

Something like forgiveness: Healing in Northern Ireland

by [Donald W. Shriver](#)

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There is a saying, “The English never remember, the Irish never forget.” The more sober truth is that everyone remembers and forgets selectively. Therein is a political problem that is well illustrated in Northern Ireland these days.

Many people in the country’s six counties are hoping that the astonishing emergence of a power-sharing government that includes both Unionist Ian Paisley and Sinn Fein leader Martin McGuinness will lead the country away from the “Troubles” of 1969-2000. It is time, some Irish say, for leaders to abandon public recriminations about the past and to build a peace that will foster the kind of economic growth that prevails in the Republic to the south. In Belfast, the chief topic of conversation is no longer the latest atrocity by a paramilitary group, but the rapid escalation of real estate prices. Proponents of forgetting see this as a healthy transition.

But as Hannah Arendt argued, political change requires not only new constitutions but also a reckoning with the past, a reckoning that entails forgiveness. And forgiveness requires remembering. Neglect the diverse memories that citizens bring to political discourse and you may be inviting a renewal of violence.

In Belfast, a group of Catholics and Protestants are intent on trying to deal with the memories together. People whose family members endured murder, injury, rape or imprisonment have been meeting regularly, not only for mutual comfort but also to help free one another from the prison of the past. The mere existence of this conversation is a hopeful sign.

Members of the group are also slowly and painfully moving toward something like forgiveness of the paramilitaries, police and soldiers who inflicted horrible damage on their personal lives. Frequently one hears the phrase, “I can never forgive the gunman who killed my . . . ” Yet there are the beginnings of forgiveness in these

conversations. Those who speak are remembering the same wrongs, but none are yearning for revenge, and all have begun to practice empathy for victims regardless of political identity. These are ingredients of the struggle toward social forgiveness, the mending of their torn community. Many of them complain that leading politicians are giving little public attention to such healing.

Forgiveness in a political context often has to begin, as it does between individuals, with the statement, “I’m sorry.” The issue of whether saying sorry is important for mending damaged relationships came up in a meeting of the top officials of the Northern Irish police force. In the past, Protestants have made up 90 percent of the police, and the police were regarded as a hostile force by many Catholics. Now the force recruits its officers from both sides. The discussion raised the question: should officers ever acknowledge a past wrong for the sake of healing the memories of police brutality? Several leaders said no; a few said maybe, but unofficially. Only one said yes.

Meanwhile, segregation between Protestants and Catholics remains deep. They inhabit separate streets, stores, schools, hospitals and churches, and even different parks. The separate structures daily reinforce the experience of alienation. Only 7 percent of public schools openly enroll students from the two sides. As high school history teachers testify, it’s difficult to have a discussion of both sides of the Troubles in an all-Protestant or all-Catholic class. How can any human being gain empathy for the stranger if the stranger is never encountered? Reconciliation will require a “march through the institutions”—all of them.

One way that citizens encounter one another’s memories is through public symbols and occasions. The new government recently appointed a commission, chaired by Archbishop Robin Eames of the Church of Ireland, to consider public memorials to the years of the Troubles. Its recommendations may include monuments, annual events, curricula, even a truth commission. But support for the latter is weak. Some say, “We have already spent too much time and money in the official investigation of Bloody Sunday”—the killings in Derry by British troops in 1972. The struggle of other countries to “master the past”—Germany and South Africa in particular—suggests that the commissioners will have to devise symbols with which partisans from both sides can learn to identify. In search of such examples, a delegation of Northern Irish citizens visited the new Tredegar Civil War Center in Richmond, Virginia. It is the only U.S. museum that attempts to show three different perspectives on that war—those of northern whites, southern whites and black

slaves.

Neither private nor public efforts at reconciliation can be neglected, for private and public alienation feed each other. The same goes for public and private healing. This was underscored poignantly in a story shared by a veteran police officer. After policing a contentious incident in a community, the officer noticed a man and a woman nearby who were members of his own Protestant congregation. Going over to acknowledge them, he reached out to shake hands and encountered solid and surprising rejection from the couple. That resistance has persisted for years in congregational encounters. In short, the Protestant couple refused to trust or befriend a police officer charged with protecting the interests of *both* Protestants and Catholics.

Perhaps the rising generation will prove capable of acquiring a bifocal memory that embraces the suffering of the enemy as well as the suffering of the friend. One thing is certain: the old cracks in Northern Ireland's body politic will never be mended without work on all sides, in all institutions, and in long conversations between citizens open to each other's humanity.

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