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Blog article by Chief Commissioner Dr Michael Wardlow

Back to the future

I have had an interesting response to a recent blog on dealing with the past. Having had a few conversations on the back of those comments I have taken the opportunity to develop those initial thoughts a little further.

I am prompted in the content of what I want to say today by two independent sources, both of which raise the issue of how we deal with the past. The first, is a personal hero of mine John Paul Lederach, who I quoted in that first blog and the second is a 2013 paper by Ira Hyman, in *Mental Mishaps*, entitled [Remembering the Future](#).

When I consider how we think about the past, I am reminded of the famous George Santayana quote: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Perhaps we could put it this way "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to live without imagining the future".

So, let me make a few observations which are probably self evident.

The Past is complex, convoluted, nuanced, at some level it is shared, it is contended and there is no agreed narrative. It is neither fixed nor absolute although it contains elements which are inevitably both fixed as well as absolute. There is no agreement on when the past becomes the present. Was it 1994? 1998? Last week? Just now? So no wonder we have problem dealing with the past and its legacy.

Then when we add memory to the equation it creates the potential for some confusion. We have two types of memory, episodic and knowing. Episodic is linked to experience while knowing tends to relate to facts or skills. Episodic is less forensic, less objective, more likely to be changed by age and distance from the event and therefore less



reliable, more selective. Knowing is more scientific and less contended. Both are incubated in family and community, but the episodic is more likely to conform and reflect community narratives. When we look back, we invoke both realms of memory and so the factual is fused with and often confused with the personal or episodic.

The past has left a differential legacy, with the most marginalised, disadvantaged being left without a sense of any “win” or any tangible peace dividend. So what invades the consciences of the middle classes is qualitatively different than that which causes working class communities concerns. Here many people still contend with a wide variety of inequalities on a daily basis. The past lives on in their present.

We have attempted to address the past through different methods, the Consultative group on the past, Historical Enquiries, Public Enquiries, Police Ombudsman, Inquests, Litigation. We have considered Truth commissions, drawing a line in the past, using Art, storytelling and sport as ways of addressing legacy matters. Despite these attempts dealing with the past remains an unsolved problem as we try and move forward together.

John Paul Lederach suggests that we have inherited a linear view of time, which sees past present and future in three unconnected boxes, moving forward. What if, however, we see time as more fluid, might it be possible to see the past in a different way. Could we see the past as still present amongst us.

Michael Ignatieff put it this way “When it comes to healing, one is faced with the most mysterious process of all. For what seems apparent in the former Yugoslavia, in Rwanda, and in South Africa is that the past continues to torment because it is not past. These places are not living in a serial order of time but in a simultaneous one, in which the past and the present are a continuous, agglutinated mass of fantasies, distortions, myths, and lies.”

In the Amarya language in Bolivia, people talk about the future being behind them and the past being ahead of them in that they can “see” what took place in the past so in that sense it lies before them, whereas the future is as yet unseen and metaphorically is behind them. In some ways we do the same. For example we commonly say “Easter follows Christmas” meaning of course that it comes after sequentially not that it is somehow behind it in terms of chronology. We also say we are “ahead of time” when we have dealt with things quickly.

It should be no real surprise to us to accept that the past invades the present. A certain smell a particular noise or sound can transport us back to the past.

We can't change the past but what if the lens in which we view the past was one of generosity, then how we locate the story of the other in our past, in our memory, might that help us re-imagine the future? Looking back on our past and asking what part of my past embraced the other and what part excluded the other? What if I had the ability to re-write my past, would it be any different? If it would then this "past" knowledge should inform the present, what we do now and assist us in addressing and indeed re-imagining the future. Lederach sees this as living in the ambiguity of the simultaneity of past present and future. So we see the past as the landscape through which we can negotiate the present and reimagine the future.

We imagine the future in the same way that we reconstruct the past. When I imagine some future event, I build that event from similar past experiences and my general knowledge. I remember a future that hasn't actually happened yet. This process allows me to plan, - a basic human capability. What will I do for my holidays this year? I'm not sure, but I can imagine lots of wonderful possibilities.

If we accept that history is made up of a series of episodes, events which took place, some of which we experienced and have a personal memory of, but others which we didn't experience personally and have only a vague understanding of, then perhaps we might be able to see history; not as a record of events, but made up of a variety of narratives and personal experiences, with some of which we may have only a passing acquaintance. We can't change any of this "past", but when we look back, it is possible to imagine that things might have been different if we had acted in another way, if we or our community had been more generous to "the other"... if we had taken time to listen to the story of the other. If we had taken time to see how our shared history is more linked than perhaps we had first understood.

So, let me suggest that if we took time to re-examine the past through a lens of generosity, we might just be able to see how "our story" might have been enhanced by including "their story". In doing this, in offering generosity perhaps we might be able to re-imagine a shared future in which our story includes an understanding of "their story". The two are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Where does this take us? So we have a generation of young people born in 1994 who are no longer teenagers, those born in 1998 who have now done their GCSEs. No actual memory of "the troubles". What past did they learn about at school? My past? Our past? They are accumulating knowledge memory but through the medium of personal, episodic memory.

So we have the ability to remember the past, but we do not have any capacity to change it. We have the possibility to imagine a different future, but there is no formula to predict it, and even less control it.

Nobody controls the future, but we all can try to control our own time. The reimagined future lies somewhere between memory and potentiality. Peacebuilding requires us to develop the art of living in the multiple time and space spheres. The well being of my grandchildren is inextricably linked with the well being of yours.

So, in order to re-imagine the future, we need to ensure that, whatever we do, it embraces “the other” so we look for the common values, common goals, common good. This is a big ask, to embrace the other in generosity of spirit. Are we up to the challenge?



Read the Chief Commissioner’s blog “*Here’s the thing...*”

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