

Chapter 7

Mutual Accountability for Sustainable Peace: Reconceptualizing the Current Paradigm of Partnership, Ownership, Responsibility, and Results

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores some of the ways that other-than-human guidance can help to restore the mutually beneficial relationships that bring peace and sustain life. Building on the chapter “Restorative Peacebuilding in Liberia” (in this volume), the authors examine some of the underlying principles that make relational peacebuilding such a compelling path to reconnection after violence. They look at how, in the Liberian context, conventional aid reinforces learned helplessness; how communities riven by bloodshed long for reconnection above all; how ecocide exacerbates and often precedes genocide; how a radical shift in perspective from “Me” to “We” opens fresh possibilities for healing; and they consider the role of borders, edges, dreams, and chance encounters as loci of unexpected support. They look at how trauma distorts our perceptions and compromises our decision-making, and they consider the false narrative of “progress.” In its place, they advocate that Westerners seek reciprocity rather than dominance for all our sakes. The authors have included an appendix with benchmarks and questions designed to help us make the necessary changes in ourselves so that we can redefine progress in relational rather than material terms. Above all, the events and stories related here invite us to consider a new kind of relationship with the natural world and each other, based on mutual healing and mutual accountability.

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2004, grassroots peacebuilders from the NGO *everyday gandhis* have been working in traditional towns and villages in Northwest Liberia to support community reconciliation, sustainable agriculture and ecological restoration. Our team includes people from Liberia and the U.S., with a wide variety of backgrounds, beliefs and training, including several people with little or no formal schooling. This chapter explores the urgency, in light of impending global extinction, of creating a culture of mutual respect and reciprocity among humans, the Natural World and the unseen forces that make Life possible. Our experiences in Liberia are the context for this discussion.

Interwoven stories from our work in the field reveal unexpected sources of guidance from elephants and the dead, as communicated through dreams and synchronicities, and show how appreciative outsiders can support local communities in recognizing their own unique wisdom and creativity as they recover from the violence of war and the assault of Western consumer culture. The chapter demonstrates the beauty of traditional wisdom in meeting the challenges of post-conflict recovery, ethnic strife, multigenerational trauma and ecological devastation. The valuable lessons learned by those of us who are Western outsiders, indicate the necessity as well as the life-changing beauty of cultivating the shared goal of mutual accountability and trust. The chapter invites consideration of the ways in which the other-than-human world exercises agency in seeking to assist humans in making the necessary conceptual and behavioral changes to meet the challenges of these times.

There is no significant body of research or literature that explores other-than-human guidance in the context of peacebuilding. Our work has revealed several nested dilemmas, particularly with regard to evaluating ‘progress’, ‘results’ and ‘outcomes’ of peacebuilding work in traditional, Indigenous communities: 1) The predominant models of peacebuilding, foreign aid and academic research arise from linear Western thinking exclusively, and as such tend to dismiss as unreliable the non-linear, difficult-to-measure outcomes of felt experience and story; 2) Dreams, divinations, synchronicities and other forms of subtle communication from the natural and spirit worlds are not considered legitimate sources of information for identifying what a community might need, or reliable guidance for discerning what action is required; 3) Relationships between ‘experts’ and ‘recipient communities’ are skewed to favor the authority of outside experts and the requirements of their funders over the needs and perspectives of local people. Few outsiders recognize the role this power imbalance plays in perpetuating the dilemmas supposedly being addressed by the interventions of outside actors; 4) Few Westerners recognize Western culture as the source of the problems faced by former colonies, aka ‘developing countries’; 5) Little or no research exists examining the accuracy of nonlinear communication from other-than-human beings; 6) Indigenous ways of knowing are generally dismissed as superstition, though experience continues to show them to be extremely effective and precise; 7) Ecocide precedes genocide. Deforestation, industrial agriculture, resource extraction, pollution and habitat loss destroy the natural systems necessary for survival, and create or exacerbate economic injustice, ethnic and social strife. Ecological restoration supports healing by restoring the natural systems necessary for survival and by creating experiential healing and a sense of connection and accomplishment as denigrated environments are repaired in tandem with human communities.

These dilemmas fold in on themselves, and, if not addressed, reinforce the mindset that produced them and perpetuate the deterioration of the Natural World and the breakdown of human communities struggling to survive in the face of the relentless assaults of Western consumer culture and the resulting decimation of Indigenous cultures and the Natural World. To that end, this chapter demonstrates

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