

## Book Review: Lisa Schirch. *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding*

Janine Minkler

### Abstract.

A dancer stands before the Nazi gas chambers; in a moment of poised defiance, she glides up to the guard, seizes his gun, and shoots him. Lisa Schirch opens *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding* with this story, dramatically illustrating one of her key points: through the act of “doing,” the doing becomes reality. “The dancer acts as if she is alive and powerful,” Schirch writes, “and through dancing, she becomes alive and powerful” (3). Traditional peacebuilding<sup>1</sup> approaches tend to deal with issues directly, linearly, and rationally and, ironically, to reproduce adversarial space by placing conflicting parties in opposition to each other across the negotiating table. Schirch proposes that those working to resolve conflict should instead consider facilitating “peacebuilding dramas”—ritual and symbolic acts that engage the senses, passions, and emotions to create a “unique social space” that includes cooperative images and activities.

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# Book Review

**Lisa Schirch. *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding*. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2005. Pp. 224, paper. \$25.95 US.**

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A dancer stands before the Nazi gas chambers; in a moment of poised defiance, she glides up to the guard, seizes his gun, and shoots him. Lisa Schirch opens *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding* with this story, dramatically illustrating one of her key points: through the act of “doing,” the doing becomes reality. “The dancer acts as if she is alive and powerful,” Schirch writes, “and through dancing, she becomes alive and powerful” (3). Traditional peacebuilding<sup>1</sup> approaches tend to deal with issues directly, linearly, and rationally and, ironically, to reproduce adversarial space by placing conflicting parties in opposition to each other across the negotiating table. Schirch proposes that those working to resolve conflict should instead consider facilitating “peacebuilding dramas”—ritual and symbolic acts that engage the senses, passions, and emotions to create a “unique social space” that includes cooperative images and activities.

Schirch, associate professor of peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University, draws on her work with three different communities to examine how rituals work to erode rigid social structures. In her work with First Nations peoples in the province of Ontario, Schirch has observed how the power of silence operates in ways that cannot be conveyed through verbal communication, the primary medium of conventional conflict resolution. The activities involved in smudging ceremonies (purification ceremonies during which varieties of sage are burned to drive out harmful influences) work to create a sacred space distinguished from everyday conflict and struggles. Schirch also describes how women’s spirituality groups use ritual to resist oppressive patriarchal structures and create new possibilities and opportunities for positive social change. Through both improvised and formalized rituals, women’s spirituality groups seek to create new perceptions and experiences.

Finally, Schirch documents her observations of peacebuilding activities among Turkish and Greek Cypriots, who have been in conflict since 1974. A group of Greek and Turkish Cypriots was brought together for the first time in the 1990s for training in conflict resolution. At an informal dinner, they had an opportunity to view each other as more than their ethnic identities—as parents, teachers, victims of war, men, women, and so forth. “Eating and dancing take on new meanings when they are done in the company of enemies,” Schirch explains (5). Such informal ritual space is critical to creating opportunities for peacebuilding. “In ritual,” writes Schirch, “the impossible and unlikely can come true as people create a unique context where, if only temporarily, symbols, sensory cues, and the expression of emotion communicate what words alone cannot” (86).

Schirch has not limited her examination of the use of symbols and rituals in peacebuilding to one body of knowledge. She draws on the work of sociologists such as Émile Durkheim to examine how symbols function to externalize collective sentiments while concurrently drawing on contemporary biology to examine how rituals and

symbols alter consciousness and reorganize cognitive systems. She offers a comprehensive justification for the use of ritual in peacebuilding, carefully analyzing how rituals transform space, worldviews, identities, and relationships.

Schirch's extensive justification of the use of ritual and symbol is an important contribution to the literature in mediation and peacebuilding. Many key texts<sup>2</sup> focus on the continued use of language to address conflict but overlook the more subtle and "messy dimension of conflict" (38) that symbols and rituals access. As Schirch explains, "Symbolic acts can penetrate the impenetrable, overwhelm the defensive, and convey complex messages without saying a single word" (4). Rituals help people make sense of the world, especially during periods of transition, when the symbols of the old social structures no longer adequately express collective sentiments. By engaging the emotions and senses, rituals ultimately have the power to transform the way we experience the world. Furthermore, Schirch maintains that "ritual does not solve problems by negotiating the best solution, but by creating a new frame for interpreting the problem" (104). This makes the use of ritual a much-needed addition to traditional negotiation models.

This extensive justification seems designed to prepare the reader for the final chapter on how to design peacebuilding rituals. Yet one continually wonders just *how* rituals can be constructed in ways that underscore nonviolent cooperative action among groups in conflict. Aside from anecdotal examples from her case studies, Schirch never adequately addresses this. The final chapter is designed to "synthesize these key ideas into practical applications for peacebuilders" (156), yet it contains very few practical tools. When a few guiding tips are offered, they are oversimplified, making their direct application unclear. While Schirch offers lists—"places for peacebuilding," "sensual stimuli in peacebuilding," "common peacebuilding symbols," "peacebuilding actions," "informal rituals for peacebuilding"—she gives no real direction; that is, there are no real tips on how to actually apply ritual and symbol when working to resolve conflict. To her credit, Schirch acknowledges the importance of helping communities discover and develop their own rituals rather than imposing some preconceived idea on them; however, we are still left wondering just how ritual and symbol can be thoughtfully introduced to parties in conflict. Finally, the violent imagery of the dancer shooting the Nazi continues to haunt the pages, although it is never mentioned again. Schirch leaves us hanging, wondering how the use of such violent imagery and its important position at the beginning of the book connect with her key insight—that ritual is critical to the peacebuilding process. Despite these discrepancies, anyone who wants to understand the importance of introducing ritual and symbol into the peacebuilding process will gain a clear and supported rationale from this text.

Schirch's work is critical in helping to establish a basis and justification for the use of ritual in peacebuilding. While some have begun to examine the importance of addressing the emotional and symbolic roots of conflict,<sup>3</sup> few have focused on ritual as a key peacebuilding tool.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Schirch's work is critical at a time when peacebuilding efforts around the world seem themselves to be in crisis.

## Notes

1. Peacebuilding (as distinct from peacemaking, peacekeeping, and conflict resolution) tends to focus on the continued economic, political, and social instabilities that groups in conflict face even after the conflict has ended.

2. Jock Covey, Michael J. Dziedzic, and Leonard R. Hawley, eds., *The Quest for Viable Peace: International Intervention and Strategies for Conflict Transformation* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 2005); Roger Fisher and William L. Ury, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* (New York: Penguin, 1991); Roger Fisher and Scott Brown, *Getting Together: Building Relationships As We Negotiate* (New York: Penguin, 1989); John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 1998); William Wilmot and Joyce L. Hocker, *Interpersonal Conflict* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000).
3. Stuart J. Kaufman, "Escaping the Symbolic Politics Trap: Reconciliation Initiatives and Conflict Resolution in Ethnic Wars," *Journal of Peace Research* 43 (2006): 201–18; John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); William J. Long and Peter Brecke, *War and Reconciliation: Reason and Emotion in Conflict Resolution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003); Roger D. Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
4. Marc Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Michelle LeBaron, *Bridging Troubled Waters: Conflict Resolution from the Heart* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002).