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OPINION

A More Just and Less Violent Image of America

Honoring the Original People

BY CRIS TOFFOLO

The Seattle City Council took the courageous decision to celebrate Oct. 13th as Indigenous People's Day. This is a national event, for in making this decision, Seattle is showing all of us how to take steps toward renewing our nation and remaking it in a more just and less violent image.

Americans descend from many different indigenous and non-indigenous nations and it is often unclear just what defines us as a people. Let me put forth the idea that what many of us share is a history of violence, suffering, oppression and trauma.

Sometimes it is seen as impolite in this country to talk politics or religion in social gatherings. So instead we often turn to that most acceptable and completely American question, "So where is your family from? When did your family immigrate to the US?" And those of us with immigration histories quickly and

proudly tell our stories, and once we even had a shared pride in being a nation of immigrants, as symbolized by the Statue of Liberty.

Taking a deeper look at our shared conversation about our origins, however, we will see a more disturbing truth. Well-known peace studies pioneer Johan Galtung argues that what we typically think of as violence (i.e., rape and murder) is only the tip of the iceberg. For that type of violence sits atop two other, much larger layers, of socio-economic violence, (what Galtung calls "structural violence"), and cultural violence.

Many of us know the truth of this claim from our families' immigration stories. My Italian grandfather came to the US after experiencing the horrific direct violence of World War I: He watched his brother burn to death in a fire bombing raid and he almost died himself as a soldier in that "great" war.

The parents of my Italian grandmother had arrived earlier, fleeing the oppressive structural violence of grinding poverty and hunger. So poor were they, that they only ate meat once a year, on Christmas. And the only orange my great-grandmother ever ate as a child

was a gift from the mayor, an act of charity which he doled out, again, on Christmas.

But like many Americans I also have ancestors from another country, and from my Dutch side I heard the stories of cultural violence, mixed with direct violence. My great-grandparents left Holland after living through World War II and witnessing the vicious anti-Semitism of the Nazis who told a tale about how Jews were so much lesser than others that it was morally okay to cast them out and kill them. In summary, like so many other Americans, my ancestors came here due to a combination of direct, structural and cultural violence, no one kind worse than another.

And yet, our arrival to these shores brought with it the violence of disinheritance and wiping out Native American peoples, the original inhabitants of this land. And along with Europeans also came the horrific institution of slavery, and millions of involuntary immigrants in the form of Africans in chains.

As a result, both Native Americans and African Americans have suffered levels of direct, structural and cultural

violence beyond comprehension. Still today these two communities suffer the highest rates of direct violence and crippling poverty, and the deep cultural violence of racism which makes the direct violence and poverty go largely unnoticed by mainstream society.

With Seattle's action we have taken one step toward lessening the cultural violence perpetrated on Native Americans. While this might seem like just a tiny step, it is only by transforming our cultural narrative that we will be able to move on to tackle the other forms of violence that affect us all. With Seattle's action they have helped us all to begin to see how those of us who live elsewhere could take similar actions, relevant to our own contexts, to heal the wounds that were inadvertently caused by immigrants coming to these shores. It makes it possible to imagine an American narrative in which our shared story is not one of violence but one of shared redemption, of overcoming of injustice and pain.

Cris Toffolo writes for PeaceVoice and is professor and chair of the Justice Studies Department at Northwestern Illinois University in Chicago.

The Human Tragedy of Wholesale Displacement

We can't give up on the Palestinian refugees

BY THE REV. M. LINDA JARAMILLO

It is one thing to hear news reports about conditions in Palestinian refugee camps, but it is quite another to actually be there in person. As part of Global Ministries (a joint ministry of the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church Disciples of Christ), I recently visited such a camp in Beirut, Lebanon. There is no way to fully describe the situation, but I am sure that what I saw will remain in my memory for a long-time to come.

The Joint Christian Committee for Social Serves in Lebanon, which is part of the Middle East Council of Churches, boldly demonstrates extraordinary commitment to serving Palestinian refugees. It is important to remember that these refugees were first displaced over 65 years ago, first to Syria then from Syria to Lebanon. The director of the joint committee, Mrs. Sylvia Haddad, is courageous in her quest to keep the Palestinian community's story alive, generation after generation.

Mrs. Haddad first wanted to expose

our group to a positive experience at the service group's Sabra Center because she knew that entering the nearby inner-city refugee camp would present a more disturbing picture that would jolt our consciousness. She was correct.

Following an orientation to the center's inter-generational programs, we were greeted by pre-school age children with sparkling eyes and joyful smiles, and an occasional frightened face.

In classroom after classroom, teachers were busily teaching basic skills, but they readily welcomed us with waves and songs. The Center's youth and adult vocational education programs include computer technology, electronics, hair dressing, and literacy to help students to become self-sufficient. The Center also offers programs for the elderly, who according to Mrs. Haddad "carry the keys to the family and community story."

As Mrs. Haddad promised, my consciousness was profoundly stirred by the journey through the Shatilla Palestinian refugee camp, just a short walk from the Sabra Center where thousands of people reside (an accurate number is not known).

We wound through narrow streets

and passageways between buildings greeting people along the way. Even with the electrical wires hanging overhead from building to building and street to street, there are still some small home spaces without electrical power.

We came upon a stack of baked bread, safely tucked in clear plastic bags. We were told that many in the community are without food so the bread is left on a concrete shelf for them to take with no questions asked. In this way they do not have to beg on the streets, their dignity is preserved and immediate hunger needs are met a clear demonstration of mutual care.

As we moved along, we passed children playing in the narrow passageways. While the Sabra Center serves

many children, they are filled to capacity so the rest are left to pass their day in the camp. Three little boys were jostling as we passed, one sporting a t-shirt with the words "Never Give Up" across his chest.

Regardless of our political feelings about Israel/Palestine, we cannot ignore the human tragedy of wholesale displacement of Palestinians from their homeland generations ago. The message on this little boy's t-shirt reminded me that we all have a part, and if we do nothing justice will never be realized. We cannot close our eyes to their reality. We, too, can never give up.

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