

# A Mindfulness Approach to Restorative Dialogue and Healing

Sarah Chandler

In October I attended a six-day course sponsored by the Centre for Restorative Justice and Peacemaking at the University of Minnesota. This was titled “Victim Offender Dialogue (VOD) in Cases of Severe Criminal and Political Violence: A Mindfulness-based Approach to Restorative Dialogue and Healing.”

Mark Umbreit and Sheryl Wilson facilitated this training for twenty-four participants from eight countries including Canada, Hong Kong, Ireland, Liberia, Israel, Palestine, Sierra Leone, and the USA. The goals of the training were as follows: to understand the benefits and risks of mediating a dialogue between victims and offenders in cases of severe violence; to understand the victimization experience including the specific needs of victims; to understand the contexts in which severely violent crimes are committed (including the needs of offenders); to understand a humanistic model of Victim-Sensitive Offender Dialogue. The latter involves extensive preparation, creation of a safe space for dialogue, and gentle support for all parties throughout the process.

Together we considered cases ranging from aggravated assault to murder, terrorism, organized political violence, and genocide. We met separately with both victims and perpetrators of these violations, and once simultaneously with both, in a prison setting. Participants and presenters in our group included both victims and victim-survivors of severe criminal and political violence. And persons who have chosen to empower themselves by working in corrections systems, and participating in truth and reconciliation commissions. They facilitate victim-offender dialogues, or work on peace and reconciliation initiatives in their own country's contexts.

According to Mark Umbreit: *Humanistic mediation represents a 'dialogue-driven', rather than a 'settlement-driven' form of conflict resolution. It focuses on the importance of meeting with the parties individually and in-person prior to the joint mediation session, to - listen to their stories, build rapport, explain the process, and*

*prepare them for engagement in a mediated dialogue. It is a non-directive style of mediation in which the parties are primarily speaking with each other with minimal intervention by the mediator. The mediator maintains an attitude of unconditional positive regard and concern for all parties while remaining impartial. Humanistic mediation is a specific practice/application of the broader theory of transformative mediation. Humanistic mediation emphasizes healing and peacemaking over problem-solving and resolution. The telling and hearing of each other's stories about the conflict, the opportunity for maximum direct communication with each other, and the importance of honouring silence and the innate wisdom and strength of the participants, are all central to humanistic mediation practice.*

Central to this process of victim/offender dialogue are the needs of victims. In particular, VOD addresses the need to pursue what matters to victims in the aftermath of extreme criminal or political violence. Often, what matters is to learn the truth about what happened, to have unanswered questions addressed, to express the truth about how they have been affected, to have those truths acknowledged, and to witness remorse on the part of the perpetrator. Pursuit of what matters helps victims to heal in order to make meaning of the rest of their lives.

There is a sacred potential for the healing of all parties when participants are able and willing to safely engage and are supported by sensitive facilitation. This is true: between a victim and offender in a one-on-one crime; between a victim survivor of a terrorist attack and the mastermind of that attack; between victims of ethnic cleansing and the governments that condoned it.

Together we bore witness for six days to the strength of humanity and the potential for healing and transformation between victims and offenders. I was reminded of the *Alternatives to Violence* principles to look for a non-violent solution and to expect the best. I was also reminded that there is that of God in every person, even in the worst offender. But reaching it can sometimes be difficult. Sometimes we can't get there. Sometimes it isn't safe for a victim to try, or for an offender to participate. The offender's life circumstances may have buried “that of God” in him or her so deeply that we may despair of ever reaching it. In those cases it can be helpful for the victim to meet with an offender who has committed a similar violent act, but has reached that place of remorse within.