

**MANY FACES . . . MANY VOICES . . . WHO WILL LISTEN?**

**By**

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*Our work has many faces, as do our problems.*

*Though we speak with many voices and in many languages -*

*Our hearts beat as one,*

*The rhythm is the same.*

***The World Forum challenges us to listen with our hearts,***

***as well as to use our voices, as we set about to change the world -***

***Heart-by-heart . . . One person at a time.***

*We are the voices of children –*

*whose voices cannot otherwise be heard.*

**OUR MISSION: Interpret the WOFO experience to others.**

At the 2005 World Forum on Early Care and Education (aka WOFO) held in Montreal, Canada we heard many questions. These questions were not academic. What we heard were words that came from others' hearts and as they entered our minds they changed our hearts. This document is our opportunity to share that experience with you and in so doing, perhaps touch your heart, too.

**MANY VOICES**

It was day one and the opening plenary session had begun. After watching a montage of images of children from around the globe, we settled back to listen to one another's stories.

Felicien, a small man wearing thick glasses, told us about being imprisoned and losing his wife during the Rwandan war - then asked a question that would continue to be asked throughout our time together:

*'What can we in early childhood do to help families when their society is disintegrated and divided?'*

His was not an academic musing.

Next, Ali Nashat, a physician from Jerusalem, described watching his newborn son die because an ambulance could not get through due to shooting on the streets of Jerusalem - then he asked us:

*'What did my 5-hour-old child do to be killed?  
How much closer to security did his death bring anyone?'*

Over 700 of us, from more than 80 countries, sat and listened in that darkened auditorium - but had no answers. We could only wipe our own tears - as our hearts ached with his.

Then Martha Arango took the podium and presented a different question, one she had been asked at her husband's funeral by a little boy. He said:

*'Why are you crying? He just died. He wasn't killed.'*

In her country of Colombia, a South American nation racked with violence, such a grim interpretation was the one this small boy had formed to understand his world. She told of another child who had asked his father:

*“If I don’t get killed, then what do I die of?”*

What are our answers to these children? What kind of world have we created for them?

Paul Connolly of Northern Ireland concluded his remarks that morning with five questions: those questions which had originated in the fall of 2004 at the Working Forum Belfast, a meeting of around 200 people who work in some of the world’s most violent places, as they had gathered together inside of Belfast’s most bullet-riddled hotel.

The questions were:

1. How do we help (support / care for young children where communities we disintegrating?
2. How do we support the caregivers who are also suffering?
3. What role can we as ECE educators play in this larger global picture?
4. How can we engage families and communities and work together?
5. How can we be advocates for children: speak on behalf of children and their needs?

And thus we began. Our mission: to listen; to hear with our hearts as well as our minds; and to discover answers - or at least form new and additional questions to guide us on our rickety path toward a peace, a peace that remains elusive in all parts of our world.

## **MANY FACES**

Over the next days we all lived in this place called WOFO. Few of us could have told you what the weather was like outside our hotel doors or have described any of Montreal’s splendors. From morning until night we lived in this place of many voices and

many faces. We learned about each other and about the many faces of violence and the countless ways it harms - as well as connects - us all.

### **POVERTY AND ABUSE**

The face of poverty's violence looms large. Joan Lombardi, as she introduced the *Global Leaders for Young Children* and their projects, reminded us that there are over 1 million children in the world who live in extreme poverty. In South Africa alone, 80% of the population is poverty-stricken. But poverty is only one face of violence.

Family violence is yet another of violence's many guises. Such violence exists from the shores of Ireland to the deepest valleys of Katmandu.

### **DISEASE / COMMERCIAL EXPLOITATION/ WAR**

Violence shows its face in the form of disease such as Africa's HIV-AIDS pandemic where, even as Michael Kelly was speaking before us, he pointed out that in the 10 minutes of his presentation just elapsed; another 150 people had become newly infected with the HIV-AIDS virus.

Violence appears in the suffering brought about by, what Wayne Eastman of Canada referred to as the 'under nutrition' of children in developed countries, whose diets are increasingly low in nutrients and high in nutritionless processed foods that put commercial profits ahead of children's needs.

Violence comes in the form of war and armed conflict such as that described by Kishor of Nepal, as he told us the story of a child who became ill in order to avoid going to school after seeing a soldier in Nepal's insurgency-torn country crush a child with a stone while on his walk to school the previous day. As painful as this story was to hear – Kishor's soft, sad voice as he told it, was even more poignant.

Violence stares back at us from the research of Paul Connolly and others in Northern Ireland that showed how children as young as three years old expressed a preference for either the Irish or English flag, depending upon whether he or she were raised in a Catholic or Protestant family - thus continuing age-old patterns of hatred and mistrust, passing them forward to a new generation along with the nightly bowls of boiled potatoes.

### **IDENTITY AND SELF WORTH**

We also heard about internal violence - how it invades a peoples' sense of self as Sasa Milic of Montenegro described the way Roma children (often known as gypsies) are taught to be ashamed of their language and that those who do succeed in joining mainstream society, often do so at the cost of distancing themselves from their Roma heritage.

Carol Beaulieu's story of her experience of exclusion as an Aboriginal person in Canada, or the devastation her father suffered from being forced into a government-run residential school as a child, an experience that planted in him deep and lifelong seeds of shame, put additional faces to violence.

Then tall and calm, Alex Diablo, an elder of the Mohawk nation, stood up and recounted having his mouth washed out with soap as a child, for speaking his native tongue. His words, spoken with quiet dignity – silenced us all. None of this had happened in a distant past - but within the past few decades.

### **NATURE'S VIOLENCE**

And finally the violence that nature brings in so many forms, such as Sri Lankan, Amara's, description of seawater on the day of December's tsunami: its pitch black color,

foul smell and what it felt like for this tiny four-foot tall, sari-clad woman to walk through thick mud as it oozed up over her knees.

Ken Jaffe, of the United States, showed us the tents standing in blistering heat without shade that 5 months after this tsunami, still house families of up to ten people in a single tent.

Few of these images or statistics intruded upon our hearts though, in the way that a few simple words spoken by Widarm Wijana did, when she described and showed slides of the devastation done to her Indonesian homeland on that Sunday morning of December 26, 2004:

*“Is broken. Please help us. Everything broken. “*

We listened. We let our hearts feel and hear. Changes were happening deep inside. Would we remain the same on the outside – when inside so much was shifting? We moved forward, but as Dato Napsiah of Malaysia reminded us:

*‘Peace and harmony do not come on a silver platter-you have to work at it.’*

And we did - and we are – and we will. WOFO moved forward.

## **THE CASUALTIES**

Duane Dennis of the United States reminded us that any violence impacts the caregivers as well as those being cared for, and that we must first help those who give care, for them to be able to offer it to others.

Michael Kelly made this need more graphic as he helped us to understand the broad impact of HIV-AIDS on African families and society. Because HIV-AIDS is killing men and women in the prime of lives (ages 25-45) the order of care has been reversed. With 12.1 million orphans in Africa, this loss of life means that the very old,

those who are traditionally being taken care of - are now the caregivers. 40% of the orphaned children of Uganda live with grandparents, most of whom are women, and as of 2002, one-third or all orphans in Africa were being cared for by grandparents.

Where grandparents or other family members are unavailable or the affected family has become ostracized, this task of care giving falls onto the children themselves, with as many as 2% of households in Zambia being headed by children 14 or younger.

*The weakest of society: the elderly and children –  
are caring for the youngest and orphaned.*

Jolly Nyeko of Uganda told of an 82-year-old grandmother who was caring for 5 grandchildren, the youngest only 8 months old. Because the grandmother had lost her sight, the only way she could know it was time to change this baby was by smell. She had to rely on her 2-year-old granddaughter to guide them to the local community center. But it was here, in this tiny space - that hope entered.

Those involved in Jolly's project were able to restore partial sight to this aging grandmother. A small but HUGE act! As Jolly said:

*"It might be a drop in the ocean - but it is changing the life of someone."*

Even more hopeful is the amazing breadth of humanity that people display. Jackie Hayden of Australia asked Susan, an elderly woman in Namibia with no children of her own but who had fulfilled a deathbed promise to her friend by raising her friend's child, and was now caring for that child's child, when she too became orphaned by AIDS:

*"How does it feel to care for such a child?"*

Her response:

*“What do you mean? I love her.”*

### **‘US’ – NOT ‘THEM’**

As speaker after speaker came forward, it became clear that none of them were speaking *just* about Africa, Northern Ireland or the destruction of villages in Asia.

*What is happening anywhere – is happening to us all.*

The spread of HIV-AIDS in Africa was reflected in Reeta Sonawat’s (of Mumbai, India) words that described the rate of HIV infection that has risen in her country from hundreds to thousands, in only two years time. I think about that as I recall reading in my Seattle newspaper in the United States, that HIV-AIDS infections are on the rise here – and I begin to understand that HIV-AIDS in Africa or India is not about ‘*them*’ but about ‘*us*’, too.

When Eleanor talked about the ‘troubles’ in her native Northern Ireland, and described racial attacks, bullying and intolerance, my mind moved to my own country once again, with America’s red-state/blue-state; conservative/liberal; Democrat/Republican divisions. We weren’t talking only about Northern Ireland, – these are ‘our’ issues, too – all of us.

When lives are lost, spirits harmed and diminished or compassion is lacking - not only do the direct victims of that violence suffer – but *we all suffer*.

*Violence connects us – wherever it happens.*

### **THE POWER OF SILENCE**

Martin Luther King said that:

*“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”*

Eleanor of Northern Ireland referred to her society's 'culture of silence', in which topics become taboo. The Irish have not cornered this market of 'silence'.

Michael Kelly tells of the social isolation and stigma of HIV-AIDS, when it is regarded as morally wrong, and how such judgments extend beyond those infected -to their families and caregivers. This isolation and 'silence' leave the task of interpreting what is happening to them and their families up to young children who possess few skills for doing so.

When the 'rule of silence' prevails children have no answers for:

*"Why are my parents always sick?"; "Why don't we celebrate festivals?"; Why did they take my mommy away in an ambulance?"; "Why do I take so many medicines?"; "Why do other children run away from me?" "Why do my siblings get to stay home and I can't?"*

Instead of answers children come up with their own interpretations: *"My mother doesn't want me anymore.";* *"They put my father in a big hole and now I live here."* ('Here' being a 'safe house', a residential compound enclosed with barbed wire, a place from which infected children rarely leave); or their futures become sad reflections of the present *"When I grow up I want to stay home with my children and give them lots of food,"* or grim reminders *"[I want to be] a person who digs holes,"* (the implication: a gravedigger).

Michael exhorted us to break this silence.

*"Becoming an orphan is a slow and painful business."*

A child looking after a sick parent is at high risk of infection not just from HIV-AIDS but also from other opportunistic ailments such as thrush or tuberculosis. Children

do not know how to protect themselves. They want to be near their parent or family members.

*Silence will not protect them.*

## **WHO AM I?**

Connection brings up another aspect of violence. For all the ways in which we are connected - there are many in which we are different. Cultural violence leads to a loss of connection to *'who we are'* deepening the roots of damage we do to one another.

Whether you came to be called *'Bruce Iron Shirt'*, as one Alberta, Canadian man, a member of the *Black Foot Nation* who had this name handed down to him because his father had been wearing an 'armored shirt' when he was given his 'travel card' (a document without which his father would not have been able to move about Canada up until the later part of the 1900's); or one of the Roma children living as a refugee in Montenegro, youngsters who are often referred to by derogatory names such as gitan or gypsy, less than 10% of whom are still in school by high school; or a woman in a male-dominated society such as much of Albania where Ingrid Jones tells us that women need permission from men to do anything: from taking the children to school, to shopping; to even going for a walk. All of these people experience a violence of 'self', an assault on *'who they are'* and a diminishment of their worth as human beings. How do we claim *'who we are?'*

Felicien said that:

*"War sows the seeds of fear; restlessness; uncertainty and despair."*

He asked how could he *'rebuild his children's confidence in family and society'* when everything around them was disintegrating?

The same question in a different form comes when Reeta Sonowat describes ‘*a lost childhood*’ for those facing the ravages of HIV-AIDS.

It comes in still another form when a child whose parents have been killed or disappeared when, as Amara told us, some people were pulled along canals, away from their villages and had no way to get back to their loved ones after December’s tsunami.

*Who am I?*

*Do I deserve to be?*

*What is left when there is no one - or nothing left?*

From this new set of questions come new beams of hope.

Carol Beauleau, working on behalf of the Aboriginal people of Canada, along with others, has produced a set of videos called: *Our children / Our Ways*. These videos cover dance/music/languages/ natural world/ connection to the earth and focus on how indigenous cultures transmit their values and beliefs to children. Of all of these, the importance of language preservation is emphasized.

Alex Diablo, the man who had soap put in his mouth for speaking his native language, is now an elder of the *Mohawk* nation and teaches their language to his people, seeking in some small measure to preserve and hand down this precious gift.

Honoring languages is responded to in different ways from country to county. In Malaysia materials are produced in *Malay; Pad sang* and *Chinese*. Sasa Milic showed us a book of *Roma Folk Tales*; one of few printed in both English and the Roma language and told of efforts to create Roma language radio and television programming.

Ingrid Jones reports other small successes from her work in Albania with fathers, teaching mediation practices in an effort to diminish the continuation of ‘blood feuds’, which so exacerbate women’s lack of freedom.

The need to include all family members and caregivers is crucial. Margarita de Gradata of El Salvador says that at their ‘*Our Family*’ School - all are welcomed, which means that sometimes everyone down to the family dog shows up. Their guiding philosophy of moving from a position of people “feeling judged - to feeling appreciated invites honest introspection, and people feel encouraged and willing to try new methods. Follow-up documentation of this approach has shown: an increase in birth weight (pregnant women are also included); decreases in the number of abusive incidents in the home; and a decrease in playground violence.

Vijaya Murthy of India (who introduced herself as being ‘of the globe’, a description we are all coming to share) reiterated the difficulty that regarding parents as ‘sheer interference’ creates and spoke of teacher trainings aimed at creating an attitude shift to that of viewing ‘parents as partners’.

Mary-Louise Vanderlee of Canada’s Brock University emphasized this concept from another angle as that of empowerment. When a parent sees that learning to read is her means of being able to read to her children, which will in turn help them to learn to read and make life’s opportunities more abundant for them – she becomes motivated to learn to read.

Often it is not the specifics of how problems are handled but the underlying processes, those tangible reflections of respect, wisdom and sensitivity, which are the greatest sources of our shared learning.

The seeming small impact of any of these projects, and the many more we shared or planned, reminds us of an African proverb Barnabas Otaala of Namibia once shared:

*How do you eat an elephant?*

*One bite at a time.*

We may be barely nibbling at the problems we face, but bite-by-bite, we are reducing the size of the many ‘elephants’ of worldwide violence.

WHO WAS I?

The issue of whole society’s being destroyed brings us to bigger and harder questions. In Africa many communities are helping those dying of AIDS to prepare ‘memory boxes’. These ‘memory boxes’ or books are comprised of collections of photos or stories and to be left behind for their children - who will soon be left orphans. They provide a reminder of who each child and family was in the past and how much each child was loved. Children are left with a sense of pride and continuity – and hopefully, feel a bit less alone in the world.

People from villages lost to the December tsunami, or to any disaster, have both a need to feel linked to their past but also to grieve for what has been lost. It was this need that sparked the thinking of one small group of us who met to consider WOFO-related responses to the needs of those in tsunami-devastated lands. One project, now in progress, is that of developing trainings and activities to be used to help children grieve. Michael Kelly tells us that even very young children are quite angry if they are not allowed to attend the funeral of a family member.

What happens when there are no funerals, or there is so much loss that no one loss can be acknowledged? The questions are so many but so are the rays of hope.

## TOGETHER

When Farida Akhtar of Bangladesh asked us to hold hands and sing “*We Shall Overcome*” together at the end of a session on ‘Social Health Issues for Young Children’, it seemed awkward -but by the time her co-presenters had sung verses with us - first in English; then in French; then Hindi; and finally in Bangla – it had become much more than words, for the fact that we – from so many different places – were together holding hands and singing in our many voices, gave us each hope.

Ali Nashat Shaar of Jerusalem told us that:

*“When it comes to [violence and harm] to children, there is no right or wrong – no one wins, we are all the losers.”*

Alex Diablo said:

*“Babies are born with both hands closed – hanging onto a gift that they have. Some learn their gift – some go their whole lives and never know their gift. . .”*

For any child or adult to fail to know and share his gift, is a loss to us all.

Eleanor gave us the NIPPA logo:

*“Different on the outside – but inside all the same.”*

WOFO let us glimpse inside one another’s deep places.

*Knowing we are connected – unites us in hope.*

The Maoris have a saying shared with us by Tu Tuhi Robust of New Zealand, which proclaims:

*“When one side of the island is at war, the other side will come to help.”*

There can no longer be attitudes of ‘us’ and ‘them’, for - wherever, whatever and to whomever violence happens it happens to us all. That is the connection.

Ghandi said:

*“You must be the change you want to see in the world,”*

His words have become only more true.

As she bid us goodbye during our final gathering session, Lisa quoted her 82-year-old Grandmother’s words:

*“Wherever I am, my love will always follow you.”*

They are words that spoke for us all. We need one another. May these words reach out to you who read these pages, for you – and we – are not alone.

The task is huge - but together we can tackle it, ‘bite-by-bite’.

*“Is broken.*

*Please help us.*

*Everything broken. “*

Widarm Wijana

(In the pages that follow Janet Lanier, Edna Ranck, Lori Harris and Amy Neugebauer (all of the United States) and Heino Schonfeld (Ireland) will share both specifics and reflections from their WOFO experiences.

Please read on and continue the journey with us.)

\*Roslyn Duffy’s reflections are based upon the following:

- All Plenary Sessions
- Session # 1 HIV/AIDS: Exploring the Issues / Case Studies
- Session # 2 Social Health Issues for Young Children: Mental Health, Nutritional Health, Environmental Health

- Session #5 Early Childhood Programs as a Source for Reconciliation
- Session # 7 Challenging Behavior as a Result of Stressors and Trauma
- Session # 44: Preserving Indigenous Cultures
- Session # 47 Working with Parents: Sharing a Wealth of World Strategies
- Session # 55 Responding to Crises as a World Forum Community – What Can We Do In Response to the Tsunami?
- Session # 61 Taking Care of Children in Emergencies
- Session # 64 Advocacy for Early Childhood Development: Lessons from the *Global Leaders for Young Children*