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"We Say, When We've Reached One We've Reached the World...but What if We Missed One?"

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I met Michelle Black in January 2017 when she was a student in my Conflict Resolution class at Borough of Manhattan Community College, CUNY¹ where I am an assistant professor. On the first day of class when we introduced ourselves, Michelle said that she was from Northern Ireland (a region in the north-east corner of the island of Ireland), her family was Protestant (in other words British), and that her DNA analysis showed that she was of Irish descent. She mentioned her Irish heritage several times with joy and pride. I was somewhat confused by this initially because it seems incongruous given the eight-hundred plus years of conflict and war and most recently the Troubles maintaining deep divisions between the Protestant / English and Catholic / Irish communities for generations. Perhaps it was a result of living outside of the region for over a decade, first in Dublin and then in London before moving to New York City? Meanwhile, in her absence Northern Ireland has gone through a remarkable transformation from violent conflict to relative peace since the 1998 Good

Friday Agreement that set up a power-sharing government of equal numbers of Catholics and Protestants along with a great deal of hard work at the civil society level. Could Michelle's desire and even pride to self-identify as both of these formerly irreconcilable identities be a product of these reconciliation efforts?

'The Troubles' is a euphemism for a period or periods of conflict and violence in Ireland. The origin date and duration of the Troubles are also contested history in the North of Ireland. For some, the Troubles began "almost a millennium ago" or with Partition followed by the establishment of the Republic of Ireland in the mid-twentieth century, or in 1969 (Santino, 2001) or the Civil Rights Movement in 1968. Generally speaking, the term is used to refer to the period 1968/9 - 1998 and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement.

It was this successful peace process that holds till today that originally inspired me to want to spend time in the region to understand better what was required for this kind of societal transformation. From 2006 to 2009 I lived in Northern Ireland while working on my PhD at Ulster University, so I felt an immediate affinity with Michelle. It was not until nearly the end of the semester, though, that I finally heard Michelle's story. Given the course theme of conflict resolution, she offered to give a presentation to the class on her life growing up during the Troubles in one of the worst affected areas, the Shankill Road in Belfast, which is the capital of Northern Ireland. The Shankill Road, often called simply "the Shankill", is a working class, predominantly Loyalist² area. We arranged for her to give her presentation on the same day as coincidentally, there was a screening on another CUNY campus of a documentary called *How to Defuse a Bomb: The Project Children Story*³ (2016) about a program that took Protestant and Catholic youth out of Northern Ireland to the United States during the Troubles for homestays of six weeks during the summer "on holiday schemes" or "community relations holidays" as they are called there.

Until today, most children in urban areas in North of Ireland live in neighborhoods segregated by religious or political identity and more than ninety percent attend schools segregated by religion and for the most part so are their teachers. This lack of meaningful daily contact with "the other" protracts the distrust and fear that goes along with conflict. To address this and other challenges around coexistence, equity and equality, there is peace education and conflict resolution programming during and after

school and summers designed, according to the Northern Ireland Central Community Relations Unit, to foster “cross-community contact, mutual understanding, and awareness of cultural diversity.”⁴ Many cross-community (the term used to describe co-existence initiatives) activities bring similar age groups of Protestants and Catholics) together in the schools, first through Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) and since 2007 through citizenship curriculum mandates (McEvoy, 2007). In addition, there are many non-formal education programs and organizations focusing on cross-community programming such as the Verbal Arts Centre and The Junction in Derry/Londonderry, and WAVE Trauma Centre that implement cross-community programs for youth or adults across the region. In addition, institutions like the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, R.E.A.C.H. Across, and Public Achievement and Youth Action Northern Ireland focus on civic engagement.⁵

However, the “community relations holidays” aimed to go even further by taking at-risk youth out of the more violent areas in Northern Ireland, especially during the summer “marching season”⁶ when there was increased tension and conflict. There were over twenty different initiatives in the 1970s through the early 1990s taking equal numbers of Catholic and Protestant children to Europe, Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland, and other parts of Northern Ireland for anywhere from five days to six weeks. The circumstances varied along with the location; some of the youth lived in summer camps while others were hosted by local families. Also, depending on the program, they were sightseers or required to participate in structured programs involving games, sports, or hiking. As all the trips were short term, reconciliation between the two religious identity groups was not considered by the funding bodies. Nevertheless, the trips were spoken of as a positive worthwhile experience and this is reflected in the literature (Riley & Trew, 1994; Smith & Murray, 1993; Trew, 1989). However, until I met Michelle, to the best of my knowledge, I had not known anyone who had personally taken part.

Prior to seeing the documentary, Michelle was very excited and told me that she was in contact with the filmmakers because she had been on a similar program run by the Irish Children’s Fund when she was twelve years old and again at age sixteen. When the documentary was over I looked for her, but she was already gone. I found out later that she had felt very emotional and left quickly. Since the screening, we have spoken

several times about her reaction and response and this educational reflection is an outcome of this ongoing conversation. As an educator, I have always believed that when I reach one I have reached the world. At the same time, Michelle's response to the documentary, as someone who has experienced the direct violence of the Troubles, has compelled me to pause and reflect on whether reaching one is enough and whether I need to think more about those whom, unintentionally perhaps but nevertheless, I may have missed.

Michelle's Story

I was born in the early 80's in Belfast, Northern Ireland at the height of the 'Troubles.' I was born into the Protestant community and spent the early part of my childhood living in one area, mixing with only Protestants, attending an all Protestant school with only Protestant friends. I knew Northern Ireland was at war and it wasn't unusual to see the army patrolling the streets day in and day out, bomb scares happened on a regular basis and my community was built upon the protection of its families inside the barricade that surrounded us. I lived on a street with one of the most dangerous interface walls⁷ in Belfast. I witnessed my uncle get shot by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in 1991 and then another uncle was shot in 1993 so I had really become effected by the continuing Troubles in Belfast.

I was only 13 years old on 23rd October 1993, when a bomb went off on the Shankill Road⁸ in Belfast, Northern Ireland, killing nine people and also killing one of the bombers. I remember vividly being on the Shankill Road at the time of the bomb as I worked in a local shop nearby and seeing the rubble, the smoke, the men with dirty hands and scrunched up faces after having had to search through the rubble to help find bodies and rescue survivors. I remember hearing them speak about people that they knew who they had helped pull from the debris.

Later that day I was to find out that amongst the dead was my good school friend, Leanne Murray. I had attended two years of school with Leanne and on July of that year I was involved in a cross-community project and Leanne was also part of my group. I was extremely sad and felt deeply traumatized by the death of Leanne Murray and it still has a massive effect on me today. The project was called the Irish Children's Fund and it set out to place children together from the opposite side of the community in a mutual environment in Chicago in order to help with rehabilitation and to try and grow a deeper understanding for the opposite side. I was placed with

children from the other side of the barricade from me which happened to be Ardoyne.

The experience was one that has stayed with me for many years. Along with Leanne, I was given the opportunity to meet Catholics for the first time in a neutral environment. I was soon to find that these children lived just like me, had similar lives to me, had relationships just like me and literally lived a stones' through away beyond a tall 10-foot high wall.

It really was eye opening for me. But then I remember thinking that the idea I would be able to keep in contact with these girls once I returned home was crazy. How could I? Yes, these girls were just like me, but they were also from troubled backgrounds, families heavily involved in the conflict, and also lived in communities where hatred for the other side was rife. I felt that I almost lived a different existence in America, one where religion didn't exist. But I always knew that this was not the case back home.

If I wanted to remain friends in Belfast, where would be able to meet once back home? How could we ever integrate and build on our relationships? Even if we wanted to, how could we? I lived in an area where families were regularly burned out of their houses for committing such crimes. I remember meeting one girl called Theresa and I remember leaving the project thinking that I would never see her again. In fact, I *knew* that I would never be allowed to see her again. This was the reality of it.

So twenty-four years after my initial trip to Chicago, I was then invited to watch a documentary on a similar project named "Project Children", this program was based in New York in the early 80's and like my project, invited children to America with the hope to connect them with the opposite side of the community, I was excited about being able to watch the documentary as I would have loved to understand their project and find out the details of how these projects change our society and the people in it. I hoped that it would show me great things that they had done and I felt proud as I was also part of a similar project.

Watching the documentary on the cross-community project was very emotional for me so I had asked a friend of mine to join me as I thought the footage would be extremely difficult to watch. I had seen the trailer and it had scenes of the violence that took place in Northern Ireland and briefly

showed the Shankill bomb, which I didn't think was weird as it was indeed a massive attack that changed lives including mine. When I sat down to watch it, I felt an extreme sense of emotions as I was in a room of people watching real footage of my growing up in Belfast. Then as soon as I heard the name Thomas Begley, I froze.

For twenty-four years that name had terrified me, a name that I had pushed to the back of my mind, one that I hoped would never be repeated *he* was a killer, a terrorist, the evil person who killed my friend back in 1993.⁹ Then it hit me harder. I was in shock -- he was part of *that* program. Twenty-four years after my friend was murdered, I was sitting in a room listening to people talk about how he was involved in the cross-community project. These people had actually met Thomas Begley and were talking about him like he was a normal person.

I wanted to stand up and shout "MURDERER." I felt ultimate betrayal at even being in the same room with so many of these people. I really wanted to leave straight away. I thought of Leanne and the other victims of the bomb. My mind drifted back to that awful day. How would my friends and family feel back home about me even giving this project a minute of my time? What was I doing here? I felt so sick.

Then I realized, of course, this was proof that the project didn't work and couldn't work. Thomas Begley did the complete opposite to what they could have ever imagined a child could do. He murdered innocent people.

This was all very emotional and really too ironic. I was indeed watching a documentary on a cross-community project started by a man from a bomb disposal unit in Upstate New York who housed Thomas Begley for a summer with the hope of rehabilitating him only to find that he did the uttermost betrayal and blew himself up in a bomb a few years later which killed my friend. I couldn't believe the events that had unfolded.

Over the next few days, I really got to thinking about the effects of the project. I thought of myself and how I was faced with challenges on my return to Belfast. For example, I couldn't meet up with any of my other friends from the other side of the community. How would Thomas Begley have ever been allowed to do that. I felt bad that I was even trying to put myself in his shoes. But, Begley was from Ardoyne, the other side of the

barricade from me. I knew what my area was like back then, we couldn't have Catholic friends, we were not allowed to go into Catholic communities. Like me, he would have returned to a community filled with prejudice and hatred for Protestants even though he had just spent a summer mixing with them and making friendships, how could he have ever been allowed the chance to turn around his hatred. Even, if he had wanted to keep up a relationship with any of his Protestant friends I am sure it would have been extremely difficult.

I also feel that maybe this program let Thomas Begley down, it made me think about why, unlike me, Thomas Begley didn't get a chance to go back to the States when he was slightly older, why this cross-community trip was a one off (a one-time opportunity) for him. Had the organizers followed through and monitored Begley, would the outcome have been the same? Did Begley just become another boy who they hoped to help or was it that when they realized he couldn't be helped they just gave up? Why did Begley go on to commit such crimes? Did the program have an effect on him so much so that he found it necessary to turn extremist to prove his loyalty to his side? Either way, as someone who is deeply affected by the Troubles but also someone who has been given the opportunity to take part in one of these programs, I feel confident enough to say that Begley was indeed missed, he slipped through the net, he was let down. And for me to say that is a statement I thought that I would never ever hear myself say.

Reflections on Youth Peace Building Efforts

During our conversations about the Shankill Bombing and Michelle's reaction to the documentary, I noticed that Michelle became better able to articulate her feelings and also, became more empathetic towards Thomas Begley as for instance when she says that Project Children failed Begley by not providing the support he needed given the amount of family and peer pressure that in all likelihood he would have faced after participating in a project intended to bring him together with Catholics. To what degree her ability to think critically and empathize can be attributed to her experience with the Irish Children Fund is impossible to say. At the same time, she says she also feels some sense of betrayal to her friend and her community for no longer seeing him as only a villain. These are very real issues Michelle raises about sustainability of the potential transformative experience these projects afford. For instance, she told me that as a participant of the Irish

Children's Fund programs, she went with the other Protestant youth to Corrymeela,¹⁰ Northern Ireland's oldest peace and reconciliation organization, several times to check-in and reinforce the experience of the summer holiday trips. In addition, the Protestant youth met monthly in Belfast so that while they may not have been maintaining relationships with 'the other' they were not becoming involved in the violent conflict or other trouble, either. This is called Single Identity work the purpose of which is to enable open discussion within an identity community to further enable cross-community engagement.¹¹ Unfortunately, in practice these initiatives do not go to the next phase. This is in part because in many instances there is no desire to take the risks involved such as fear of entering *the other's* territory. This also occurs because of segregated schooling throughout Northern Ireland (noted above) and segregated communities in urban areas. As a result, those who need most to hear what *the other* has to say are unwilling or unable to because of structural divisions within the society (Galtung, 1990).

Perhaps recognizing these limitations, Dennis Mulcahy, the co-founder of Project Children, notes that the intention of this summer away program was not to "bring peace to Northern Ireland"¹² but to give the children another perspective of what is possible in terms of people with different backgrounds and ethnicities living and working side by side. Project Children, it seems did not offer this kind of follow up support for the young people upon their return home. However, in collaboration with the Psychology Department at Queens University, Belfast an extensive and thorough research project evaluating attitudes of the Project Children youth and their parents prior and post summer holiday program was done in 1987 and a report issued.¹³ I found most telling that many of the parents reported that their children were doing better in school and cared more for their surroundings after their summer away (Trew, 1988). This may be an indication that they saw possibilities for a future that they had not considered before. Furthermore, from the documentary and what Michelle has told me, it seems that in both organizations, many of the young people stayed in touch with their 'American families' even if they did not or could not cross religious identity lines. At least that is what they write on their Facebook pages.

My students at an urban public community college are very similar demographically to the young people growing up during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. I know that I do not reach them all and this is for many

reasons ranging from not trying hard enough myself to meet them where they are to indifference on their part. To what extent am I responsible for this? To what extent is the systemic injustice of our education system? In preparation for writing this educational reflection, I have been in touch with Karen Trew of Queens University Belfast, one of the primary researchers on the effects of the holiday scheme (project) on the youth participants. In our email correspondence about the ethical dilemma of whether reaching one is enough, she wrote:

[T]he fact that at least one of the 2000 (sic) children who followed the project became involved in the violent conflict is not surprising - I am sure there are many more who were directly or indirectly involved in what was part of the fabric of life for them - what is wonderful is to see how such a small scheme developed and grew so that many were involved and at least experienced the benefits of a break from the conflict and also were inspired to continue their education.¹⁴

At this point I am no closer to an answer to the question of whether missing one makes meaningless the otherwise effective education for peace I do... or try to do. I tell my students that answers are great, but the important thing is to be critical thinkers and continue asking questions. With this in mind, I think it is worthwhile keeping the question as a rhetorical reminder to not be satisfied to merely reach one but to strive to reach the world.

Endnotes

¹ The City University of New York (CUNY) is a public university made up of twenty-four colleges on separate campuses across the five boroughs of New York City.

² In the Northern Ireland context, Loyalist refers to those who give “tacit or actual support [for] the use of force by paramilitary groups” to remain part of Britain (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/glossary.htm> - L)

³ <https://www.facebook.com/Project-Children-Documentary-383132658521387/>

⁴ <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/ccru/relations/relations.htm>

⁵ Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/csc/reports/mutual.htm> / Verbal Arts Centre <http://theverbal.co> / The Junction <http://www.thejunction-ni.org> / WAVE

Trauma Centre <http://www.wavetraumacentre.org.uk/home> / Ulster Folk and Transport Museum <https://www.nmni.com/our-museums/ulster-folk-and-transport-museum/Home.aspx> / R.E.A.C.H. Across <http://www.reach-across.co.uk> / Public Achievement <http://www.communityni.org/organisation/public-achievement#.WdqJvTBrxPY> / Youth Action Northern Ireland <http://www.youthaction.org/>

⁶ The annual Loyalist parades are held between Easter Monday and the end of September and commemorate victories of the colonization of Ireland by England. For this reason and because the parades often go through Catholic neighborhoods, there can be violence; <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/csc/reports/parade3.htm>.

⁷ What Michelle refers to as an interface wall are also called peace walls that separate predominantly Republican and Nationalist Catholic neighborhoods from predominantly Loyalist and Unionist Protestant neighborhoods in urban areas like Belfast. Their purpose is to limit intercommunal violence but they also limit opportunities for people to meet each other. They range in height and length and some have gates that are open during the day but closed at night. According to the Belfast Interface Project, as of 2012, there were nearly one-hundred barriers separating different Protestant and Catholic areas in Belfast alone.; www.belfastinterfaceproject.org.

⁸ The Shankill Bombing as it has come to be known, was a bomb planted by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in a shop on the Shankill Road on October 23, 1993. The bomb exploded prematurely killing ten people including one of the bombers, Thomas Begley. Loyalist paramilitaries took revenge shooting two Catholic men one of whom died. <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/events/peace/pp9398.htm>.

⁹ Thomas Begley (age 22) brought a bomb into a fish store on the Shankill Road on October 23, 1993. Although he died when the bomb exploded prematurely, also killing nine other people including two children, it was not an intentional suicide bombing.

¹⁰ <http://www.corrymeela.org/>

¹¹ <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/ccru/research/crc/fitzduff93.htm>

¹² The 1987 Project Children Brochure cited by Trew (1988).

¹³ There is little published on the summer holiday projects between Northern Ireland and the United States. However, Karen Trew, Researcher in the Psychology Department at Queens University, Belfast has done several research projects and written about the programs, but they have not been

published. Dr. Trew has been helpful sending reports to me and her willingness to discuss her personal opinions of the efficacy of the projects.

¹⁴ Email correspondence between Jill Strauss and Karen Trew 7/5/2017.

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