

**Hands Across the Hills:  
Reaching In and Reaching Out for Dialogue and Cultural Exchange  
Alliance for Peace Award Talk, October 2018**

Representing Hands Across the Hills and receiving this award from the Alliance for Peacebuilding holds special historical meaning for me, as I am part of the founding generation of AfP. This award, named after our illustrious director Melanie Greenberg and designated for US peacebuilding, is a gift late in my career that I will deeply cherish.

During the past 25 years of my life and AfP history, I founded the Karuna Center for Peacebuilding and taught generations of graduate students at the School for International Training. My work, and most of AfP's, has focused on the world beyond US borders. Along with other peacebuilders, I have had the privilege of designing and implementing multi-year projects in such complex conflicts as the Balkans, the Caucasus, South Asia, Eastern Africa and the Mideast. I find myself surprised to now be advocating for, and honored for, US peacebuilding.

I stepped down from these international responsibilities in very recent years, just in time to face the US election of 2016. We now confront a new world, one that threatens to dismantle the scaffolding that sustains and nurtures all of our work as peacebuilders. With the threats to peace, justice, and global survival, the turn to US peacebuilding seems timely and appropriate for me. I believe all of us are called upon now to use every measure of our wisdom and talent, both at home and abroad.

Like many of you, my community gathered after the election to first mourn our losses and then discern next steps. Some of us formed a committee to bridge divides, hoping to gain insight about Trump voters: their fears, their dreams deferred, and the motivation for their votes. It is such a project that I will explore with you, highlighting key points and lessons learned or reinforced for peacebuilders, integrating what we know professionally about intergroup relations, and sharing some stories about this particular match of dialogue partners.

As a peacebuilder, why did I choose this way to intervene? On one level, this project chose me. It fell into my lap as a newly articulated vision, calling to be manifested and shaped. On another level, distorted, dehumanized perceptions of each other and the development of good versus evil narratives contribute to extremist ideology and violent behaviors. Increasing connectors and reducing dividers across as many sectors as possible seems essential at this juncture.

Furthermore, research reveals that when we dehumanize particular groups of people, we ignore or reject policies that support their lives. We in the progressive and peacebuilding communities may have ignored the basic human needs and removed our moral concern for some identity groups in our society. Social psychology studies report that it is harder to humanize than to dehumanize. By

disliking those who appear to dislike us, we become caught in a trap of mutual enmity. Our group thought there would be a great deal to learn by reaching out beyond our bubble.

Seeking partners for dialogue and cultural exchange felt awkward, as our motivations were suspect and our connections were weak. Through an online newsfeed we finally found Ben Fink, a visionary and talented community organizer who is not from Kentucky but living and working there. Resistance ran high among the Kentuckians, who feared a repeat of one hundred years of exploitive “let’s go look at the hillbillies” exercises. Nell later remarked: *“we mountain people are the last group where it is socially acceptable to make fun of us and still think of yourselves as progressive.”*

Through their trust of Ben and his diligent and reassuring recruiting, however, we formed a stable partnership that has enabled this vision of dialogue across the political divides to grow. Key point #1: It is difficult and essential to find a partner credible enough to attract participants willing to dialogue with those who appear threatening to their values and way of life.

It is in the name of the 30 group members from KY and MA that I accept this award. We call ourselves Hands Across the Hills to fit the geography of Western MA and Eastern KY. Our MA region is as politically blue as coal-country KY is red, and each region abounds in stereotypes about the other. We profile as different communities on many social and economic indexes of class, politics, privilege, education, family, ethnic identity, religious practice, media consumption, occupation, history, and geography. Given these gaps and our mutual agitation about the election, I had no idea at the outset how we might reduce hostility and establish common ground. Data shows that those who choose to engage in dialogue are generally at least curious about the other, but I could not even count on that in the heightened antagonistic relations of the post-election period.

The literature on best practices in contact theory demonstrates that specific structures help maximize the development of empathy, such as sufficient time together, meaningful rather than casual interactions, common goals, some form of cooperation, self-disclosure, and equal treatment in the dialogue setting. Fortunately I had enough experience with intergroup dialogue and peacebuilding programs in far more violently divided communities to have some faith that a well-designed program based on these principles could enable participants to identify common needs, even if they disagree on the methods to satisfy those needs. One striking example of that phenomenon arose around the issue of guns. My question: *“what makes you feel safe,”* elicited responses from the MA group that having no guns created safety while the KY group felt that safety arose when everyone had guns.

All of us here at AfP understand what we are up against with this resurgent tribalism. We know that dialogue is a tool and not a panacea, and that it is not a

substitute for action. But we also recognize that deep divides become chasms and then cataclysms if not addressed. Side by side with structural change, dialogue works its way into individuals and communities, contributing to greasing the wheels for those unjust political and social structures to move. For any of this to happen between such disparate, polarized, and outwardly asymmetric groups as those between a MA college town and a KY coal camp region, I created an immersive and intensive dialogue and cultural exchange program. Perhaps key point #2 is to utilize the positive power of a residential multi-day retreat format, in our case having one each in MA and KY.

One year ago this week, a group of KY participants drove 15 hours by van from Whitesburg KY to Leverett MA, a small town just north of Amherst. For many, it was their first time in New England and there was a great deal of predictable anxiety about how these Yankees would behave. Extensive communicating and separate dialogue training in both MA and KY, however, helped ease the tension and fears of the arriving KY contingent, who were brave enough to risk entering the territory and homes of a liberal enclave.

After welcomes and introductions, hosts and guests, deliberately acquainted in advance by phone and email, departed in pairs. The intimacy and vulnerability of home-stays created an inviting and trustworthy space that shaped the experiences to follow. Jay, one of the Leverett hosts and a staunch environmentalist, wished to host a 74 year-old strip-mining supervisor and defender because *"I want to find out where we can work together."*

Key point #3: include thorough and collaborative preparation by all parties, and offer introductory dialogue training plus exposure to videos and books about each other's cultures and concerns. All of these details strengthen ripeness to meet the identified other. Personal investment impacts outcomes.

Each of our three days consisted of several hours of dialogue interspersed with other activities designed to modify the unconscious cognitive and emotional biases of participants. We used art, music, theater, dance, local sightseeing, endless potlucks, and the aforementioned home-stays to help group members see beyond their comfort zones and in-group bubbles, and to make a place at the table for those with whom they profoundly disagreed. Point #4: there are many doors through which to challenge the straight jacket of tribal judgments, both within and outside of structured dialogue circles.

To foster trust and commonality, I guided the group to enter the dialogue process through the well-known ground of family stories. What was revealed, however, were vast differences even at that level. Many MA families are relatively recent arrivals in the US, so several participants were first, second, or third generation Americans. Many of the KY colleagues had never met an immigrant or refugee and certainly never heard an impassioned, tear-filled first person Holocaust story. Nell

remarked: *"I was taught to hate refugees and immigrants. I never met one. I will never think that way again."*

Those from MA had never encountered coal miner's families nor understood the pride and accomplishment that accompanied the suffering of those whose families lived and worked in the same towns and died from the same black lung disease and crushing boulders as their great-grandparents. The group from MA, alien to a coal mining life, also had attitudes and stereotypes to shed, and new ways to think about the conditions that shape a life and a voting record. Each group had to find fresh language to acknowledge each other's suffering and each other's survival skills and resilience. We learned anew that joy and suffering touch all of us, regardless of circumstances.

This carefully constructed format was the necessary foundation to hard talk about the hot-button issues of the election and the polarization of our country. Talking about Trump and the state of the country and world was a minefield with lots of explosions. Although everyone recognized that they were not going to make blues out of reds, or visa-versa, some wanted to then, and still now, scream, blame, and convince. Each side strained to listen to beliefs and facts that collided with their realities. Participants may have hated each other's votes, but they liked each other, which created a certain amount of cognitive dissonance. By the end of the weekend, participants understood what had created the votes. They were also able to recognize that each person in the circle is a dignified human being and much more dimensional than a vote for or against Trump, abortion, guns, or immigration.

We had a spectacular local event during our weekend in Leverett attended by 300 people. The KY participants spoke with honesty and passion about their lives and struggles. The Western MA audience responded with standing ovations, creating a positive feedback loop that further encouraged the KY group, who felt seen and respected by people they had previously stereotyped. Research teaches that we dehumanize those who we perceive demonize us, and like those who appear to care about us. A web of enmity shifted to a web of mutual recognition of each side's humanity.

One of the most poignant and revealing comments was from Gwen, a coal miner's daughter in her 50s, who said: *"I have been waiting all my life to vote for a woman for president. I did not even care which party she was from. But Trump promised to restore coal and Clinton threatened to shut down the mines. Coal put shoes on our babies' feet and food in their bellies. In the end, I could not betray my community and I voted for Trump."*

After 3 days of thought-provoking dialogues and relationship-strengthening events, the group returned to KY. We in MA were immediately deluged with requests for a reflections night for insights and lessons learned, which we held for about 100 people. This prompted a request for basic dialogue training, which I offered in the winter months for 60 people, some of who are now organizing local bridging divides

circles in their own communities. We would repeat the same process of another reflections evening in the spring when we returned from KY, seeing it as another opportunity to build empathy and inspire engagement as a replacement for despair.

We who are peacebuilders have learned that we need to engage “more people and key people” for any success in our work, key point #5. To that end, these requests offered ample opportunities to engage and train hundreds of “more people,” as did events in KY and our visits to as many local and state officials in each location as possible. As a result of the publicity around our events, I have been invited to facilitate large gatherings on controversial public issues in various communities. Each of these engagements depolarizes conflicts and shores up the foundations of democracy.

In addition, we have enjoyed national and local media, including some rural online networks, been filmed by EU television which will be seen on a special program on presidential politics in the US, supposedly by millions, and were interviewed recently for upcoming features in a leading Amsterdam newspaper and the Boston Globe, possibly appearing on their front pages before the midterm elections. We also maintain a lively website. This is all key point #5 of reaching more and key people. National media, perhaps with encouragement from AfP, could aid us tremendously by showcasing bridging experiences rather than accentuating the polarization. Someone responded to our publicity by writing that “*each time a positive action is published, hope is generated.*”

Six months after the KY visit to MA, we reversed the whole process by traveling to Whitesburg, KY, a town deep in coal country where most residents are descendants of miners and describe themselves as “*having coal dust in their veins.*” We were warmly welcomed and hosted by our dialogue partners, although the town itself did not rally to meet us in large numbers, perhaps being disengaged from politics or holding on to their suspicion of the east coast elite. I had anticipated that these three days might be the end of our partnership, but it became clear by Sunday night that the groups were clearly unwilling to separate. We spent our last day on the phase of dialogue where it shifts to brainstorming joint projects and actions. (Point #6) Currently we continue to plan and augment several of these projects focused on the structural level, which research reports are essential for broader impact on political issues.

The Kentuckians, a bit to my surprise, have requested a return to MA next spring to continue the dialogues and friendships. We are investigating the feasibility of organizing this with the addition of key people and influencers from both communities, which would allow us to amplify and support changes in both groups, as well as reach more media who are now paying attention to us. (Key point #7, create space for dialogue partners to co-organize social change projects and maintain a connected presence to reinforce intergroup reciprocity).

In designing dialogue reflections at the closing of our dialogues and in subsequent post-dialogue gatherings, I kept in mind evaluation criteria that include increase in awareness, knowledge, motivation, skills, and connection to others. Hands Across the Hills, I believe, succeeded in all of these dimensions. Most group members in both communities seem increasingly motivated to engage in more bridging activities as well as in other social change interventions.

It is not news that humanizing happens in dialogue, but knocking down stereotypes and prejudices at this moment in American history is a crack in the tribal walls that has meaning beyond the participants and penetrates their communities. We are not certain that we changed any votes, which we did not set out to do, although we strongly suspect that has occurred.

We know we are building local capacities in both regions. In MA, we have generated a lot of crucial hope in this despairing and disempowering moment in our history, and more people are using dialogue models for addressing controversial community issues. In KY, our participants are empowering themselves with self-reported improved communication patterns and more speaking out. Modeling empowerment and the potential to be an actor for change in this hard time is in itself no small thing.

For me as a peacebuilder, I am interested in establishing and disseminating workable models. (Point # 8) I know it is easier to export and replicate a three-hour or six-hour model, but that is not feasible across long distances, nor as likely to result in substantive individual and community change. I included extensive preparation on both sides to support immersion, intimacy and transformation. All of that mattered in how our process unfolded, our trust grew, and our impact expanded.

As our country disintegrates into enemy camps and the urgency increases to respond to dramatic ruptures, we will need each other more and more. To that end, I have already embarked on a second experiment with this model, this time focused on race, which I daresay will be more difficult than political polarization. We have a strong group of 18 African American and white American participants from Western MA, a similar group is being assembled in Beaufort County, SC, where one of our colleagues had links to form this new partnership, and we will include some of our KY group members to provide a third geographic, racial, and cultural component. In preparation, each side will have its own monthly cross-racial dialogues. The MA and KY groups will travel first to SC in late January, with the return exchange in MA in June. I will co-lead this dialogue project, named Bridge4Unity, with an African American professor from Beaufort County.

The fruits of these preparatory dialogues are already manifesting. The group in MA is looking ahead beyond SC toward a multi-year program of both dialogue and collective action in our own community. One of the members of the MA dialogue group is a leading professor of African American Studies at UMass and head of the

National Black Studies Association. His motivation for joining the dialogue is to learn the skills to bring to campus and around the country. (Key point #5 on more people/key people again, and last key point #9: keep experimenting with and refining your models).

I thank you for this honor that AfP has bestowed on Hands Across the Hills. I take this award on behalf of all of us in KY and MA who have put our hearts into this vision. We will carry the work forward in the hopes that rather than forfeiting our democracy, that we keep reaching out across hills and divides to make room for each other and create some semblance of wholeness that perhaps this country has really never known. We need to act soon and decisively, before the chasms between us become too wide to cross.

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October 2018  
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