Youth Leaders and the Arts: From Conflict to Strategic Community Building

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Introduction: A State of Peace, Just Like a State of Conflict, is not an Event; it is a Process

In a recent public gathering, while discussing the challenges of post-conflict Colombia, Humberto de la Calle, the lead negotiator of the Colombian government in the Havana peace talks with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), claimed that it is imperative that we conceive peace "not as an event, but as a process" (2017). With this being said, de la Calle alluded to the complexity embedded not only in peace, but also in the state of conflict itself. The armed conflict between the Colombian government and FARC has a long and complex history. In fact,

133

according to the The Center for Justice and Accountability, "Colombia has endured the longest-running internal conflict in the Western hemisphere" (CJA, 2017). Many players, from all spheres of social life, have been part of this conflict from its origin, its sustainment, to its ever-morphing reproduction; but of course, and most importantly, of its dissolution and transformation into a peaceful society.

Individuals and social groups experience seemingly insignificant everyday conflicts, such as disputes over power in the workplace, quarrels between football fans in the pub, and fights between drug-dealers over product distribution spaces on street corners, on a regular basis. What they do not readily see is that these everyday local conflicts are part of the social network that sustains conflict patterns of larger impact around the world. The guerrilla warfare in Colombia and international armed and cyber conflicts we witness today in some of the most "advanced" countries of the world are examples of this impact. Most people experience these seemingly insignificant conflicts closely on a more personal level in their everyday lives, causing them not to recognize the larger global ones as connected in any way or that they affect their way of life at all.

It is important to understand that we live in complex and dynamic social contexts, and that the presence of conflict of any order, large or small, is both the cause and result of social relationships, and the cultural patterns they produce, at all levels of our society. The seemingly insignificant everyday conflicts previously described are intertwined at different levels with larger more macro conflicts. At the same time, Sunday community kitchens in the inner cities of the United States, the artistic collectives in Rio de Janeiro, and the youth organizations in Medellin, Colombia, are all part of the same dynamic and complex social fabric that act toward subverting these conflicts, not sustaining them. Thus, it is in the strategic distribution in a given society of seemingly insignificant actions, either of conflict or not, that a dynamic and complex social context can lean towards patterns that sustain conflicts, or towards patterns that have the potential to produce and sustain states of peace.

The objective of this paper is to suggest that conflict, peacebuilding and states of peace are the products of the intimate social relationships that are at work in a society between individuals and social institutions, such as governments, armed forces (legal and illegal), grassroots

134

organizations, gangs, and so forth; and most importantly, that it is the social imagination that we attach to such relationships that produce and reproduce the patterns that can, on the one hand produce and sustain conflict, or on the other hand, produce and sustain conditions upon which a process of peacebuilding can be constructed. In sum, we want to suggest that within the intricacy of the social networks that produce patterns of conflict, exist the elements to transform these patterns into those of its sustainable resolution.

We will exemplify one situation in which a community rife with conflict and violence came together to initiate peacebuilding. We will draw from the testimony of some of our colleagues in Medellin about a community organized event held in 2013 in a conflict-ridden zone that produced a peacebuilding model with strong potential for sustainability. To do this, we will situate this event in the historical social and political conflict that began in the city of Medellin during the end of the 1970's and that escalated to previously unimaginable levels. Thus, we will first provide a historical description of Medellin to set the context and then describe ConVidArte, the community organized event of peacebuilding that we will use as a case study. After describing the case study we will analyze this event through several theoretical lenses from the fields of conflict resolution and peacebuilding, which we also refer to as "*strategic community building*."

The Context: Medellin, Colombia

For a long time, Medellin has been associated with drug trafficking, and especially to the kingpin, Pablo Escobar. In the 1990s, it was known as the most violent city on earth. In fact, the city had a murder rate of 300 killings every 100 thousand residents (Civico, 2006); today, the rate is 19, less than Chicago or Newark in the United States.

Medellín is the second largest city in Colombia and it has been the commercial capital. It is a city where paternalism, civic duty, a tradition of nonpartisan public service, and ascent based on merit have always coexisted with exclusion, discrimination, parochialism and selective repression (Roldan, 2003).

135

The capital of the department of Antioquia, Medellin was founded in 1675 by aristocratic families tired of paying high royal dues to support the bureaucracy of Santa Fe, then the departmental capital and center of the gold mining industry. These families were joined by a new wave of immigrants from Spain attracted by the favorable climate and the fertile terrain of the Aburrá Valley, mainly occupied by Indians at that time. Thus, merchants made up the ruling class of the city, which soon became the most important center for commerce in Colombia. Medellín's trading imprint is a distinguishing feature of the city and its residents even up until the present time (Civico, 2006).

Over the decades, the elite in Medellín pushed the working class people out of town towards the suburbs growing in the northeastern and northwestern slopes of the city. To this day most people of the lower socioeconomic classes and the internally displaced persons live in these areas. Thus, also because of the civil war, known as *La Violencia*, in the 1950s, and the growth of Medellin's textile industry, those neighborhoods became densely populated with people from every corner of Colombia (Civico, 2006).

There are invisible boundaries running through Medellín, and invisible walls fencing off one sector from the other, that divide the city into poor and wealthy *barrios* or neighborhoods. The well-to-do withdrew into the private enclaves of the El Poblado section of Medellin, where they live in fortified villas or luxurious condominiums. As anthropologist Teresa Caldeira (2000) noted in her study of crime and segregation in the Brazilian capital Sao Paolo, "the upper classes have used the fear of violence and crime to justify new techniques of exclusion and their withdrawal from traditional quarters of the cities" (p.1). She also noted how these private enclaves, "incorporate racial and ethnic anxieties, class prejudices, and references to poor and marginalized groups" (idem).

At the beginning of the 1970s, in the wake of a major decline in textile manufacturing, first the trafficking of marijuana and then cocaine, marked the fate of Medellin. The trading of these commodities gave the criminals from the lower and middle classes chances to mimic the life of the privileged class. Drug trafficking allowed the unleashing of a deep desire for material wellbeing and the access to power, which historically had been denied to everyone but the aristocratic families.

With the surge of cocaine and powerful Cartels, like Escobar's legendary Medellín Cartel, came also extreme and spectacular violence. In the late 1970s, gangs formed in the marginal *barrios* of the city and that eventually Pablo Escobar turned into his private army. In consecutive waves of violence, Medellin's peripheries were dominated by guerrilla militias and paramilitary groups. Eventually, they demobilized in 2003, as part of the national disarmament of the Self-Defense United of Colombia, an umbrella of paramilitary groups that had formed in the late 1990s under the leadership of the Castaño brothers (Civico, 2006).

In spite of several attempts to reduce violence through urban peace talks with militias and armed groups, violence always found a way to recycle itself. Thus, today, armed groups linked to a still powerful network of drug trafficking are keeping a stronghold of Medellin's peripheries, especially the most remote ones, far up in the hills, that are the gateways to the drug routes that lead to the city from the northern coast of Colombia.

It is in these marginal areas that violence is still experienced, though with far less intensity than in the 1990s and the first years of the new millennium. It is also in these same areas that with courage and creativity citizens have been resisting this violence, transcending reality and generating spaces of peace, often using forms of urban art, from murals to the rhythms, moves and beats of hip-hop.

An Experience of Strategic Peace Building: ConVidArte

The first Sunday of February in 2013 was not going to be a normal day. Altavista, a remote sector on the southwest region of Medellin, had been immersed in conflict. On this day, over ninety *cultural agents*, from musicians, painters, poets, and clowns, to social organizers and community leaders, gathered at Altavista. Through a creative, poetic and melodic political action, the violent conflict between two armed groups (gangs) that were inflicting pain and terror on the community, was suspended. Initially, this temporary truce was to hold for two days.

We became familiar with this story of community action and peacebuilding through one of our colleagues[1], who was an organizer of the event. As we became more familiar with what transpired through

testimonies, the nuances of this event, its origin, the motivation behind it, and its outcome, marked a major shift in the way we understood the relationship between peacebuilding and strategic community building. It would also enable us to conceive of the arts as a transgressive and transformative aesthetic form. It gave us a tangible situation as a data point to analyze, in order to identify and understand the role of youth leadership, strategic community building and the arts in processes of peacebuilding.

Rafael Augusto Restrepo, a social leader, musician and community organizer, since the 1980's in Medellin, tells us that this event was organized as a way to confront the violence that was permeating the social and economic texture of the family and community life of Altavista. It was also a way to show support to innocent community members who played no part in the conflict, but who were in the middle of the confrontation between these two gangs. The conflict between the two major gangs of Altavista was claiming many lives, especially of children and youth.

It was the murder of Julian Bedoya, "Cresty," a young mime artist, on January 9th, that sparked the massive mobilization of youth leaders and "engaged artists" (as they self-identify) from all over Medellin. Rafael Augusto, who played a pivotal role in the organization and execution of this experience, claims that this event was informed by the sense of collective consciousness that is formed when many people are affected by something in common: in this case, violence. "I was many and the many were one…that was the key to making this successful…this allowed us to combine our individual forces and become a united transformative force," claims Augusto (2015).

The Negotiation

ConVidArte was only possible due to the existing citywide network of youth leaders, artists and social activists. The little clown, Cresty, belonged to Corporacion Casa Arte of Altavista, a community organized space where members of the community have access to artistic formation, mostly on performing and visual arts, and mentoring. Cresty was know in the city both for his membership at Corporacion Casa Arte and for his skills as a mime. Thus his death, which was the result of a crossfire

138

between the two major gangs of Altavista, moved social activists from across the city to join forces to act instead of only lamenting, this all too common type of death.

Camilo Bahena, a masterful clown, was the director of Corporacion Casa Arte at that time. He and Augusto, after a long conversation about the murder of Cresty, and reflecting on whether they were "condemned to attend to funerals of little clowns, as rituals of sacrifice, to pay for the cost of being, or dreaming to be artists," took action to put into motion the network of youth leaders in a call for collective action (2016). Camilo and Augusto with the support of masses of youth that were fed up with the violence all around the city, took up the challenge to negotiate a ceasefire, at least for a couple of days, between the gangs--including the one responsible for the death of Cresty. The "excuse" they used to begin the negotiation was to ask members of the community, the armed actors included, to join them for a gigantic artistic festival: ConVidArte[2]. The community, as well as the combatants, were tired of so many deaths and of the incessant bloodshed of the past months and were ready to suspend the conflict--at least for a few days.

Camilo and Augusto found a way to meet with the leaders of the two gangs and, thereby, to serve as negotiators for a ceasefire between them. As the result of various conversations between Camilo and Augusto, who were representing a whole community of youth leaders and artists, and the leaders of the two gangs, the latter understood their role in this act of solidarity, or mourning if you will, but above all of peacebuilding. These gang leaders were not asked to put men at the disposal of the festival for protection; rather, their role was to put their arms away and join the festivities, to dance, and forget about their armed conflict for a few days. Given that the two gang leaders showed willingness to participate, the two brave negotiators exposed the feelings of sorrow that the community was experiencing due to the conflict between these two gangs. The sense of humanity began to be visible in the faces of these "poor warriors," Augusto recounts (2016). One of the gang leaders received a call from an ex-lover that, according to him has always asked him to leave the armed conflict, and this prompted him to confirm his participation saying "count on us...tell them they have my word that we will suspend our fire as of now." This happened on a Thursday, two days before the festival, which meant that if the other gang leader was to agree, the

139

ceasefire would not be for two days, but actually for four days. He agreed. All day Saturday Augusto, Camilo, and many more dreamers and peacemakers spent the day at Altavista preparing the stages for what was going to be a spectacular expression of peace, and not of war, in a conflict zone.

Reflections on ConVidArte

One of the key elements that made this negotiation possible was the leadership capacity of leaders that *learn by doing*, and that let their intuition and their lived experiences in conflict zones guide their actions. For the most part, the youth leaders we know in Medellin have spent all of their lives in neighborhoods where conflict lays at the base of the social dynamics of the community and, thereby, conditions the way community members act and interact with each other. It is important to understand that in conflict zones, such as some of today's urban neighborhoods, there is no presence of an "Other" within the community, as conventionally referenced. The gang members, the youth leaders and social organizers, the girls and boys that play on the streets, and the elderly that gossip while playing dominoes in front of their homes, all belong to the same community. Be it in one way or another, they are all embedded in the conflict and are part of the dynamics that sustain it. But as the ConVidArte experience shows, not only are members of conflict zones "sustainers" of the conflict, they are also powerful transformative agents. When their efforts are combined they can represent a threat to the culture and dynamic of violence that saturates these communities.

Augusto, Camilo and all the youth leaders and social organizers that planned ConVidArte recognized this; they conceived of the gang members as "one among them" and let themselves be guided by this finding. They helped the gang members identify themselves as part of the community, and the community as part of them. By everyone recognizing that they were one and that "one was all," they stopped the armed conflict between the two gangs that were inflicting pain to the Altavista community--themselves included. After this event, the two armed groups found a way to resolve their conflict without the piercing sound of rifles. As of today, no instance of armed conflict activity between these two gangs has been evidenced in Altavista after ConVidArte.

140

From Conflict to Peace

Conflicts persist embedded in webs of relationships. Our world is built of relationships and our relationships are built in communication (Fisher-Yoshida, 2014). Our relationships consist of a series of episodes and the quality of these episodes creates the quality of our relationships. As noted in the story of ConVidArte, these webs of relationship are what made the event and process of transformation from armed conflict to peace possible.

We can have relationships that are overall healthy and peaceful or we can have relationships that are rife with conflict. Lederach (2003) differentiates between *episodes* of conflict, which are the visible expressions of conflict and issues within a particular time frame, whereas the *epicenter* of the conflict is the web of relational patterns where these issues emerge, revealing the history of the relationship. The boundaries of an episode are not always apparent to us until there is a change that distinguishes one episode from another. So we may be in a relationship with a particular pattern or rhythm that becomes disturbed when an episode of conflict emerges. In this case the conflict becomes explicit to us. It brings certain energy to it that may differ from the nature of the relationship we had previously.

In order to change this pattern of conflict we need to change the pattern dynamics and create new episodes with better patterns of relationship. This is an ongoing process as peace is dynamic because it is embedded in the patterns of our relationship and these are ever changing (Lederach, 2003). And since we created the episodes and dynamics of our relationships whatever the quality they are, we also have the agency to change them.

In the ConVidArte case described above, we see that the initiators of the event to celebrate the life of Cresty the mime artist, and other artists who made the festivities, interrupted the pattern of violence that was so typical to life in Altavista. The event of Cresty's murder was a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 2000) for the community and artists. It shifted their perspective of continuing to accept the violence that had become the norm, to taking a creative turn and making something different. They questioned their taken for granted assumptions that violence was the

141

norm and they wanted something different. These artists were able to create new episodes as they began changing the nature of the relationships they had even if for only a few days. The experience of these new episodes would create new patterns of relationship.

Peacebuilding and the state of peace require us to use our imaginations to emerge from the conflict we are living to enter into the mystery of the unknown, which in this case is peaceful existence (Lederach, 2005). Our knowledge base is from our experience and these experiences form the current frames of reference we have. These frames make the lenses from which we understand our worlds and our relationships. In order to shift from a conflict frame to a peace frame that can be sustained, we need to change the practices we use to engage with others. Pearce (1989) identifies *resources* as the stories, images and symbols that we use to make our worlds meaningful; and *practices* as the actions we take based on these resources. Through reflexive processes our resources are expressed through our practices and our practices construct or reconstruct our resources. This is an iterative cycle and learning takes place when we are able to make explicit this process so we can be more intentional in how we act and how we shape our beliefs. Transforming the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and who we are in relation to others, changes the quality of the relationship we have to be in a conflict relationship or in a relationship of peace (Wasserman & Fisher-Yoshida, 2017).

Peacebuilding Framework

There is a framework of peacebuilding that Lederach (2005) suggests, which is built on four principles: quality of relationship, paradoxical curiosity, space for the creative act, and willingness to take risk. In this next section we will apply these four principles forming the basis of peacebuilding to the case study of ConVidArte to see the qualities they captured in their experience according to this framework. After analyzing the case we will highlight the main take aways we gleaned from this peacebuilding process.

First principle, relationship. In the first principle, *relationship*, Lederach (2005) posits that, "Peacebuilding requires a vision of relationship" (p. 35). Conflict is embedded in the web of relationships we

142

have with others both those known to us and the greater community at large, therefore, peacebuilding as well is embedded in our relationships. "The centrality of relationship provides the context and potential for breaking violence, for it brings people into the pregnant moments of the moral imagination: the space of recognition that ultimately the quality of our life is dependent on the quality of life of others" (p.35). Noticing the interdependence we have with others allows us to think beyond the boundaries of our own existence to recognize that we live in relation to others and these relationships are what constitute our communities and social worlds.

Deutsch (2014) discusses the nature of our interdependence as sinking or swimming together. If we boost others up with us then we are entering into a cooperative relationship considered win-win, whereas, bringing others down even though we go down as well is more of a lose-lose relationship. Sustainable peace needs to be a web of relationships in which we have a series of win-win dynamics realizing we are all in this together and what affects one will ripple across the community. In addition, each community consisting of a web of relationships has certain types of energy provoking specific types of actions. These energies are known as *logical forces* that stimulate certain types of communication over others (Pearce, 2007).

This communication presents itself as practices we take up as we are socialized into these communities. It creates a sense of what we "ought to do in situations such as these with the relationships we have with these types of people." In order to change the resulting practices in which we partake because of the logical forces leading to these actions, we need to change the episodes creating these logical forces. If we create episodes that prefigure, with *prefigurative forces*, different practices, we are potentially shifting the nature of our relationship from conflict to peace. The implications, or *implicative force*, this generates calls for different behaviors (Wasserman & Fisher-Yoshida, 2017). The forces are strong and embedded in the episodes of our relationship history, so it takes determination and strong consistent support to challenge existing forces toward new relational dynamics.

In the case of ConVidArte, there were relationships between the two main gangs, between the artists, between the community and the

143

gangs, community and the artists, and all of them with the mime artist, Cresty, who was murdered. They took the status of the normed relationships that had developed over the years, and decided to transform them so that they could all come together on those days to celebrate life, celebrate art, and celebrate the coexistence in the community. This meant they had to do something different to challenge the existing relationships and logical forces that led them into the pattern of behavior under which they had been living. One example of this is when Augusto and Camilo engaged in conversation with the gang leaders to secure their support in creating the truce, so this event could occur. The *contextual forces* of Altavista suggested that the gangs were in charge and the community members were mere witnesses and subjects to this rule. Engaging the gang leaders into a different type of dialogue created *implicative forces* that changed what happened next, ConVidArte (Wasserman & Fisher-Yoshida, 2017).

Second principle, paradoxical curiosity. The second principle, *paradoxical curiosity,* Lederach (2005) describes as being able to suspend judgment to explore the contradictions that appear. He talks about using *face value* and *heart value* to go beyond what is apparently contradictory. "*Face value* is the simple and direct way that things appear and are presented. . . .*Heart value* goes beyond the presentation of appearance and ventures into the way these things are perceived and interpreted by people. It explores where meaning is rooted" (p. 36). The paradox is the contrast between knowing what is, which is the face value and based on experience, as compared to the heart value of anticipating where it could be.

There are three principles in Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM), a social constructionist theory and practice that takes a communication perspective (Pearce, 2007). One of these principles is *mystery* and that is realizing that there are many unknowns in the world in which we live and sometimes we need to take leaps of faith into the abyss of what is unknown and potentially better than what currently exists. This resonates with the heart value Lederach (2005) speaks of in this principle of peacebuilding. The face value aspect of peacebuilding resonates with the principles of *coherence* and *coordination* in CMM (Pearce, 2007). Coherence is the sense making that we do to understand our social worlds, while coordination is what we do to be in sync within our

144

relationships. The resources and practices from our experience and the historical episodes we have had with others provide the foundation that determines the quality of our relationships. It is in this space that our personal and social narratives become intertwined as well. We live in stories that we tell about ourselves and the world in which we live (Wasserman & Fisher-Yoshida, 2017). Change one story and it is a change to the resources we draw upon, which in turn has a ripple effect to change other stories as well.

In terms of how this applies to ConVidArte, there were contradictions here in that two rival gangs were willing to support a temporary truce in order for there to be celebration in the streets for life and the arts. They were taking time out of their perpetuation of violence to put a hold on it in order to allow this event to occur. And even though there were high levels of violence in the area of Altavista, there was a profound love of this mime Cresty, so that even perpetrators of violence were upset with the violence on him. An interesting development from the event is that although the gangs placed a temporary truce on violence in order for the festival to occur, the community residents who now tasted freedom again were not as willing to accept the gangs rule over their living conditions any longer. They of course had not directly supported the violence, but their not openly challenging it in the past gave implicit permission for the gangs to remain relevant and in charge. This was no longer to be the case as the community members ran the gangs out of their powerful positions once the festival and truce took place. The gangs did not have as strong a chokehold on the community after the event and perhaps they were ready for this change, too.

Third principle, find space for the creative act. Providing space requires a predisposition, a kind of attitude and perspective that opens up, even invokes, the spirit and belief that creativity is humanly possible. Fundamentally, this requires a belief that the creative act and response are permanently within reach and, most important, are always accessible, even in settings where violence dominates and through its oppressive swath creates its greatest lie: the lands it inhabits are barren. Artists shatter this lie (Lederach, 2005, p. 38).

For ConVidArte it was artists who came out to celebrate the life of one of their own that was taken from them by this violence. They had the

145

vision and wherewithal to take a risk because for them the beauty of what they do, how they express themselves in relationship to others, is life giving and this was more important for them to communicate than to be fearful for that day. They allowed themselves to be in the creative moment and suspend any apprehension they may have previously held. "Creativity and imagination, the artist giving birth to something new, propose to us avenues of inquiry and ideas about change that requires to think about how we know the world, how we are in the world, and most important, what in the world is possible" (Lederach, 2005, p. 39).

From a CMM perspective they were creating new contextual forces to bring about new realities of what could transpire in that community (Pearce, 2007). The context we are in puts forth certain logical forces of the types of activities that should occur in this type of environment. The artists were changing the dynamics of the context of the Altavista community so that celebrations of life could take place, rather than the dominant narrative of violence. Through their artistic initiatives they were transforming the stories of violence and inhibition to stories of life and artistic expression.

Fourth principle, the willingness to risk. "*To risk* is to step into the unknown without any guarantee of success or even safety. Risk by its very nature is mysterious. It is mystery lived, for it ventures into lands the are not controlled or charted" (Lederach, 2005, p. 39). There is a certain irony here in that when we work with people in communities that have known violence for so long, it is living in peaceful co-existence that is the mystery, the unknown. This means there are new ways of communicating and being with each that need to be learned because the known is relating to each other through violence. These are the stories we want to transform. New framing questions could be, "What does it mean for me to live in peace with other members of my community? What does it look like? What do I have to do differently to change my life narrative from one of a violent existence to one of a peaceful existence?"

In ConVidArte the artists were willing to take risks and re-story the violence of Altavista into a new story of creativity, artistic expression and community building. The mystery for them was how would it be for them to be in peaceful coexistence when all they had known for an extended period of time was violence and fear? Was it something stored in a

146

recessive part of their memory that they were able to call upon or would it be experienced as a new phenomenon? This would imply that if it were a new phenomenon, to live in peace, then they would have to learn these behaviors and ways of being. They did this by trusting the process and presence of their artistic expression. They did not need to think through every detail, but instead to believe their art was a natural human expression and one that would bring healing to a divided community.

In CMM the role of mystery allows for the space of our imagination and responding to questions beginning with "What if?" It opens up doors and paths to rewriting our personal and social narratives as we continue to make new social worlds of peaceful communities. Once these new ways of being in relation to one another begin to be formed, they develop new resources that inform our practices of how we engage one another. And these new stories and ways of being are generative and continue to develop over time until they become deeply embedded into our psyche and are no longer new.

These four principles of peacebuilding that Lederach (2005) puts forth offer us a framework that can demonstrate that when these principles exist then we have strategic community building. This type of community building is intentional and at the same time this intentionality creates spaces for the imagination to take root and for community members to work in tandem to create environments they can call home in which they take pride.

Conclusion

In thinking through the ConVidArte experience as a bottom-up, grassroots experiment in transforming communities of conflict into communities of peace, certain elements surface. These are *ripeness, creativity* and *relationships*. For the first one, there seemed to be an element of ripeness or readiness that pushed the citizens of the communities and fellow artists of Cresty into action. We might ask ourselves then, what are the conditions that bring communities to conditions of ripeness? If we can identify some of these characteristics, then perhaps we can foster ripeness in situations in order to push them toward action. Four methods were identified as being applicable to

147

bringing parties toward ripeness to engage in constructive conflict resolution (Coleman, Fisher-Yoshida, Stover, Hacking & Bartoli, 2008):

1. *Increasing awareness of the mutually shared problems and interests* the parties have. There is an interdependence amongst them that may not be recognized, which can foster initiatives for change. In the case of ConVidArte, the humanity of all involved parties was highlighted and they recognized that they all suffer or rejoice together.
2. *Reducing the fear* the parties had of each other and their environment. Once the organizers were able to recognize the humanity in all parties and bring them together in celebration of life and the arts, previous barriers of "us and them" faded.
3. *Engendering trust* is one factor that is critical, but takes time to build. After so many years of the relationships in Altavista being prone to violence, many felt under threat. The initial trust was given to allow ConVidArte to happen, first from each of the gang leaders toward the other, and then from the community members and artists.
4. *Eliciting and responding to needs* of the community members. When Cresty was killed people all around were grieving. They needed solace and they needed closure. ConVidArte was a way to foster that and in turn, begin rebuilding the community.

Constructively engaging parties in episodes that build positive relationships shifts the mindsets of the parties to want to continue engaging in this manner. The parties in ConVidArte began creating new episodes that fostered different stories about each other and how they are in relation to one another. These became the building blocks for new and constructive relational dynamics.

This sentiment of ripeness was also felt by the more active perpetrators of violence, the two rival gangs. They, too, were feeling tired from the demands of being on constant alert to spring into violence at any moment, in addition to, losing some of their loved ones as well. Perhaps they were looking for an excuse to create new episodes of cooperation to end the violence and this invitation of having a truce for the festival was that opening. The rewriting of the personal and social stories of all involved in making ConVidArte happen allowed them to continue the truce

148

long after the festival came and went. The more they lived without conflict, in a peaceful, thriving community, the more they were able to continue along that trajectory reinforcing these new narratives.

A second element that surfaced, is the role of the arts and imagination. Altavista was a community where people walked in the streets only if they needed to get from point A to point B. No one lingered in the streets and there were no signs of life in the streets, such as playgrounds and parks filled with children or food venders along the road. However, ConVidArte changed all that. For the first time in many years food vendors came to the streets to sell their wares to all of the participants and attendees at the festival. Once the population experienced this new sense of freedom, they did not want to go back into hiding. The community was also reminded of what it means to be alive and enjoy the arts and culture. This is very much in alignment with the four principles of peacebuilding Lederach (2005) put forth, especially the principle of finding space for the creative act. ConVidArte, from conception to how it was carried out, was one creative act in a creative space that had long lasting ripple effects on the community.

The third element, relationships, cannot be underestimated. We are all part of social webs of relationships and every nuance is felt throughout the system. When these relationships are embedded in conflict all of the characteristics of destructive interactions are highlighted. We lose sight of each other's humanity and our own suffering becomes greatest. However, when given opportunities to transform these relationships to ones filled with constructive engagement, we recognize the humanity in each other. This brings forth different sets of resources and practices, so that we develop more empathy toward each other. These positive engagements create new stories and new episodes that foster other episodes. Our stories of each other change and the nature of our social worlds change in turn. We can then tell stories of cooperation that we could not previously tell. We are all social beings and live in relation to one another although at times we lose sight of these dynamics.

In order for any peacebuilding to be sustainable there needs to be glimpses into what the possibilities might be. This calls forth a willingness on the part of parties involved in conflict to let go of the familiar and venture into experiencing the mystery of peace. This requires a leap of

149

faith and for those involved to engage their imaginations in considering what if? In present day Colombia these are just the types of questions they could be asking, as they have agency in designing their post-conflict future.

Endnotes

[1] All the quotations in this section are part of our field notes drawn from conversations we have had with Augusto Restrepo about ConVidArte between 2014 and 2017.

[2] ConVidArte is a spanish compound words that was created for the purpose of this event that combines the following words: Coexistence, Life and Art.

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150

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