

Witness to Reconciliation
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Unbreaking the Window

In my role as a writer, I've had a chance to hear powerful testimonies about reconciliation, and when invited to speak today I hesitated to share from my life, because how can my everyday reflections compare? World War II enemies meet in friendship decades later. People in Rwanda and Sierra Leone work to heal the scars of civil war. An activist and prisoner in Northern Ireland is inspired by a fellow inmate from the other side, and before and after release works for peace and a brighter future.

And yet, this topic has weighed heavily upon my heart for quite a while, and especially across the past couple of years. I don't think there's been a time in our country's history when we've needed to focus on reconciliation more. I say that mindful of the division of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and of the Civil War a century before that.

I worry that the Civil War might be an apt comparison today, especially the Border States where neighbors could be bitterly opposed. I feel like we're all living in Border States now. We're neighbors, but not necessarily neighborly in how we perceive or treat one another. We even get to construct our own reality by watching the news and following Tweets by people we agree with, and can ignore or demonize the rest. And the mistrust and state of the world seem to be growing worse. I've heard it said that it's like we're living in the paragraph in a history book that appears just before a statement like, "And then 'fill in the blank' happened..."

Years ago I read an essay that made the following analogy based on dealing with vandalism. The idea was that if someone threw a rock and broke a window in an abandoned building, it should be fixed right away because more vandalism was less likely if the building was kept in decent repair. In the same way, the author said, larger problems in society might be avoided if smaller ones are addressed.

Here's my broken window and very modest reconciliation story: I'm an easily frustrated driver. I know it shouldn't, but it really bothers me when someone,

say, cuts me off if they'd only need to wait a few seconds for a clear road. Now, I'm not a road-rager, and it bothers me just as much when it happens to someone else. But my uncharitable thinking runs rampant — not because of what was done, but because of how I perceive it, which is often along the lines of, “That narcissist doesn't think the rules apply to him,” or, “People like him are why the world is a mess.”

But then, it doesn't take too long before I misjudge an oncoming car's speed, or do something else weird behind the wheel. I know that I didn't do it on purpose, but why, then, is it so easy to assume the worst about others?

Is it possible to reconcile with someone you haven't met? Can there be reconciliation if the other person doesn't even realize there's a problem? Does the way that technology and mobility affect how we form community and perceive others make a broad view of reconciliation necessary?

Driving in our metal boxes, we become anonymous and the others on the road likewise become anonymous metal boxes. The same can happen when we're online, or on social media, or in front of the television. We are literally separated from each other's humanity, and when that distance combines with assumptions about who others are, how they think and why they do what they do, they can become little more than obstacles.

Now, not everything everyone says or does is reasonable and just, and there is right and wrong, but I'm a broken window when I draw conclusions about other drivers without understanding them, because I'm reflecting and contributing to a larger problem. I can at least give them the benefit of a doubt, and I should also think beyond my preconceived notions and cultivate that same approach where it really matters. Maybe it's someone on the right with whom I disagree; maybe it's someone on the left. Maybe it's someone of a different race, or from another country. What's behind what they've said and done and what they value? Is there more there than my separation from them will allow me to see? Is there a way to bridge the difference?

Sure, if we come to issues thinking only of ourselves, smug in our certainty and superiority, we might feel more comfortable or achieve some sort of short-term advantage. But if others are doing the same, how do we imagine things will turn out in the long run?

The choices I make day to day won't fix the world, but I don't get to let myself off the hook with excuses. Restoration has to start somewhere. And so my reconciliation story is about being mindful of the little things because they're where patterns begin; it's about removing the log from my own eye instead of worrying about the speck in others'; it's about extending grace even when it's difficult. And it's a work in progress, hopefully to eliminate at least one broken window instead of throwing a rock.