



The Butterfly Peace Garden

In this column we shall explore the stories of those who have tried to heal deficits in peace in a community at the same time as healing its ill and wounded members. The Butterfly Peace Garden is one of the most unusual of these stories. Its central characters are an artist, a doctor, and a priest... although they would say the central characters were the children of Batticaloa, an area on the strife-riven east coast of Sri Lanka.

These children have lived their whole lives in the presence of an ugly asymmetrical conflict. About one-third of the population of the area is Muslim, and about two-thirds Tamil who are mainly Hindu. In the course of the violent conflict between these ethnicities, there have been village massacres, abductions, and rapes. Thousands of families have suffered repeated displacements, with consequent deprivation and malnutrition. There are thousands of war widows. The suicide rate is among the highest in the world, higher than the war casualty rates. Considerable numbers of children have been abducted by militias and forced to work as soldiers. Some children choose to join militias out of despair and revenge. Unemployment is high. Depression, alcoholism, and domestic violence are common.

This project began in an orthodox way as one of a series of "Health of Children in War Zones Projects" of McMaster University's Centre for Peace Studies (Hamilton, Canada). An epidemiological study, carefully designed to be culturally appropriate, showed that in a sample of 170 nine- to eleven-year-olds in this area, there was almost universal (95%) exposure to severely adverse experiences (threatened death or serious injury) and high exposure to loss of family members through death or "disappearance". About one-fifth of the children suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder in the severe or very severe range of symptom intensity, and about the same proportion suffered from severe depression and unresolved grief (1).

Robbie Chase was the young physician heading this project. In a Toronto café, he encountered Paul Hogan, a remarkable artist who had created The Spiral Garden, combining connection with the Earth and creative arts in the rehabilitation of neurologically impaired children. Together they conceived the idea of a healing garden for children affected by Sri Lanka's

war. Integral to the shaping of the idea was Father Paul Satkunanayagam, a Tamil Jesuit priest and psychologist active in the provision of children's mental health services in the Batticaloa region.

It became clear that this trio's approach to children's mental health was far from orthodox. War-affected youngsters were to be helped by a combination of "earthwork, artwork, heartwork, and healing", to use the language of the Garden. As the Garden evolved, children planted seeds, tended to their growth, and harvested the fruits. There was some emphasis on medicinal herbs, now scarce in the war-damaged environment. They care for sick birds and animals that remain on the site, which once had been a monastery garden and zoo. The children begin their day in the garden on "Mud Mountain", sculpting fanciful creatures from clay, inventing characters who persist as imaginary inhabitants of the garden. Stories grow around the characters, and songs around the stories. Dramas are produced, with brilliant masks and costumes. Painting is a much-loved art form. Clowns appear from nowhere from time to time, to tease and act outrageously (Figs. 1 and 2).

"Play is children's sacrament", says Paul Hogan, the genius of the Garden. Once I asked him how misbehaving children were handled there. "Ah," his eyes twinkled, "Naughtiness is children's special sacrament".



Figure 1. Crane dance in the Butterfly Garden.



Figure 2. Painting in the Butterfly Garden.

The Butterfly Peace Garden aims to create a space to honor children in the middle of violence at many levels of their lives. Here they will create stories instead of being silenced; they will create peace instead of war; will use artistic expressiveness instead of weapons; there will be laughter rather than fear; their relationships with the world, after being destroyed, will be remade (2).

Children are referred to the Garden from surrounding schools, usually because they experience school or home difficulties. They come one day a week for a nine-month cycle, 50 at a time, in equal numbers of boys and girls, Tamils and Muslims. The "Butterflies" as they call themselves, are picked up from their villages by the highly colorful Butterfly Bus.

The animators in the Garden are local artists, selected for their ability to be open and present to children. The initial job advertisement must be unique in the world:

In the best of all possible gardens these artist-poet-facilitators should be multiply skilled... as, for example, textile artist/juggler; painter/clown; mask-maker/potter/drummer; story-teller/ritualist/snake-charmer. All facilitators should be blessed with a contemplative, respectful spirit, a fine sense of humor, a concentrated, yet open aesthetic approach to life. Beauty, harmony, equanimity, detachment and an endless capacity to be awed by the mystery and sacredness of all life; these qualities are also indispensable (2).

The animators have been trained over years to be artist-healers in supervision with Father Paul, the psychologist, and by a number of visiting clinicians. In the course of their training, they have had to deal with their own psychological wounds of war, as no one in this region has escaped intense suffering.

Each day the children select activities from a range of visual, dramatic, and musical arts. They work in mixed ethnicity and gender groups, forming friendships, which persist after their time in the Garden. The children also have opportunity to work individually with animators or Father Paul on their own stories of loss and harm. Healing rituals are used carefully in this phase of the children's experience, maintaining congruence with each child's ethnic and religious background.

By the end of the nine-month cycle, the children have woven their stories, music and artistic creations together to form a grand offering to their communities. Sometimes as a traveling theatre, sometimes as a town parade, sometimes as an opera or art exhibition offered in the Garden to parents, teachers and religious leaders from their home communities, the children make their offering, gorgeously costumed, masked, their songs and chants ringing out.

By now, the garden is in its eighth year and thousands of children have passed through it. They come back briefly in the subsequent years to keep their experience alive and fresh. There is no question that they find it a joyous and empowering experience. It is known that for some, their inter-ethnic friendships persist. There is talk now of establishing "seedling Gardens", offshoots of the Butterfly Garden, between villages formerly at enmity with each other.

It is impossible to appraise with accuracy the short- and long-term effects of this remarkable experience on its participants. No research, in the formal sense, is permitted on children in the Garden. Robbie Chase has followed up 20 participants, with inquiries of caregivers and teachers yielding anecdotal accounts of observable improvements in most. Some continue to struggle with extremely difficult home lives (1). But no one who has seen the children laughing and creating in the Garden, and who has permitted themselves to be open to its magic, could doubt the health and peace – in the deepest senses of those terms – that flow from its beauty.

References

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- 2 Lawrence P. The ocean of stories: children's imagination, creativity, and reconciliation in Eastern Sri Lanka. Colombo, Sri Lanka: International Centre for Ethnic Studies; 2003.