

Trust-building conversations

A talk by Jean Brown

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I would like to start with something that I hear, and have even felt, from time to time.

‘And to think that I *trusted* you—how *could* I have been so stupid. I need to have my head examined. I will *never* forgive you—and I can certainly *never* forgive myself.’

There is a key in this, several in fact. We need to have our heads and our hearts examined if trust is to be foundational in the ‘humane society’, the creation of which is our only hope. The humane society, where everyone cares enough and everyone shares enough so that everyone has enough, to quote Mahatma Gandhi; where as a world family together we confront global climate change, acute hunger, conflict and injustice, and the greed and corruption that cause them, starting in our own lives and practice. We can only do anything worth doing together on the bedrock of trust. There is an ancient Vedic prayer that reminds us that we can live individually but only survive collectively. We are called together to remake the world and everyone has a part in that.

Then forgiveness – trust and forgiveness go together, they have to.

Trust is the choice to believe in the decent intention of the other.... in their appropriate skill and knowledge.... in their word, ability and motive. It is a choice to be taken with eyes wide open, helped if we know ourselves, and are familiar with our own nature and often devious motives. So trust—informed by radical self honesty, preconditioned with forgiveness.

Let’s face it, the real weapons of mass destruction are the lack of trust, the unresolved injustices, the unhealed hurts of history, the un-faced prejudices, hidden under the surface of every community on earth.

In my work with Creators of Peace—a women’s initiative out of Africa and one of the programmes of Initiatives of Change—our methodology is to attempt to disturb and defuse these often ancient grievances before they explode into irretrievable conflict. Especially amongst women. We women are more usually the tellers of the stories and frequently the perpetrators of prejudice amongst our children. We have to take responsibility for that before we can effectively see our role as Peace Creators.

A couple of stories to illustrate this: a few years ago we worked with a young Malaysian Chinese man who had been told by his grandmother when he was four years old: ‘Never trust an Indian or a Muslim—you never know when they will betray you.’ So he didn’t and confined himself totally to his Chinese community and culture. She was coming out of her own unhealed suffering following race riots.

Later, with him, we met an Indonesian Muslim. This young man told us: ‘When I was a small boy, about four years old, my grandmother told me “Never trust a Chinese...”’ The two young men looked at each other and laughed. They became friends and they resolved to stop the poison going on through further generations.

I was running a workshop in Kenya last year, just before the violence broke out after the elections. One Kenyan woman told me that she had told her children, when they were small, to never mix with or marry anyone from another tribe. Suddenly she was seeing for the first time how she has been part of feeding into the problem of Kenya. She felt really ashamed and called her now adult children together. She apologized for having sown the seeds of prejudice in their minds and encouraged them now to befriend and even marry from another tribe.

Last month there were further workshops with women from seven different tribes coming together to seek healing and a way forward. One young woman, who had decided to forgive another tribe which had dispossessed her family of home and land, went a step further, realizing that her hatred made her a contributor to the injustice. She sought out members of that other tribe to ask their forgiveness for the rumour-spreading and bitterness that she was part of. She started a new conversation. She is a dynamic contributor now to the rebuilding of trust in Kenya.

Our Creators of Peace Circles bring women together across the divides of religion, ethnicity, and economic status to explore together the nature of peace, the *how* of peace. Peace Circles are being used in about nine different countries with requests for their introduction in six more.

The aim is not dialogue for its own sake, nor even the building of trust for its own sake; they are the tools to help women find a change of heart and empowerment to understand each other and care for and work together to bring effective social change. So many working on social change do wonderful work, but also often contaminate it by their own unresolved issues. One woman who had been in peace education all her life shared that she hated her brother. She suddenly woke up to the connection, to her own integrity gap and hypocrisy.

Over the years I have often been made aware of my own integrity gap starting when I was 21, when as a passionate advocate of peace I was made aware of my cold war with my own father. As a passionate condemner of corruption I was made aware of the fact that I was stealing from my mother's purse. As a proponent of transparency I was a devious character hiding behind a whole series of masks! Initiatives of Change has a fundamental position that change starts with oneself. Perhaps the first and most important trust building conversation is the one with our own consciences in the depths of our own hearts. One challenge as a trust builder is how to be trustworthy!

So how to start, where to start? One of the primary tools of Initiatives of Change is the practice of Inner Listening. We all have a choice, we either live reflectively or we live reactively, which is what most of us end up doing. The practice of taking time in silence to listen to God or that inner voice of Truth and compassion, as a source of connection, correction and direction, is surely the most dynamic and effective way to live. I strongly recommend it. I am a follower of Jesus, and I have found this sharing in silence, to listen for truth from within, is one of the most trust building tools, whether I am with people of other faiths or no faith.

One challenging trust building opportunity came for me when I was at a largely women's conference in India and I was chairing a session. One of the African women

asked if she could address the meeting briefly at the start, and proceeded to complain about one of the white women at the conference with whom she had had an encounter in which she felt the white woman had been very racist. She felt that as we were talking about peace this sort of thing should not be allowed. She sat down.

There were only about a dozen white women at the mostly Indian and African conference, and I could feel all eyes on them. But I knew that the woman she was talking about was me. We had earlier had a conversation about money and I had insensitively made it into a race issue. I had felt quite justified at the time.

So now what was I to do? The session had to start and I began to call up the speakers and do all the tasks of a chairperson.... but underneath I was stewing. My outraged self esteem was angry, blaming her... my inner voice, voice of God or conscience, whatever, was pointing out that while I may have had no intention of being racist, my motive at the time had been one of self pity and I had used race to defend myself. It had been an issue of pride and now here again was an issue of pride. I knew I was in the wrong. The meeting continued, successfully as far as I can remember, and I looked calm and in control. I have always been a good bluffer. So what was I to do? I could decide to do nothing and since she had been able to voice her hurt that may be all that was needed, it would blow over. Or I could take her into a corner later and apologize privately. Or, I could deal a blow to my pride and build trust at the same time.... I could apologize publicly.

The meeting came to an end and after thanking the speakers I asked for a couple of minutes extra and told them all that I was the white woman concerned. I shared about the often ungenerous, self centered motives that go through my heart, that I was the one to make it into a racist issue and how sorry I was, that I need change.

The meeting broke up and I was surrounded by all the African women wanting to hug me and reassure me. It turned out that all of them had known in advance, they had all heard of the incident and knew it was me and were waiting to see what my response would be in the meeting. One said, 'Thank God you demonstrated that sort of honest leadership.' I walked away from that experience feeling not virtuous but shakey, that I had nearly missed it; that my pride and instinct for the self preservation of my good image could have so easily prevented me from doing the right thing. Trust is destroyed or built on small things.

Trust always involves some form of surrender. I was challenged repeatedly by my teenage daughter to trust her. How can I, I would reply. I know that you do things which I am unhappy about. In a dream I was awoken with a stark thought: to trust is to relinquish control. In this case it was nothing to do with a faked blindness to pretend to her goodness. It was simply to make the decision to let go; to surrender the control I attempted to exert through my oblique questions, my fears, my habits of checking whether the light was still on through the night and so on; countless little devious practices on my part. To trust that we had built the relationship earlier, which could see us through, whatever might happen. We had two trust building conversations at this time. One was when I told her all this, what I had understood about myself and decided. The other was when I invited her out to lunch and told her the truth about myself: my shame and shadows and how I had found faith, forgiveness

and healing. I have never been listened to so well as by her at that lunch. We have been good friends since.

This conference is being hosted by Initiatives of Change. This year is a significant one in that it is 100 years since Frank Buchman, the initiator of Moral Re-Armament which became Initiatives of Change, had his transformative spiritual awakening in Keswick, what I call his 'I too was wrong' moment. It led him to write letters of apology and find release from his bitterness and pride. It is amazing how much change and rebuilt trust starts from the moment someone is able to say, 'Actually I was wrong... or I too was wrong... forgive me?' We had a moment like that in Australia on 13 February this year. Our Australian Prime Minister apologized on behalf of the government for the terrible policies of the removal of Aboriginal children over three generations. He was able to say, 'We were wrong, please forgive us.' And a few days ago the Canadian Government followed suit.

During the workshop this afternoon I am hoping that my husband and another colleague, John Bond, who have been intimately involved with the reconciliation movement in Australia, will join us. My husband and I first got personally involved in this trust building conversation 27 years ago, along with hundreds of Australians working to find healing and a united way forward.

One last point: if we are to be contributors to the essential conversations that will build the trust across the world's divides, in homes, communities, nations; we, in the West especially, have to come out of what I call 'The Great Indifference', the result of our materially saturated, self-centred, fearful way of living and thinking, and become participants in 'The Great Engagement'. The aim of Initiatives of Change is to engage every person in changing the world starting with themselves.

Be the change you want to see in the world, said Gandhi. Be the trust.....