

Grace-full gestures: Opportunities for reconciliation

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [November 21, 2001](#) issue

In his wonderful memoir *Open Secrets*, Richard Lischer describes a personal conflict that developed between Lischer and Leonard, a lay leader in the congregation. Their conflict had the potential to erupt into a major split in the congregation. But each man remained committed to the ministry of the church. When a woman who lived near Leonard overdosed on pills, Lischer forgot that he wasn't on speaking terms with his parishioner, and called to ask Leonard to accompany him to the woman's house.

Their shared ministry in this setting provided an opportunity for renewing their relationship. As Lischer writes:

That was the beginning of the great thaw between Leonard and me. Our manner of reconciliation reminded me of the way my father and I communicated . . . *through* something else: throwing a ball, catching a fish, planting a tree, but never direct from one heart to another.

We achieved approximations of feeling for one another, with the tacit understanding that the truth between people is cumulative. Everything will be sorted out at some mythical end point. Until then, extended conversation is premature at best.

Had Lischer sought to bring about reconciliation by directly confronting the brokenness, he might have exacerbated the conflict. After all, even in cases where all sides are of good will, there is enormous potential for misunderstanding, distorted communication and intrusive bitterness. Then there are the lurking dangers of power dynamics, the desire to avoid being humiliated and the difficulty of externalizing one's internal pain.

I assigned *Open Secrets* to my class of first-year theological students and looked forward to lecturing on the significance of Christian ministry, and in particular, to

emphasizing the significance of the smaller moves and gestures that may open up opportunities to move toward reconciliation.

My preparation for the lecture coincided with the beginning of the U.S. bombings of Afghanistan. Might there be a connection, I wondered, between the national response and how we respond to personal conflicts, division, betrayal? Lischer was writing about an estrangement between friends in an interpersonal setting, and about his sense of the cumulative development of truth. The struggles against Osama bin Laden are about a political, international conflict between strangers, indeed enemies—but also about the cumulative development of ideological hatred.

John Paul Lederach is a mediator with 20 years' experience of trying "to effect nonviolent change around the globe where cycles of deep violence seem hell-bent on perpetuating themselves." He says:

We should be careful to pursue one and only one thing as the strategic guidepost of our response: avoid doing what they expect. What they expect from us is the lashing out of the giant against the weak, the many against the few. This will reinforce their capacity to perpetrate the myth they carefully seek to sustain: that they are under threat, fighting an irrational and mad system that has never taken them seriously and wishes to destroy them and their people. What we need to destroy is their myth, not their people.

This does not mean that we are wrong to offer a forceful response to the terror we endured. But it does suggest that we too quickly respond in kind. Many people's rhetoric of "bombing Afghanistan back to the stone age" reflects the tit-for-tat mentality that fuels cycles of violence and brokenness. Might there be a way of opening a door to reconciliation by indirection, by doing the unexpected? Might this be what Jesus had in mind when he called on disciples to "love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you"?

To be sure, neither in Lischer's case with Leonard nor in the conflict between the U.S. and terrorist networks can one assume that reconciliation will happen quickly. Lischer describes the shared gesture in ministry as "the beginning of the great thaw." Any thaw that might occur between the U.S. and the people sympathetic to bin Laden will take years, perhaps generations, to develop.

But my lecture that day did focus on the importance of the unexpected small gestures that have the capacity to transform. What might they look like? An invitation to share in a ministry need with a neighbor; Anwar Sadat entering the Knesset; a mother offering an estranged child an unexpected gift; Nelson Mandela opening a horizon for transformed relations by refusing vengeance; a kiss of peace in a setting of worship; Jesus washing his disciples' feet.

Lederach calls people to give birth to the unexpected by responding through indirection. By shifting the dynamics of the situation, relationship or system, we open possibilities for transforming our imaginative landscapes. It requires creativity, subtlety and a capacity to imagine relations that look very different from the ones we are currently experiencing. It also requires an ability to believe in miracles that begin with a small step in a different direction.