



Journey Towards Healing - Trauma & Spirituality

Friday 11th March

Good evening everyone. I am delighted to be here with you this evening and although I am aware that you have already been welcomed to Northern Ireland, I would also like to extend a very warm welcome to you on behalf of the Commission for Victims and Survivors.

To attend a conference on Trauma and Spirituality makes us all reflect on our own experiences, so tonight my focus is on what is happening in Northern Ireland, and some personal reflections.

Many of you from outside of Northern Ireland will be unaware of the Commission and its role. There are three Commissioners and the Commission has been set up to address strategic issues on the needs of victims and survivors relating to the past, present and future.

We know that many of these needs are interdependent – truth, justice, well being. For some individuals dealing with the past is essential for them to have any quality of life now, for others, the past has either been dealt with or they do not see anything positive coming out of dealing with it.

The individual and communities' experiences of the conflict will always be with them and continue to influence their present lifestyle,

yet everyone emphasizes the need for a better future for their children and their children's children.

Whatever each individual's view it is essential that we respect where they are, acknowledge their needs and where possible address them.

The Commission's role is to promote the interests of Victims and Survivors, keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of services, law and practice, advise Governments and make arrangements for a Forum.

In making arrangements for the Forum the Commission set up a Pilot Forum of 28 individual victims and survivors and 9 associate members. This was across a range of experiences of the conflict - the bereaved, carers, injured, former security force members and those who had experienced traumatic incidents. We also took account of geographical location and gender representation, although there were gaps e.g. young people.

For individuals to join the Pilot Forum was a step into the unknown and later in the Forum's life members told us that at the initial meeting they felt apprehensive, nervous and had an expectation that it would end in a shouting match.

Certainly the media took an extensive interest in the opening meeting, but very little interest when the Pilot Forum came to an end for the shouting matches did not materialise.

The Forum was a safe place and within it there were very difficult dialogues and conversations. Listening to the 'Other Side', stories of

such sadness, but also demonstrating the strength of individuals. This was not an easy process – it was emotionally draining and it took considerable time for each individual to process their experiences, but it was a journey for each person. ‘I have come on a journey...Sometimes you need to let it get hot and heavy...I now understand where people were coming from. “Their reasoning... their anger ... helps me understand other people with similar views better.’ It was a gradual process of feeling more at ease in each other’s company.

While the Pilot Forum focused in on many issues relating to victims and survivors I believe the most significant was relating to the legal definition of a Victim. This is a very contentious issue with no agreement across society. However, the Pilot Forum stated that they would not address this area as it would split the Forum, but they would agree in principle that where there was a need, as a consequence of the conflict, and that need must be addressed

An example of such a need expressed was for an individual in a wheelchair. This wheelchair had been provided by a funder which then ceased that particular scheme – so therefore they would not replace the tyres, but then neither would the Health Service as they had not provided it, and so it was left to the local bicycle shop to provide new tyres – crazy and also unbelievable. We have now ensured that the scheme to support the seriously injured has been improved to address their needs and we are monitoring carefully that scheme.

This principle of need was a significant statement of humanity towards each other from the Pilot Forum, and we should continue to

remember that one of the measures of a society is how we treat the vulnerable!

Over the years the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has made significant financial contributions to support the sector and this will continue with the setting up of a new service for Victims and Survivors later this year to co-ordinate the delivery of services for individuals and groups, to deal with their trauma and to continue to address the funding for groups and individuals.

As part of this Service the Commission is undertaking a Comprehensive Needs Assessment (CNA). In an earlier report in January 2007 I indicated that because there had been no CNA undertaken at any stage by OFMDFM it was difficult to make plans for future provision.

The Commission has now progressed the CNA and the final stage will be delivered by the Autumn. It will be no surprise to many that the priority of needs remain Health and Well Being and Social Support.

As part of the CNA, questions were asked through an Omnibus survey. This survey is structured to enable an extrapolation from the findings to the general population and using this information it would indicate that 30% of the population, or over 500,000 people, have been affected by the conflict, either through bereavement, a traumatic experience or as a carer.

Interestingly 81% indicated had not used any services with 61% indicating 'they did not need such a service'.

Northern Ireland is now often viewed internationally as a post-conflict society however, I believe that we are in a post-violent society where the legacy of the troubles remains and are manifested in many ways through individuals who are only now beginning to speak about their experiences, and the impact that there has been on their lives, through trans-generational issues and by trauma not being addressed. We must address these issues for individuals, communities and society if we are to build a society that develops respect for differing opinions.

As this conference is about Trauma and Spirituality I wanted to reflect on my personal journey which began just over 31 years ago when my husband Lindsay was shot in the back of the head while on foot patrol in Belfast as a police officer. He did not die immediately but it was only the life support system that kept him breathing.

Our faith was a very strong component of our family and lives. During the time he was on the life support system my family and I were uplifted by the prayers of so many and I was fully aware of the peace of God that passeth all understanding during that period. It is difficult to explain that to someone who has no faith but it was a reality for me.

I believe that we each make choices as we journey through traumatic experiences and those choices influence our everyday living. For me the choice was to hate or not to hate the person who had caused Lindsay's death, but I knew that hating destroys you as it eats away at your emotions, your very being and your life. I also could not pass hate on to my children as that would have been so against what we

had stood for as a family and so I let it go. This was my choice and I believe it was the right one for me to make.

In the early stages after Lindsay's death I talked at a lot of women's groups and this I think is also part of the healing process - to talk and for others to listen to you. However, there came a time when I recognised that I had to move on to the next stage in the process. I also developed cross - community work between schools and this was a very enriching experience.

There is nothing easy about dealing with a trauma in your life, but I believe that it is how you react to that trauma that enables you to travel along the pathway of life, to change your behavior, to grow and to thrive.

How you view your spirituality may be very different to how I view mine, but I believe that with Spirituality there must be compassion, and that for me is an essential part of dealing with those who are traumatized.

I kept hearing one word coming through from this conference, and that word was hope. Such a small word - but what potential. Kaete talked about actions being small but there is movement, yet those suffering are looking for sensible and moderate actions to make sense of the now for them as individuals. By nature I am a pragmatic person, but I want to be like Michael and consider rainbow hope to be very reasonable!

Thank you for listening, for permitting me to expand upon the situation here in Northern Ireland, and to share in the learning from

your vast experiences in the field of trauma. This conference has given us a platform to share experiences, to challenge our thinking, to reflect on current practice and to consider the next steps for the future.

The opportunity for this conference has been made possible by Journey Towards Healing and our thanks must go to all those involved in the preparation, planning and now the fruition of their work. I am sure that come Sunday they will be more than ready to chill out and relax. As each of us return to where we live and work, may the experiences and networking from the last few days revitalise our approach and enable us to reflect on how we interact with those suffering trauma in their lives.

The challenge I would like to leave with you is a quote from Robert Kennedy:

“Each time a man stands up for an ideal or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice he sends forth a ripple of hope and those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance”

Let's start working on those ripples of hope.