

## OpEd

### An Architecture for Peacebuilding - Needed Now More than Ever

The recent death of another young black man in police custody, the ensuing social upheaval, and the maddeningly polarized viewpoints on these events which permeated the news and social media in the days that followed have shone a spotlight on gaping wounds in our society. It seems our methods for dealing with - and even effectively talking about these challenges are simply not adequate for the task of addressing these rising issues - of race, wealth, power, and violence - in healthy, healing ways.

These turbulent times call for clear, honest dialogue, and the forging of alliances and building of bridges to improve our social functioning - this at its core may be our greatest challenge and our greatest opportunity - the nuts, bolts, and architecture of peace and justice.

What are the best ways to reduce police violence? What are the best ways to reduce racial hostilities? What are the best ways to level the playing field of socio-economic opportunity?

There are people on all sides of these issues yearning for relations characterized by more love, dignity, and respect. People who care – many of whom are unaware that effective tools do exist for creating the world we crave. I'm talking about the tools of peacebuilding.

From our international relations to schoolyard dynamics, our world is fraught with conflict and violence. Our ability to cooperate and forge systemic and effective strategies has not kept pace with our killing technology and our tendency towards hostility. This touches our families and our communities, and reaches across the planet. Through an economic lens, research has shown that national violence containment costs in the U.S. are over \$1.7 Trillion every year.

One recent example of this is in the situation surrounding \_\_\_\_\_, . Where \_\_\_\_\_ *[describe in your own words some local or personally-relevant situation – either that's been in the news lately and had a particular emotional impact on you, or that has directly affected your local community - for example, I might include something like this: "...surrounding the recent shootings in Texas - where a museum had hosted an exhibit intended to offend Muslim sensibilities, and two men attacked the exhibit with gunfire - wounding a guard - and were themselves killed. Is this really how we address religious diversity - through taunts and bullets? Can we face our children and explain that this is the world we are offering them?"]*

The good news is that peacebuilding approaches in various realms, focused on conflict resolution and effective cooperation, are already making a difference - proving to be highly efficient at saving lives, money, and heartache. The science and practice of peacebuilding and conflict resolution is a diverse, sophisticated, and successful enterprise, and is ready to be applied on a much larger scale. Our social policies have to catch up with our proven capacities to turn these challenges around.

In the situation/case of \_\_\_\_\_, *[regarding the situation you chose above, either briefly describe resources you may know about that could be employed, or strengthened to improve the situation – or briefly describe more details about the situation, perhaps including some wished-for possible solution(s). Using my earlier example, I might point to the wonderful work of the Salam Institute for Peace and Justice, which promotes interfaith dialogue to build bridges of understanding between Muslim and Non-Muslim communities]*

The Peace Alliance, a national non-profit grassroots educational and advocacy organization, has mapped out five major categories of peacebuilding work - work that is beginning to demonstrate how we could better deal with these challenges. These five key “Cornerstones of Peacebuilding” offer tangible hope and a blueprint for deeper progress. Their effectiveness can be measured in cost savings, violence reduction, and various other community benefits. The five cornerstones are:

- **Empowering Community Peacebuilding:** Addressing such challenges as crime, violence, and gangs. Effective programs may include police/community relations, hands-on street outreach and intervention, mental health services, out-of-school programs, opportunities for seniors, and arts practices. One example is the River Phoenix Center for Peacebuilding, in Gainesville, Florida, which is guiding the entire local police force, six officers at a time, through day-long workshops where they interact with high-risk teenagers, strengthening community connections with deeper empathy and respect. Congressman Bobby Scott has introduced the bi-partisan Youth PROMISE Act (HR 2197) - which promotes community dialogue to identify and support the best practices for reducing youth violence and incarceration.
- **Teaching Peace in Schools:** Bringing conflict resolution curricula into our schools with tools such as social-emotional learning, reflective listening techniques, restorative processes, and other proven peacebuilding skills to increase graduation rates and dramatically transform violence, bullying, truancy, and other challenges facing youth. Congressman Tim Ryan (OH) has a bill (HR 850) currently before Congress to bring Social and Emotional Learning into US public school curriculum.
- **Humanizing Justice Systems:** Moving away from overly punitive policies, towards healing-oriented criminal and juvenile justice approaches. Restorative justice, diversion/alternative incarceration programs, and prisoner rehabilitation & re-entry programs are among the most promising solutions. The Longmont (CO) Community Justice Partnership - using Restorative Justice practices, brought its recidivism rate down to 8%, compared to over 55% in the surrounding Boulder County.
- **Fostering International Peace:** Championing peacebuilding approaches to international conflict and atrocity prevention in hotspots through mediation, diplomacy, and effective on-the-ground programs. Important components may involve economic development, post conflict justice, humanitarian aid, and support for frameworks necessary for democratic processes. US Agencies leading in this realm include the State Department’s Conflict and Stabilization

Operations Bureau, and USAID's Complex Crises Fund, as well as the US Institute of Peace. All of these are obtaining impressive peacebuilding results on a shoestring budget.

- **Cultivating Personal Peace:** Integrating peace in our own lives, with our children, in our relationships, in the workplace, and in our approach to activism, through such methods as compassionate communication, mindfulness, empathy, and stress reduction.

More detailed examples in each of these areas can be found at [www.peacealliance.org](http://www.peacealliance.org).

The situation regarding \_\_\_\_\_ would clearly fall into the category of \_\_\_\_\_, and maybe also \_\_\_\_\_ (*possibly more than one*). Through a greater awareness that these positive tools exist in these specific realms, we could address situations like \_\_\_\_\_ [*this issue*] with a better sense of effective, available resources [*feel free to say more about what could be done, positively, in the specific situation you reference. In my earlier example, tools in international peacebuilding as well as school and community-level approaches could all be useful*] – knowing that proven tools exist could mean the difference between making effective progress and throwing up our hands and accepting that the world is hopelessly mired in violence.

It is time for these practical approaches to become a far greater societal priority, through shifts in public policy towards stronger support for these cost-effective and life affirming peacebuilding resources. I urge both **Senators \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_, and Congresswo/man \_\_\_\_\_** to promote policy advances in all five of these Cornerstones, giving peacebuilding the enhanced focus and energy it most surely deserves.

[*Your Name*] is a \_\_\_\_\_ [*how you might identify in your community: mother, grandmother, student, educator*] and a volunteer with the \_\_\_\_\_ [*name of local area*] Peace Alliance Action Team