



ART, HEALING AND NORTHERN IRELAND

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The potential role of the arts in healing the trauma of the Troubles and building peace in Northern Ireland – a personal reflection

Background

This paper collects some of my thoughts about the potential role of the arts in healing the trauma of The Troubles and building peace in Northern Ireland. It follows a brief two-day visit to Belfast in September 2015. I was invited by John, Lord Alderdice and the Centre of Democracy and Peace Building to share my experience of using the arts in the collective healing of traumatised communities.

On the morning of my first day I conducted a small workshop on how exhibitions and art viewing can bring communities together to face painful experiences collectively, and find healing together. Through this workshop, I was able to meet several leaders of community arts organisations, helping me better to understand the Troubles and Northern Ireland today. Later that afternoon, I had the privilege of seeing the exhibition of paintings by Paddy McCann and talking to him at the Metropolitan Arts Centre (MAC). The next day, I gave a public lecture at the Ulster Museum on my work with traumatised Aboriginal communities of the Central Australian Desert.

I am a psychiatrist and psychoanalytic psychotherapist and have worked closely with traumatised individuals and communities over many years and have come to appreciate the importance of addressing cultural contexts as part of the process of healing. For over 12 years I was also the director of the Dax Centre, an organization dedicated to the use of art in promoting mental health and well being. For 5 years, I was the Founding Director of CASSE, an organization dedicated to assisting communities to Create A Safe Supportive Environment using psychoanalytic ideas. In this latter role, I came to understand how collective trauma can undermine the ability of a community to address conflict, rendering them vulnerable to violent eruptions, and limiting their capacity to 'think emotionally' about their collective well being.

Although I am based in Melbourne Australia, far away from Belfast, I have a long interest in Northern Ireland from my days as a student in London in the early 1980s. I offer the following observations and thoughts as a small contribution to the challenging work of building peace in Northern Ireland, and as a gesture of gratitude, for the invitation to visit, and to all who so generously shared their thoughts with me during my stay.

Initial impression and reflection.

I sensed that the present peace in Northern Ireland was fragile. A few weeks before my visit, an ex-IRA member had been shot in what was thought to be a revenge killing for another murder a few months earlier. Such news brought on a rather unsettling awareness of the violence that had occurred during The Troubles, which ended not that long ago. Peace had been achieved through courageous political solutions, and maintained through segregation rather than integration, a point highlighted by the fact that more peace walls and fences had

been built since The Troubles ended than previously, and usually at the request of the local communities.

My visit impressed on me the depth of the sectarian divide and the way it pervades almost every aspect of life, including education, the arts and sport. This divide between Protestant and Catholic appears to be accepted as an inevitable reality that stretches such a long way back that no one can, or perhaps thought a need, to consider a time when it did not exist. I thought to myself: the Protestant Reformation was only a little less than five hundred years ago, but there was a much longer period when Ireland was uniformly Christian, a period of a thousand years, between the time of St Patrick and the Reformation.

I asked if the Protestants and Catholics celebrate St Patrick's Day together, thinking that perhaps the pre-Reformation St Patrick could be a unifying symbol. My search for commonality between the Protestant and Catholic communities was often met with an incredulous gaze and puzzlement. My naivete showed. I imagined that some would wonder if I had any idea of the politicisation of the sectarian split, and the social and economic factors that feed it. It seemed, however, that once people realized that I was indeed naïve, and therefore, possibly non sectarian and unpoliticised, they were more open to sharing their views.

I wonder, however, if my naivete might in fact assist me to see Northern Ireland with fresh eyes, unaffected by generations of conscious and unconscious prejudice, and with hope, unencumbered by a sense of despair that may easily re-emerge after more than a generation of conflict and violence, and almost another generation of peace-building. As a genuine outsider, I am free to ask seemingly "stupid" questions, and to have a clearer view from the sideline. I hope to understand not only the depth of the cultural fracture underneath the sectarian divide, but also to identify the unacknowledged, and perhaps unacknowledgable points of cultural commonality, upon which the foundations for a new shared cultural life may be built. I am reminded, however, that traumatised communities often need to cling on to differences that distinguish them from others and reinforce their boundaries in order to shore up a stronger sense of identity, and how they can feel threatened by talk of commonality.

I am indeed overwhelmed by the enormity of the sectarian divide and conflict in Northern Ireland. There are frequent moments when I ask myself if there is indeed anything worthwhile, that I, an outsider from far away, and of a distinctly different race and culture, can contribute to finding a solution to a set of problems that are centuries old. I should acknowledge the limitations of the position from which I write this paper. Firstly, in my very brief visit to Northern Ireland I encountered mainly the visual arts. I understand that the community arts sector is very effective in employing a wide range of art forms, especially music and the performing arts. Secondly, I saw only very small part of the arts community in Northern Ireland and did not have the opportunity to meet with art teachers, art therapists or the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. Thirdly, my understanding of the politics of The Troubles and the complexities of the divided

communities is, again, obviously very limited. What I share from here, therefore, is offered most tentatively and with reservation.

Arts and Culture in Northern Ireland

It has always been my impression that Ireland is a land rich in arts and culture, its people are warm and passionate, and I have not thought of Northern Ireland as being different. Ireland gave the world William Yeats, Oscar Wilde, James Joyce and C.S.Lewis, and more recently, out of the Troubles, Nobel Prize winners for Literature, Samuel Beckett and Seamus Heaney. In the popular culture, the music of U2, Van Morrison, Enya, Sinead O'Connor and the Cranberries come to mind. While not many Irish visual artists are world renowned, the art that emerged out of Irish life and history is substantial, including the social realist works of William Conor.

In my brief survey of the history of Irish arts and culture, I wonder if the period of the Troubles, and the recent years of uncertain peace, may prove to be one of its most significant periods. From a political perspective, it is perhaps comparable to the period of cultural revival between 1891 to 1912, the years leading to the establishment of independent Ireland. It is my impression that there is indeed a very substantial body of work that was created during the Troubles, some of which has recently been digitally archived by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. In exploring the archive I was not surprised to find artists' depictions of the situation during the Troubles: these works not only depicted *what was happening or had happened* but often also included powerful critiques of the politics of the time and had a strong sense of protest. These elements of critique and protest were expressed most effectively, I think, in the impressive series of Performance Art around Belfast dating back to the early 70s, and continuing to the present.

I wonder if there is a trend away from protest, with a move towards exploring the *personal and collective impact of what happened and is happening*, in the 90's and, increasingly, since the present peace was reached. An example of this trend is the work of Willie Doherty, a leading contemporary artist twice nominated for the Turner's Prize. His photographs (e.g. The Bridge) powerfully capture the mood of the Troubles, the tension of divided communities, and the fragile hope for sustained peace. The Archive recorded, "The photographs focus on clarity within Northern Ireland. They embody the atmosphere of tension and unease associated with the Troubles. It is not about what can be seen but rather about the psychological impact that it has on the individual."

Willie Doherty is an established and successful artist. Perhaps, those who have "succeeded" feel secure enough to contemplate the pain of the Troubles. I have a sense, especially from my discussion with the younger artists, that there are some who continue to feel left out and remain scarred from the violence of the Troubles. In their art, the need to protest remains.

I was moved by the spontaneous street art and graffiti adorning the peace walls (some appears to be recent) and the iconic murals of the Troubles. While the

work of professional artists give expression, importantly, to the unspoken and unspeakable experiences, feelings and thoughts of their respective communities, the so-called 'outsider art' (outside of mainstream art) is the direct expression of the general members of these communities. The significance of these works should not be underestimated. It would be mistaken, I think, to consider the murals of the Troubles as just propaganda or, within the framework of art history, to compare them with the Constructivism of Russian art in the 1920s and its more overtly political successors during the Cold War. There is something quite psychologically powerful about these murals; perhaps they are indeed icons in the true sense of the word: that is, they possess a deep psychological and even spiritual dimension that offers a resonance for the suffering of the Troubles.

I understand that there were attempts by the government in the 1980s to counter these murals with new murals containing positive and hopeful imagery. Such a response can be taken as acknowledgment of the power of the original, iconic murals. The new government sponsored murals, however artistically captivating they may be, will not have the same impact or effect as those of the Troubles, as the latter were born out of a lived experience. This aspect of the history of the murals of Belfast highlights how the cultural space became a battleground during the Troubles. It suggests, however, that murals in Northern Ireland have a special significance within its collective psyche, and may also prove to be a unique cultural space for healing and peace building.

The arts, culture and the process of collective healing

How then might the communities of Northern Ireland find healing from their trauma, healing which addresses the distortion that has occurred, and that proposes a new way to be together?

From my experience of working with traumatised communities, I have come to appreciate: firstly, that individuals and communities experience trauma within their respective cultural context; secondly, these contextual elements provide the processes and symbols that enable the construction of meaning out of what seemed to be an incomprehensible experience, a step which is critical to recovery; thirdly, severe trauma often causes individuals and communities to be fractured and dislocated from the culture that has held and nourished them; fourthly, large scale and protracted trauma, will often strain, if not distort or destroy elements of culture; fifthly, while the repair of the damage to culture is necessarily one of the first steps in the healing of a traumatised community, the 'traumatic quake' (cf. earthquake) also exposes aspects of a culture that render a community vulnerable to the trauma, or even contribute to its cause.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss these observations in detail they highlight the importance of culture in the understanding of trauma and its healing. It is important, for the purposes of this paper that I clarify what I mean by culture. In my mind, one may distinguish two aspects of culture: its structures and its processes. The structures of a community's culture consist of its established *shared systems of communication*, that is, language and other

forms of collective symbolization, including idioms; *shared systems of governance* that regulate boundaries and behavior, such as laws (conscious) and taboos (unconscious), and *shared systems of belief for the creation of meaning* for one's existence, identity and experience, such as philosophy and religion. The *processes* of a community's culture consist of *facilitatory* elements such as rituals and ceremonies, and the *creative* elements such as music, poetry, literature, art and drama.

While the arts do not constitute all that is culture, they offer the instruments or devices that enable a culture to be expressed in its fullest and richest form. The creative aspect of culture plays a most useful role in the collective healing from trauma.

In the aftermath of trauma, in the face of the devastation to the psychic landscape of individuals and communities, where one is left speechless, when laws and taboos seem irrelevant, previously held values and beliefs severely challenged, and rituals and ceremonies are held with the faint hope of deriving meaning for one's continuing existence, the creative aspect of culture is called upon to resurrect it from its broken, fragmented, and most basic forms.

In peace time, we associate the creative elements with pleasure, entertainment and celebration. Psychically, the traumatised landscape is more akin to that of war. In this situation, the creative elements have the task of transforming unimaginable experiences into fragmented senses and thoughts, first as partial symbols that might be assembled to give some vague form, a "something" that might be sensed or thought about, but could never be articulated, let alone described. They facilitate the development of some undifferentiated feelings that might be felt, and ultimately, put these unspeakable experiences into words. In this sense, the arts can be transformative – transforming the unimaginable into words, and from there, create a narrative that can be *shared*, one of the very first steps in collective healing.

The creative elements of culture are also transcendental; not in the spiritual sense, but in the way they can often overcome barriers erected by institutional and political agendas, community expectations, prejudices and taboos. In the aftermath of large-scale trauma, these barriers are often reinforced. Political sentiments become more conservative and community regulatory processes more restrictive. While such a development is understandable in light of the need for self-protection and preservation, some experience it as oppressive, and protest with destructive rage (either to themselves or to others). The creative space, in such instances, is vital, as it enables individuals and communities to challenge these barriers and protest constructively.

However, the transcendental aspect of the arts is so much more than protest; it has the important role of finding a new way of seeing, thinking and feeling, beyond the restrictions imposed by the existing (old) way of being. It also has a greater freedom to ask questions unencumbered by unconscious allegiances to the culture to which we belong. It could ask: Is it possible that the old way of being has contributed somewhat to the trauma? Is there something wrong with

the old culture in which the trauma is embedded? Often, only the questioning quality of the arts can offer a deep critique of the status quo. One might begin to think of culture as an entity that has an in-built system of questioning itself through its creative elements, the arts. In my mind, this questioning aspect of a system is vital to it repairing, healing and adapting itself to new challenges. It is akin to cleaning and debriding a dirty wound, so that new healthy tissue can grow.

The Arts and Healing in Northern Ireland

The experience of trauma often leaves a person feeling helpless, and if it has been relentless and occurred over a protracted period, he or she is often left feeling quite depleted of resources. In such a desperate situation, those who come to help may experience an unspoken expectation to offer simple and easy solutions, and the people who have been traumatised are often willing to accept these despite a great mistrust of outsiders, or indeed, anyone and everyone.

In this light, it would be tempting to prescribe certain ways to use the arts in healing the trauma of the Troubles. One may be tempted to promote certain ways of thinking or feeling through the propagandistic use of the arts; similar to the government's use of public murals in the 1980s. One may suggest the exploration of specific psychological themes, such as loss and its associated feelings of sadness and anger, in all artforms throughout the arts community. One may even be tempted to produce workbooks and manuals to facilitate the working through of deep emotional issues related to the Troubles and use them in extensive school and community programs.

It would soon be apparent, however, that these approaches will not have any significant or sustained effect on the collective trauma of the Troubles. I am reminded that the healing of trauma cannot be forced. The mind will automatically activate defences and resistances, to protect itself from the excessive pain inflicted by the exposure of the traumatic wound. The traumatised part of the mind needs to sense the presence of an unhurried space, a safe and supportive space, before it is to open itself to be healed. While psychotherapy is familiar in the provision of such a space for the individual seeking help, the arts is ideally placed for the creation of such a space for large groups and communities. The process of engaging with the arts, already involves the creation of a space where reverie can prevail; what is also needed is the thoughtful consideration of the emotional response of its audience.

The simple exposure of a wound, even in a safe, supportive space, does not necessarily lead to its healing. I am reminded that just as the trauma in an individual can become embedded in their personality, the trauma of a community, especially after a protracted period (as is the case with the Troubles), becomes embedded in its culture. In this light, it would be a mistake to see the trauma of Northern Ireland as a superficial wound that can be healed without addressing the "old" culture that led to the conflict, and the present culture that continues to sustain it. The trauma is a very deep wound, and to

some extent, is almost like a cancer that has grown within a body tissue or organ and become an inextricable part of it.

The traditional approach of psychotherapy and art therapy for the healing of individuals, focuses on revisiting the trauma and working through the associated psychic pain. In situations where the traumatic experience has become part of the self, as is often the case in protracted childhood trauma, an analysis of the personality is necessary to identify how the trauma has affected, and continues to influence the personality, and how the personality has come to sustain its continuing existence. In the case of the trauma of the Troubles, there is a need to address its cultural context. There is a need for the arts to help the community at large to examine the culture of old and the present, and ask questions about its assumptions and beliefs, its prejudices and taboos. Contemporary art, especially performance art, in the spirit of the *avant garde*, is good at this. However, the arts also need to be propositional and not just reactive. They need to facilitate new ways of seeing, thinking and feeling about age-old problems. They need to be propositional without being directive or didactic.

I would like to consider the transformative and transcendental roles of the arts in the collective healing from the trauma of the Troubles, through the aforementioned exhibitions of Paddy McCann and Colin Davidson. I understand that the exhibition by Colin was curated with considerable thought, and not without careful and sensitive negotiation of social and political influences; a task that would not have been possible without the close partnership between the artist and curator. The over-sized portraits of people whose loved ones had been killed during the Troubles, were presented with a simple account of the circumstances of their loss, and without reference to their faith or who was responsible for the death. In so doing, the tragic loss of lives was not only de-politicised but most significantly, the focus was shifted onto shared experiences and common humanity.

This exhibition, I think, represents a new way to consider the trauma of the Troubles. The working through of the pain of trauma is often undermined by the rigid dialectic of perpetrators and victims; the latter is invariably immobilized by deep feelings of shame, grievance and revenge, and the former is haunted by guilt. This exhibition is transformative as it shows us another way of encountering trauma. Colin painted these individuals, who have suffered terrible loss, without sentimentality or pity. They looked at us without the shame that so often accompanies trauma, and their over-sized beings emphasized pain with dignity. The exhibition illustrates well what I have said about the role of the arts in helping their communities see, think and feel things anew. It also illustrates the point I tried to convey to the leaders of community arts during my workshop at the Golden Thread Gallery: that carefully thought through exhibitions of works by or, of those with lived experience of trauma can create a safe and supportive space for traumatised communities to come together to face the pain of their shared experience, and in so doing, weave a collective fabric that can hold them as one.

The exhibition by Paddy McCann is another example of the transformative role of the arts; in particular, his painting of Jean McConville, clutching a pillow. The tragic story of the kidnapping and murder of Jean McConville, a widow, mother of ten, a Protestant who was disowned by her community after marrying a Catholic, and who, according to Paddy, was suspected of being an informer by the IRA after she was seen placing a pillow under the head of a dying British soldier. Although the circumstances of the killing of Jean McConville were emblematic of the tragedies of the Troubles, Paddy did not paint this subject with any sense of romanticism or glorification. Instead, she was painted in soft colours that almost merged into the background and the outline of her figure was blurred, indeed, ghostly. There was almost no direct reference to the Troubles except for block print imagery of cassette tapes, a reference to the recording of interrogations.

Paddy said that he wanted to paint the suffering of a woman. The figure could have been any woman, any widow, any mother, living in pain. This painting had, however, also been born out of his own experience of loss and pain (as recorded in a public interview). The story of Jean McConville is such a terribly painful subject that, I suspect, most in Northern Ireland would rather not recall, let alone discuss it today. The willingness of Paddy to engage with this heart-aching story within his own personal suffering, illustrates a vital characteristic of the arts: that it has the courage to confront what most would shun. Perhaps this is what Paddy meant by art being transcending, as well as transformative, that it overcomes fear. I put it to him that he would not have been able to paint such an emotionally powerful painting if he had not faced his own pain and suffering. He agreed.

Traumatized communities are often paralysed by fear and they need the courage of their artists to lead the way. Artists of traumatized communities, have a more difficult task than otherwise, in overcoming social and political constraints, as these constraints are often resurrected and reinforced in times of trouble. Furthermore, these artists also need to overcome resistances within themselves, resistances against facing their own trauma.

Thinking strategically

I have so far discussed mainly the possible role of the arts and artists in addressing the trauma of the Troubles. I believe, however, that there needs to be a strategic whole-community engagement in the trauma of the Troubles in order to achieve sufficient cultural impact for significant collective healing and peace building. It is difficult to quantify the proportion of a community that would need to be engaged in order to reach the critical mass capable of self-sustaining change, and achieve the degree of healing that supports peace-building.

In my experience of working with school communities and aboriginal communities, one does not need to engage the majority proportion of the community if the initiative has the following components:

1. The process of engagement is led by individuals who are willing (and seen to be) to engage with their own traumatic experiences as well as the trauma of their respective communities. These individuals have earned the respect of their communities as a result of lived and shared experiences, rather than through power or any political mandate. They do, however, need the support of those with political, social and financial power. Such leadership needs to occur in every possible part of the community: from community organisations to governments, from schools to corporate entities, from common interest groups to religious institutions.

2. Therefore, the process needs to engage across the sectors of the community. Therefore, even if the initiative might be conceived as one led by the arts sector, it is important to involve the education, health, religious, commercial, and public sectors. It is necessary to think strategically and creatively about how to engage the 'general community' within each of the respective sectors. It needs to extend well beyond the traditional arts audience.

3. The strategic benefit of engaging children and young people in the process cannot be overstated. They are often forgotten when a community tries to address their traumatic experiences. Such a response may arise out of a wish to protect them from emotional pain. Sometimes it is the legacy of the old adage, "Children should be seen but not heard". Yet, there is no doubt, that children do experience trauma and can be severely affected. Some might argue that the current generation of children has not experienced the Troubles. However, the experience of the Jewish Holocaust of the Second World War has shown that trauma can be transmitted down generations, and young Jews of today continue to be affected by the trauma of their grandparents and great-grandparents over 70 years ago.

The strategic benefit of involving children and young people is threefold: firstly, they are often more open-minded and less influenced by historical prejudice and the constraints of the "old culture"; secondly, they are more likely to engage in the arts and other creative activities as part of their everyday life; and thirdly, they are, potentially, the carriers of the "new culture" into their families and social networks, and will carry and embed the cultural change of today into the generations of tomorrow.

4. What is it that a community needs to encounter or go through to experience healing from trauma, and create a greater capacity to resolve conflict and build peace?

I would like to suggest that the healing of the collective trauma from the Troubles involves three elements: firstly, to create a safe and supportive space (virtual, emotional space) for coming together; secondly, to

explore collectively, the wound caused by the injuries from that period and their continuing legacy; and thirdly, to examine, critically but sensitively, the cultural elements that continue to perpetuate the trauma.

I have emphasized collective healing because, in contrast to individually focused approaches, pain that is often too much to endure alone can be shared (resistance and avoidance is the norm); it is more likely to facilitate reconciliation through 'a greater understanding of the other' and challenge the us--them / perpetrator--victim mentality; it encourages the development of a culture of a common humanity, where the building of future peace and hope rests on a history of shared suffering and healing.

5. The creation of a safe and supportive environment for community engagement is vital for the initiative to succeed. This task is often easier said but difficult to achieve, especially in the aftermath of conflict, where much of pre-existing basic trust has been shattered. The absence of overt conflict does not imply that a common space is emotionally safe. The essence of emotional safety lies in a common space where feelings can be shared. Without this sense of safety, individuals and communities will not be able to engage in the process of healing from their trauma to any significant degree.

The existence of an emotionally safe space cannot be assumed but has to be created through a shared, respectful and empathetic awareness of the vulnerabilities of all present. Although it is the responsibility of all, if not most, of those present, a few will necessarily take the lead. The task of leading this process, is often carried out most effectively by emotionally aware and altruistically minded individuals, who have faced their own trauma, and have, in the process, developed not only greater self-awareness but also the courage to be vulnerable.

The two artists discussed in this paper are, I think, such individuals. Art therapists and psychotherapists, familiar with creating emotionally safe and supportive environments, have an important role in assisting their respective local organisations and communities in such a task.

6. An appreciation of realistic time--frames for achieving change at a community level assists in the development of strategies with a reasonable expectation of the resources required and protects us from premature disillusionment.

In my mind, it takes at least 5 to 10 years to change the culture of a school or small community. The challenge of instituting a significant cultural change in Northern Ireland, which consists of divided communities, will take considerably longer, at least one generation, more likely, two.

It is a challenging task; a long journey ahead. I am reminded of a Chinese perspective: Confucius said, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step". I wonder what is the Irish perspective? Will it be, "It is a long journey ahead, there is not a minute to waste, let us begin".