

JEANNINE SUURMOND THURSDAY, 03 NOVEMBER 2016 (1319 VIEWS on 2016-12-26)

You can find it on: <http://www.khmertimeskh.com/news/31609/a-violence-prevention-strategy/>

A Violence Prevention Strategy

The tensions between the Cambodian People's Party and the Cambodia National Rescue Party in the run up to the 2017 and 2018 elections are reason to consider all available violence prevention strategies, including those besides law and order.

"Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed," states the preamble of the constitution of Unesco. How can you and I build such defenses of peace? One way is to learn the language of humanization.

The psychologist Zimbardo observed that the process of dehumanization is central to the transformation of ordinary people into indifferent, even cruel perpetrators of violence.

Dehumanization is the reduction of the full humanity of a person or a people to one or few single traits, which makes them appear less human and hence unworthy of equal treatment. While all the causes of violence remain to be conclusively defined, most scientists agree that dehumanization is a precursor.

Humans do not persecute humans whom they believe to be similar to themselves. According to Genocide Watch, dehumanization is the third stage of the genocide process, following the stages of classification and symbolization and preceding organization, polarization, preparation, extermination and denial.

Our language matters in that it may become a vehicle of dehumanization, legitimizing and promoting violent actions; a phenomenon called "cultural violence" in peacebuilding. The violent conflict strategies of politicians, militaries and militias typically contain dehumanizing language, because it lowers our resistance to hurting another human being.

Khmer Rouge guards replaced the names of Tuol Sleng prisoners with numbers. The Hutu government referred to Tutsis as traitors in the run-up to the genocide in Rwanda. The US military continues to describe its enemies as targets.

Much of the language we use in our day-to-day life too is dehumanizing and therefore puts us at risk of becoming violent. Consider the following interpersonal, community and political examples.

Our children are arguing over a toy. When we respond with "bad kids," we pave the way for disconnection and acts of violence justified as punishment.

Now imagine Vietnamese come to settle in our village. In conversations with other community members, we might say "all Vietnamese are criminals," thus making their eventual expulsion more likely. Finally, suppose our political leaders are in disagreement, so by extension so are we. Calling Prime Minister Hun Sen a "dictator" or opposition leader Sam Rainsy a "traitor" in political debate will harden the enemy images that fuel violent protests and repression.

So should we just call everybody "sweetheart"? No. Positive labels are the other side of the same coin. They can be likewise dehumanizing. The actual alternative is to focus on our similarities instead of our differences.

The language of humanization, from the perspective of nonviolent communication as developed by Marshall Rosenberg, draws our attention to the needs that we as human beings have in common, such as food, shelter, safety, autonomy, acceptance and peace.

Conflict arises when our strategies for meeting these needs clash. However, because I have the same needs as you, I can understand what drives you even if I abhor what you are saying or doing. Guessing (I cannot know for sure) what you are feeling and needing will ease my eagerness to get even with you.

For example, we are more likely to create understanding and resolve the conflict between our children, if we guess “are you feeling frustrated, because both of you would love to play with this toy?”

We reduce our inclination to scapegoat the Vietnamese newcomers and increase our willingness to contribute to their well-being, as soon as we guess “are you feeling nervous and at the same time hopeful, because you would like to be accepted and access the resources you need to survive?”

We start breaking down the relational barrier between our political parties, when we guess: “Hun Sen, are you alarmed, because you want to protect the nation’s stability and economic growth, as well as your own safety by securing influence and financial resources?”

And: “Sam Rainsy, are you concerned, because political participation and equality are fundamentally important to you, while you want to be able to express your views without jeopardizing your life by living in exile?”

The language of humanization increases our resistance to hurting other humans, because we come to see that they are just like us, regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity, wealth, power or position.

Humanization has long been integral to the non-violent conflict strategies implemented by peace builders. International mediators advised the Colombian government on the psychological aspects of the peace negotiations with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

The Centre for Nonviolent Communication is teaching empathy to children in American and European schools. The Transcultural Psychosocial Organization facilitates restorative dialogues between victims and perpetrators of Khmer Rouge violence here in Cambodia.

But surely we need to protect ourselves from – how shall we put it – “crazy guys”? Trying to understand someone’s violent actions does not mean condoning them. Should there be no option for dialogue and our lives be in danger, we may resort to the protective instead of the punitive use of force.

That is what Gandhi did when he led the non-cooperation movement against the British oppression of the people of India without dehumanizing his opponents.

We may not be able to influence the language used by our politicians and military, but we can influence the way we express ourselves. In the face of conflict, we can decide to humanize the people around us and in so doing, reverse the genocide process and prevent violence.

We can free up the internal resources necessary to pursue collaborative and constructive ways of meeting everyone’s needs. To teach the language of humanization to ourselves, our children, our communities and our leaders is to build defenses of peace in our minds.

Jeannine Suurmond specializes in mediation, restorative justice and nonviolent communication and lives in Phnom Penh

This article by my very dear friend Jeannine Suurmond (ct. candidate) was printed in a national daily in Cambodia. Jeannine was the key person who organized the NVC training in Nepal that resulted in the film by Carolyn Davies “In the Eyes of the Good”. Jeannine now works in Cambodia. I find this article an extraordinary contribution to social change on several levels.

If you find joy in doing so I invite you to read the article and to share your reactions and feedback with Jeannine on: [jeannine.suurmond \(ad\) gmail.com](mailto:jeannine.suurmond@ad.gmail.com)