



PEOPLE UNITED IN A COUNTRY DIVIDED

THE ENEMY HAS BIG FEET

Twelve years ago before the opening of the checkpoints we organized a bi-communal workshop for teenagers from both sides in the village of Pyla. For many of the participants it was the first time they had seen anyone from the other community. As is often the case, at the end of this encounter a number of young people would express their surprise that they are 'normal like us'. A Greek Cypriot student told me that he found himself looking at the feet of the Turkish Cypriots. This was because he grew up with the image of the poster of the 1974 war that showed a Turkish soldier attacking Cyprus with his huge boot at the front of the poster on its way down to the bleeding map of small Cyprus. It was because of this poster that my student was under the impression that all Turkish or Turkish Cypriot people have big feet. And this is why he was looking at the feet of the teenagers of the other community.

The question we need to address is why is it that in the culture of the Cypriot youth the other community is often understood as barbaric and thus, there is no willingness to get to know any of them?

CREATION OF THE IMAGE OF THE OTHER – COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND COLLECTIVE AMNESIA

From my 20 years of involvement in peace-building work I have discovered some basic 'raw' truths that have also been the experience of possibly everyone who has been involved in this kind of work. First, is the fact that **the pain of 'our' side blinds us to the pain of the 'other' side.**

In both communities what is high on the social agenda and dialogue is the sufferings that 'we' endured at the hands of the 'other'. This process results in the creation of a generalised image of the 'other' as a barbaric monster rather than a human being. Put simply, this process *de*humanises the 'other' and thus makes the prospect of peaceful coexistence that much more remote.

At the same time, inside both communities, the issue of the sufferings of the 'other side' is invariably a taboo subject, virtually a non-issue and those who dare raise it are most likely to be branded as traitors, politically immature, hurting the 'national cause', propagandists of the enemy and so on.

For example, in the Greek Cypriot community very little is known of innocent Turkish Cypriots who suffered especially from the 1963 till 1974, while in the Turkish Cypriot community the sufferings of Greek Cypriots especially during and since the 1974 war are not subjects that are particularly talked about.

This blindness to the sufferings of the other functions as a major obstacle to building a culture of peace on this island. The prospect of a solution creates fear in the hearts of many ordinary people as the questions are worriedly being asked: "What if all these terrible things happen again? How can we **trust** them?". This lack of trust caused because of the mistakes and crimes of the past must be dealt with, otherwise no political solution can survive the test of time.

I wish it was as simple as some people sometimes say, "Why don't we just forget the past and just look to the future?". I believe that in order to 'close' the book of the past we first need to know what is in it, no matter how ugly or politically uncomfortable for 'our' side or 'our motherland' it may be. Otherwise it will haunt us forever and the prospect of a truly peaceful solution will never become a living reality. In Cyprus we desperately need at the level of the ordinary citizens to initiate a process for healing the deep wounds of the past.

What we have experienced in many bi-communal encounters is that the critical turning point, where fear is replaced by trust, where the humanity of the other is rediscovered, where mutual tears initiate the healing process, is the point where one acknowledges the wrong that his/her side has caused to the other.

This acknowledgement encourages the other side to also come out and speak using similar language. In this way the pain of the past, instead of being a stumbling block to building the peace, instead of being an instrument of one-sided propaganda to gain political points, is being transformed into a vehicle for building the much needed trust between the ordinary people of the two communities in Cyprus.

But the past was not only pain and suffering. On the contrary, **for every act of violence there were immeasurably more cases of ordinary people from both communities who experienced deep and genuine and truthful friendships that are still treasured in their hearts today, despite the long years of separation.**

These experiences of the older generation of Cypriots are **also** part of our history that is often ignored. And yet it is from here that we can start building the hope of the future. These bridges between the older generation that were severed by violence must be rebuilt and, at the same time, we must also continue building new bridges among the young generation of Cypriots who never had the chance to know anyone from the 'other side'.

'Acknowledging each other's pain', and **'celebrating togetherness'**. These two terms are not mutually exclusive. They are both real and are both very much needed. It is my firm belief that speaking out by using such terms is one of the most important actions that can be performed by citizens who want to contribute to the building of peace in our island.

We need to become, each in our own community, 'ambassadors' of the pain of the other community, and at the same time engage in a tireless campaign to both re-build the old bridges, and to build new ones.

THE CYPRUS FRIENDSHIP PROGRAMME – PEOPLE UNITED IN A COUNTRY DIVIDED

During the last four years I have been involved in a unique peace building programme that brings together teenagers and their families from the two main communities in Cyprus. In my understanding this programme is one of the most effective in eliminating the negative image of 'the other' and at the same time one of the most far reaching having multiplier effects for many other people in Cyprus.

The Cyprus Friendship Programme (CFP) is modeled after the **all-volunteer** Children's Friendship Project for Northern Ireland (CFPNI), a peace and friendship building programme that successfully brought more than 2,000 Protestant and Catholic teens (as well as their families and their friends) in Northern Ireland together throughout its 21 year existence. CFPNI came to its successful completion in 2007.

The bi-communal Cyprus Friendship Programme started in 2009 as an initiative of HasNa, a small US non-profit organization in cooperation with a Cypriot team of coordinators. Currently, the US leg of the programme is managed by the Cyprus Friendship Programme Incorporated (CFP Inc.), a new non-governmental, non-profit organization based in the US. The Cyprus leg of the programme is managed by a bi-communal team of Cypriot coordinators. The two groups cooperate harmoniously and driven by the same passion to promote a culture of peaceful coexistence.

CFP aims to create bonds of friendship and trust among the youth of the communities of Cyprus. Each teen from one community is 'paired' with another of the same gender from the other community. Each pair is then hosted in July for four weeks by a family in the US.

All the coordinators of the programme in Cyprus and the US as well as the board members of CFP Inc. offer their services on a **purely voluntary basis**. No one gets

paid. This also applies for the **host families in the US who cover all the expenses of hosting the two teenagers.**

The most important costs of the programme are the airline tickets and a health insurance package during their stay in the US. These costs are covered from donations from individuals or non-governmental organizations (e.g. the Rotary) who believe in the aims of the programme. There is also a contribution from the family of each Cypriot teen who takes part in the programme. The organisers believe that no teenager should be excluded from the programme because of family financial difficulties. **The Cyprus Friendship Programme does not get any financial support nor is dependent on any political party or any government in Cyprus or abroad.**

(1) How the programme works: Roommates for a month – friends for life

- Teenagers (15 to 18 years old) from both communities apply to join the programme after presentations are made in schools and youth clubs in both sides of the divided island.
- Interviews are conducted and the selected applicants are accepted into the programme in equal numbers from the two communities.
- A series of meetings, with facilitated workshop activities, takes place that focus on leadership, communication, reconciliation and peace building skills.
- At the end of the workshops, each teen chooses one person from the ‘other side’ of the same gender with whom he/she feels comfortable.
- The relationships of friendship and trust created between the teenagers are typically very strong. They begin to be formed long time before they board the plane in July since the selection process is completed by March, it is strengthened during their month abroad and continues after their return to Cyprus.
- The families of each 'pair' also get connected with equally strong bonds. It is only normal that the parents of each teenager would be interested to meet the young person from the other community that their child has chosen to be roommates for one month. It is equally normal to have the wish to meet the family of this child. Very often the circle becomes bigger with grandparents, uncles and aunts. There are typically many meetings of the two families in Cyprus even during the month when their children are in the US. It is therefore, no surprise that the motto of the programme is "In a country divided...people united".
- In the summer, each pair of teenagers lives with host families in the United States, sharing a bedroom to themselves for a four-week residential.
- It also allows them to experience a country where many differing cultures and religions live together in peace.
- Typically strong bonds of friendship also build between the teens and their host family that last well beyond the summer residential.

- Another important aim of the residential is to further advance leadership and peace building skills which had been promoted during the programme activities that occurred in Cyprus. This is done through four formal programme activities during the residential (team building, conflict resolution training, community service, and civic engagement).
- The Cyprus Friendship Programme is not just a trip abroad for one month. The Cypriot coordinators of the programme organize activities and projects for the members all year round. The aim to spread the message that reconciliation is possible and that these young people are living examples of this truth.
- In October a CFP Graduation occurs. After graduating, each participant is required to continue to participate in the CFP bi-communal activities.

(2) The success of the first four years of CFP – 158 teens and their families

The first group of 20 Cypriot teens (10 pairs) went to the US in July 2009 and the second group of 18 teens in July of 2010. In July 2011 an additional 60 teens and their families joined the CFP family. Another 60 joined in 2012. At the time of writing the target for the 2013 group is a further 60 teens.

Every year on the day of the teens' return to Cyprus all the families wait for them at the airport, Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots applauding and cheering their children together. The teens enthusiastically start their alumni programme of peace building activities and are still going strong long after their return. The bonds that have been created between the pairs, as well as the larger group, their families and friends are an example of the future we all want in Cyprus being brought to the present. They meet regularly both formally but also socially demonstrating to all that peaceful coexistence is possible in Cyprus. Despite being under a lot of pressure from school and exams their commitment to peace building work is exemplary. Here is a small *sample* of what they have been doing:

- Radio and TV presentations of their peace building work were made a number of times. For example, a 20 minute CyBC TV programme made focusing on the friendship of two of the teens had many positive reviews and was shown for a second time on prime time.
- The first weekly bi-communal radio programme for youth will soon be on air by the teens of the CFP.
- Bi-communal presentations in schools and youth clubs in both sides of the island have been made despite the opposition by people who disagree. The teenagers of the Cyprus Friendship Programme, showing courage and unrivaled commitment continue their work with even more passion to help build a culture of peace. *Bi-communal* presentations by youth to *mono-communal* audiences in schools is a very rare occurrence and in this sense the CFP are true leaders in opening new possibilities in the peace building work among the youth.

- The 2009 group decided to ‘adopt’ one child from a Third World country by collecting and sending money every month. The child is called Dorica and she is from Malawi.
- A programme of spreading creative ideas on how to live our lives in a more environmentally friendly and sustainable way is currently being implemented.
- The CFP teens treasure an old army helmet that has flowers planted in it. They have requested to meet the leaders of the two communities and give them each a present of one such helmet. Their hope is that when there will be a solution and Cyprus will be demilitarized, the two leaders will give thousands of helmets to Cypriot families who will turn them into flower pots to hang outside their houses.
- A documentary is currently being filmed that aims to capture the main moments of the CFP journey over a 12 month cycle. Two pairs and their families feature in this project.
- One team of CFP teens has started training with the Cyprus Community Media Centre (CCMC) on how to make films and will be working in producing their own documentary.
- The graduation ceremony each October is a highlight in the CFP calendar. For example, during the 2012 group graduation there was an audience of 450 people from both communities comprising of the families and friends of the CFP teens as well as many supporters of the project. **Nobel Peace Prize winner, Archbishop Desmond Tutu** who is a great friend and supporter of CFP sent us a special message that was read to the audience. The **daughter of Martin Luther King, Bernice King**, who had met and worked with our teens who were in Atlanta in July 2012 sent us a video message: <http://www.caselove.me/cyprus/bkingtocyprus.zip>. One of the 2012 teens, Elena Pirillou, had to move to S. Korea with her family due to unexpected changes in her father's work. Elena could not be at the graduation but sent us a short video with messages for her pair Ugfe and the other teens of the Portland group: <http://youtu.be/FfjTfJNsSIE>
- In the following link you can find a speech by one of the Cypriot coordinators of the CFP sharing stories of peace building in Cyprus and ending with a description of the work of CFP: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CyFCfg0fS3U>

THE ELDERS DOCUMENTARY

In December 2009 the Elders organization chose the Cyprus Friendship Programme for the filming of a documentary about the missing persons of both communities. Interviews of each of the teens pairs were conducted via skype and two pairs were chosen. The official launching of the documentary took place in Nicosia and in London on the 8th and 10th of February of 2011 respectively. The documentary was screened by television stations in both sides in Cyprus.

You can watch the whole documentary (38 minutes) online:

On the YouTube (with subtitles in **Turkish**):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KY42kOlAGuo&feature=youtu.be>

On the YouTube (with subtitles in **Greek**):

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7e-U_9-NTVY&feature=youtu.be

On the Elder's website (with subtitles in **English**):

<http://theelders.org/article/cyprus-digging-past-search-future>

A CEREMONY OF HEALING AT THE CENTER OF CYPRUS

The 2011 and the 2012 CFP groups organized an important event in the geographical center of Cyprus on hill outside the village of Dhali. Their aim was to emphasise that both communities have suffered during the many years of conflict in Cyprus.

If a line is drawn on the map of Cyprus from east to west and another from north to south the two lines will cross on a small hill outside the village of Dhali. On that hill, about 80 Cyprus Friendship Programme teenagers from the two communities stood together and made a circle. Then a ceremony took place to acknowledge that both communities have suffered on this island:

- A Turkish Cypriot and a Greek Cypriot whose fathers were lost during the war walked together and placed some flowers in the middle of the circle in memory of their fathers.
- Two teenagers of the Cyprus Friendship Programme whose grandparents were lost placed flowers in the middle of the circle.
- The organizers then asked everyone present to hold one minute of silence to grieve together and remember all the people who were lost in the many years of conflict in Cyprus, not just the ones in our own community. Here are the words spoken just before the minute of silence:

This is a time when we can declare that we have all suffered enough.

This is a time to declare that the law of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth that has left so many people blind and toothless has no place in Cyprus any more.

This is a time to declare that forgiveness and reconciliation are not the desires of just a few, but the powerful voice of the people of Cyprus.

This is a time to declare that we mourn for all the human beings who lost their lives in the many years of conflict on this island.

We are no longer one-sided, shedding tears only for the ones lost from 'our' side. We embrace caringly everyone who has lost a dear one as if we are members of the same family.

Today we all share and acknowledge each other's pain as if it is our own. That is why today, we are all refugees. That is why today we have all lost our homes. That is why today we have all lost a loved one who is either killed or is missing.

But today as we stand under the same sky, we can also say that we share the hope for lasting peace in Cyprus.

Let us now, show our commitment to the way of peace by holding one minute of silence to remember all those who were lost...

Finally, we asked those present to enter the circle and also place flowers in the middle. Many may also have lost members of their families, while some others may just want express their sharing of the pain of all Cypriots.

One of the teenagers of the group, Petros Charalambous made a short video of this event and managed to capture the essence of the message we wanted to give:

<http://ireport.cnn.com/docs/DOC-580337>

A BBC report on the same event: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-12872917>

THE TWO MOTHERS

I want to end my presentation with a story I sometimes share with the teens I work with.

In 1974 as the Greek Cypriots of the mixed village of Afania were fleeing from the Turkish army the soldiers were firing at them. A 15 year old boy was shot dead. His mother and the other members of the family were also in grave danger. They were saved by an 18 year old Turkish Cypriot from their village. When the checkpoints opened, 29 years later, the mother who lost her son, went back to the village looking for the young Turkish Cypriot who saved the lives of the rest of her family so she could thank him. She walked to his house and saw his mother. She told her that the Turkish Cypriot young man was also killed during the war in 1974, just a few days later...The two mothers embraced and wept...

And anyone who thinks that there is a difference between the tears of the Turkish Cypriot mother and the tears of the Greek Cypriot mother should have a good look in the mirror and snap out of it.

Nicos Anastasiou

(Greek Cypriot coordinator of the Cyprus Friendship Programme)