and based on respect for the fundamental rights and freedoms of every person. In a culture of peace, power grows not from the barrel of a gun but from participation, dialogue and cooperation' (Fisher, 2005, 137; emphasis added).

Similarly, as pointed out by Ramsbotham et al., the emergence of the 'peacebuilding from below' model is rooted in practitioner experience: it 'came during the course of experience gained in supporting local groups trying to preserve or *cultivate* cultures of peace in areas of armed conflict in the 1990s'. While leaving room for international intervention (at earlier stages) in war-shattered states such as Kosovo, Bosnia, Afghanistan, in the peacebuilding from below model ... 'futures are negotiated, *cultivated* and legitimized through elective programmes of peace education and conflict resolution training, rather than prescribed and imposed by 'international bureaucracies'. In this model the vital role of '*grassroots*' organisations are treasured; culture is interpreted as a 'seedbed'; there is a recognition that 'long-term strategy will be sustainable if outsiders/experts 'support and nurture' rather than displace [local] resources' (2005, 217, 226, 220; emphases added).

This model of peacebuilding from below is clearly more compatible with the language of cultivation. However, unless the qualification 'from below' shines brightly, the

language of peacebuilding remains clouded by criticism such as this: 'peacebuilding is in effect an enormous experiment in 'social engineering – an experiment that involves transplanting western models of social, political, and economic organization into war-shattered states in order to control civil conflict... '(Ramsbotham et al 2005, 209). This kind of criticism and my earlier stress on the shadow side of the 'building' metaphor point to the need for multiple metaphors to convey the complexity of peace work.

Need for multiple metaphors

Since 'building' appears to be the dominant metaphor in peace circles, my emphasis has been on the limits of this metaphoric comparison. By bringing these (often hidden, forgotten, unavoidable) limits to the fore my intention is to create more 'room' for other metaphors, and in particular to create more 'breathing space' for nature-based metaphors.

While I remain uncomfortable with the metaphor of 'building' I accept that this discomfort grows to a significant degree from the *type* of peace work with which I was involved at Glenree and within the SPN. This work can be seen to fall under the broad categories of 'conflict transformation' and 'trauma healing' (Schirch 2004, 46), with an emphasis on facilitating dialogue and productive relationships between people directly and indirectly involved in/affected by violent political conflict on the islands of Ireland and Great Britain.⁴

In reflecting on my discomfort with 'peacebuilding' language I also find it useful to draw attention to another set of important distinctions stressed by Lederach and Schirch, namely between personal, relational, cultural and structural *levels* of transformation (2004, 67–68). It would seem that the metaphor of 'building' peace is most suitable for types of peace work that operate more at the 'structural' level, involving institutional '(re)design', such as development, military conversion, transitional justice, governance and policymaking. Most of these are appropriately placed under a category named 'building capacity'. As we move closer to relational and personal levels of transformation, especially within trauma healing and conflict transformation types of peace work, it is arguably less appropriate to use the language of 'building' peace and more appropriate to use language of 'fostering', 'nurturing', 'growing', 'cultivating'.

When thinking about the language used to convey my role/identity/self-understanding

4. There is, of course, much more involved in peace work generally speaking (and within each of the categories mentioned above). Lisa Schirch's wide-ranging 'map of peacebuilding' includes 'waging conflict non-violently' through monitoring and advocacy, direct action, civilian-based defence; 'reducing direct violence' through humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping, military intervention, ceasefire agreements, peace zones, early warning programs; 'building capacity' through education and training, economic, social and political development, military conversion, research and evaluation; 'transforming relationships' through trauma healing, conflict transformation (through 'dialogue', 'principled negotiation', 'mediation', 'training'), restorative justice, transitional justice, governance, and policymaking (2004, 46–50).

as a peace worker, I therefore find it useful to imagine a spectrum of human agency: on the one end there is ‘growing’ (allowing for the most limited role for peace workers); on the other end one finds ‘engineering’ (giving the largest role to peace workers). Metaphors like ‘nurturing’, ‘healing’, ‘cultivating’, ‘weaving’ and ‘building from below’ would tend more towards the middle of the spectrum.

growing	healing	nurturing	cultivating	weaving	building from below	building	engineering
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Why was I drawn to the middle of the above-mentioned spectrum; why did I typically refer to the work I was involved in as peace ‘cultivation’? Often the metaphor of ‘growing’ did not fit that well, even within the SPN, because this metaphor leaves too much to ‘natural’ processes, with not enough room suggested for careful, ongoing, strategic planning. On the other hand, I remained concerned about the pitfalls of too much control, of arrogance and disconnection surrounding ‘building’ language, highlighted by previous references to peacebuilding as ‘social engineering’.

Practicing the Art of Appropriateness

Another important and ‘foundational’ guideline for the use of metaphors for peace practice can be found in that initial, unexpected cringe upon using and hearing the word ‘*peacebuilding*’. For this was a response rooted in one individual’s professional experience, at a particular time and stage within a specific project, with a particular purpose in mind, within a specific web of relationships and previous experiences. These embodied specificities point to the underlying art of appropriateness that is required in peace practice.

The art of appropriateness applies, of course, to many areas of life. Think about healthy eating habits. At stake is far more than merely knowing which foods are healthy and which are not. Healthy eating also involves eating on a regular basis, at the right times; it includes eating at a place which is clean, safe or dedicated to eating; and the people you are eating with makes a huge difference to whether the meal becomes just a meal in front of the TV, a feast, or a strengthening of family ties and friendship.

In similar fashion, following in the footsteps of Aristotle, the appropriate use of language is rooted in a wise sense of timing, place, purpose and relationships.⁵ Thus, while making a general call for greater variety in metaphors for peace work and for less dominance by the ‘building’ metaphor, there clearly is no hard, timeless, inflexible, a-contextual rule to determine which metaphor is best. For example, as I become more familiar with ‘environment friendly’ and sustainable building practices through a growing involvement with an ecovillage project in South Africa, my negative

5. See Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* where he develops his theory of moral virtues – dealing amongst other things with how to deal appropriately with feelings of anger and fear, involving, basically, acquiring sensitivity to when, why, how, and with whom to be angry.

connotation with the 'building' metaphor is shifting.⁶ I still prefer 'cultivation' but can see myself becoming more at home with the language of '*sustainable* peace building'.

The use of appropriate language therefore requires a peace worker to practice the *meta-skills* of sensitivity to time, place, purpose, particular relationships; to become an 'artist', painting word pictures that portray the complexity and dynamism of particular peace processes.

By calling attention to the metaphoric nature of a dominant expression, peace 'building', my hope is to breathe new life into what risks becoming a stale, almost dead comparison given its widespread use, especially by those in large bureaucracies such as the UN and the EU. In the process I highlighted the need for multiple metaphors, each with the potential to reveal and to distort; to give insight and to hide. As a gardener, builder, midwife, weaver, artist, long distance runner in working for enduring peace, one is often brought down to earth by the scale, complexity, fragility and elusiveness of peace. Humility lies at the heart of cultivating, growing, nurturing, fostering, building, constructing, facilitating lasting peace. A good way to keep the heartbeat of humility strong is to practice vigilance regarding the limits of the language peace workers use to convey what, how and why we do what we do.

This last reference to the 'why' of peace practice brings me to the most deeply rooted reason why I am drawn to the language of peace 'cultivation'.

Cultivating inclusive connections

In trying to make sense of that unexpected cringe in response to the expression 'peacebuilding' I have stressed thus far the connection with my own particular nature-based peace practice during my time on the island of Ireland. I have suggested that 'cultivation' fits better than 'building' when one is describing transformational journeys into wild places aimed at bringing together people divided and hurt by violent conflict. We also saw how others seem to agree that the language of 'growing' and 'cultivation' helps to bring the deeper meanings of peacebuilding, of cultures of peace, to the fore. In other words, the thrust so far has been to give different metaphors, in appropriate ways, each their place in the sun.

However, by carefully unpeeling that cringe a bit further, a deeper and more radical layer of meaning is brought to light. For gradually I have come to see that taking survivors and former combatants from 'the Troubles' into the Wicklow Hills, the Scottish Highlands or a South African wilderness is not only a *means* to cultivate peace. We were not only *using* nature in various ways to help heal *interhuman* relationships. Cultivating less violent, more gentle connections *between humans and nature* became *in itself* an

6. See www.sustainabilityinstitute.net/lynedochecovillage

'anchor root' of sustainable peace (Little and Verwoerd 2013; Hamber, Little, Verwoerd 2017).⁷

Put differently, my unexpected discomfort with the language of peacebuilding arose in part from a shift in peace practice towards more nature-based work, but in this process the foundations of my understanding of what peacebuilding is about were also shaken to the core: I came to understand that transforming violent conflict between people needed to be *rooted* in a more holistic, integrated understanding of peace which combines social-economic-political, ecological/environmental and spiritual/intrapersonal dimensions into a 'web' of enduring connections (Capra 1996; Cilliers 1998). In the words of the *Earth Charter*: '...peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are part'.⁸

Therefore, while we need to remain aware of the *limits* of whatever metaphor we use for peace, it is also important to work wisely with the *power* of language to frame and reveal underlying values and world views.

7. This 2017 'Cultivating Peace' paper also highlights how my language and thinking around 'peace building' has been shaped by deep reflective interactions with the participants in the SPN.

8. Principle 16 (f) – see www.earthcharter.org

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