

Building bridges for peace

Jo Berry describes her 'journey in understanding' following the killing of her father by the IRA.

My father, Sir Anthony Berry MP, was killed when an IRA bomb blew up the Grand Hotel in Brighton during the 1984 Conservative Party Conference. I had never considered that Dad was a target for the IRA and it came as a huge shock, ripping my heart in two and changing the very essence of who I was. I felt like I had been catapulted into a war that I knew nothing about, but which now became my war. Now I cared passionately and wanted somehow to bring something positive out of the tragedy. I knew that I had a choice in the days after the bomb; to stay as a victim, blaming others for my pain, or to go on a journey of healing in search of understanding. I wanted to understand why Dad was killed.

During the first year I began to walk in the footsteps of the bomber. By chance I met the brother of an IRA man who had been killed by the British Army. We looked beyond the label of enemy and talked of our shared humanity and dreams for a peaceful world. Together we built a bridge across the political divide. I corresponded with a Republican prisoner who shared his story with me, and I spent an afternoon with a politician from Sinn Fein. I began to understand the conditions of injustice and oppression that led to the bombing. In my world, people I loved could be blown up and I felt a deep sense of responsibility to help bring about peace. This gave me a sense of purpose and a belief that I could contribute to the peace process by helping to build bridges, through meeting so called enemies and understanding their perspective; relating to their humanity.

During 1986 I was part of a TV program on forgiveness, after which I felt I could go no further, I left London for North Wales, married and had 3 daughters. It was only with the opportunities that the Peace Agreement brought that I could return to Northern Ireland.

In June 1999, Patrick Magee, the IRA man who had been convicted of planting the bomb, was released from prison under the Good Friday Agreement.

A few days later I relived the day of Dad's death as if for the first time. I felt the grief and shock again. And I had a deep rage at Patrick Magee. How dare he kill my Dad. How dare he destroy my family, I cried and screamed, my arms beating up and down in anger and rage. I knew this was the time to become involved with my journey again.

Through a couple of synchronicities I found myself in a victims support group in Glencree Centre for Reconciliation in The Wicklow Mountains. I remember walking into the room for the first time. I looked around and knew it was safe to feel all my feelings for the first time. I knew no one would be scared of my pain because I recognised the pain in the room. We shared so much, though our individual stories were different. I did a lot of crying over the next few months and something in me began to heal. I met victims from all sides of the conflict who quickly became my friends.

I got invited to a weekend where ex prisoners from all sides would be and I jumped at the possibility. I spent the whole weekend talking to ex IRA prisoners, I found a need in me to find out all about them, to see

them as normal people. After this first meeting of ex prisoners I experienced strong feelings of betrayal. I felt that I was betraying my father, my family, my country and other victims of terrorism: these feelings were overwhelming, when I processed them, I cried for hours and found that lying underneath were feelings of deep sadness. By meeting the so-called enemies, I had discovered to my surprise how likeable and normal they were. Did this mean that my Dad needn't have died? Emotionally I had discovered the waste of war, and realised that the enemy is always my brother and sister.

I had wanted for a long time to build a bridge with Patrick in order to hear his story. On 24th November 2000 I got a phone call to say I could meet Patrick Magee that evening. I was going to Dublin anyway but wasn't sure it was the right day to meet Pat. I remember feeling so scared on the ferry, should I be doing this, can I run away? But a deeper part of me knew I could trust. As soon as he came through the door, we started talking. We talked for three hours with an intensity I had not experienced before. At first he was wearing his political hat, justifying the strategy, explaining the aims of the IRA. I listened and shared the kind of man my Dad had been, talked about my life. After an hour and a half he stopped talking, rubbed his eyes and said 'I want to hear your anger, I want to hear your pain. I have never met someone with so much dignity before.'

It was a moment that marked the beginning of another journey as he opened up and became vulnerable. I knew that his need to meet me matched my need to meet him and we were now on a journey together. Once again I was travelling in uncharted territory without a map. I felt both excited and scared. The first meeting was a profoundly healing experience that left me feeling elated and yet disorientated. On a deep level I felt as if I already knew him. I felt disorientated because I felt I had broken one of society's taboos by meeting Pat. We met on many occasions, often on our own for several hours at a time. We agreed that some of our meetings

could be filmed for a BBC 2 Everyman documentary called Facing the Enemy, which was screened in December 2001.

I find it hard to say I forgive Pat, I would rather say I understand him. I had an experience where I felt so much empathy for him that I knew that if I had lived his life, I could have made the same choices, and in that moment there was nothing to forgive.

Meeting Pat has given me many opportunities for healing, to transform my hurt into action for peace. It's over 7 years since we met and we are still in close contact. I've seen that our experience resonated with others and this strengthens my commitment to the work that we're doing. We now work nationally and internationally responding to invitations to speak at conferences, prisons, schools, Universities and to groups. When we share our story, we share deeply and honestly, talking about our challenges but always respecting each other; we have become friends.

I am left with a deep gratitude that I have an opportunity to work for

peace and to end the cycle of violence and revenge in me. I know the importance of looking at the complex roots of violence and to understand that from the deepest individual level, right through to whole communities, we are all responsible for creating the conditions that support violence as a way of meeting needs. It's so easy to blame; to project our violence onto others and demonise other communities. Yet I believe there is always a reason, if we

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look beyond the label of enemy, for someone to choose violence in order to meet their needs, to be heard. My question is always "Can we listen to those that are feeling isolated, oppressed, angry before they turn to violence?" So we can prevent more suffering, can we understand the roots of violence and then heal those roots? I know this is not a short-term solution and it will take much time and effort but it may help bring real peace to our children and their children. When we respond with 'War' on terrorism we are creating more

victims who may become victimisers. I am interested in breaking this cycle. I have learnt through listening to Pat, that for him the choice to take up violence was after a time of experiencing great suffering in his community and thinking he had no other choice but to use violence. We need to make sure everyone has choices to be heard so that this step is not taken, as everyone loses in war and terrorism.

I feel connected to those around the world who are saying "no" to the cycle of violence, and knowing that gives me strength. The miracle was that Patrick was prepared to go on a journey with me and could regard it as something that was helping him. He said that the personal cost for him taking up violence was losing some of his humanity, and through knowing me he is finding his humanity again. He sees my Dad now as a real person rather than as a faceless enemy. I see that the way forward is to recognise and experience the humanity in our enemy as our own. I believe everyone deserves opportunities to have their humanity restored, to be heard and to that end my passion and work for reconciliation grows. ■

Jo Berry is the daughter of Sir Anthony Berry MP who was killed by an IRA bomb in 1984. She is the founder of Building Bridges for Peace, a non-profit organisation promoting peace and conflict resolution throughout the World.
