A peace-building process is based on activity, acceptance, understanding of political reality, communication, and empowerment. Acceptance means accepting everybody as he or she is and let each know it. This is at the heart of peace work, it is the prerequisite for effective communication, and includes accepting other even in cases of severe disagreement. Peace work requires both an understanding of political reality and the expression of one's own political opinion. Acceptance and the expression of political opinion are not at variance but complementary. Combining acceptance and understanding of the political context provides hope for real communication in which messages are both sent and received, with appreciation and interest. Empowerment implies overcoming of the feeling of powerlessness, often present in conflict by all sides and in all social groups. It includes recovery of self-respect and respect for others. Education and economic independence are important facets of the empowerment concept. Essential principles of peace-building process are responsibility, solidarity, cooperation, and nonviolence. Responsibility encompasses caring for human rights, the suffering of others, and for consequences of our own intended and unintended actions. Solidarity allows learning through listening and understanding. Even with the best intentions on both sides, cooperation may be difficult and painful. Nonviolence is a way of life.

Key words: Bosnia-Herzegovina; civil rights; communication; communication barriers; Croatia; education, nonprofessional; human rights; training programs; war

At the beginning of the war in Croatia in 1991, there was a simple belief that there must be another way – a nonviolent way. A handful of people with whom I started the Antiwar Campaign Croatia shared values of tolerance, human rights, and nonviolence. We believed in humanity, but we did not have any practical experience with nonviolent communication or conflict management. Nonviolence was/is our choice but we did not have the slightest idea how to reach out from bloodshed to a decent life in peace. We thought that perhaps others had some experience, that something had been done in crisis situations all around the world. At least this was our impression, reading newspaper articles about other wars. It soon became clear to us that this was wishful thinking. We looked around to find documents, literature, and any other resources with the idea to apply the experiences from others to our complex situation, with the necessary adaptations. It was surprising that we could not find much written material on the practical work other people performed in similar situations of prolonged conflict and war. There was a small brochure on a particular peacemaking attempt in Cyprus and hardly anything else. Finally we realized that we would have to start from scratch.

In the years between 1991 and 1999, Antiwar Campaign Croatia (ARK, after Antiratna kampanja Hrvatska, the Croatian name of our organization) (1) has grown from a group of less than twenty people into a network of more than twenty organizations. The primary principle of the organization was to get people involved by empowering them to act on their own behalf. Peace and women's (2) and human rights groups in different towns focused on different problems using diverse approaches. The campaign served as an inspiration for some similar projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina (3,4). ARK education projects involved people from different post-Yugoslav countries leading to the establishment of the Center for Peace Studies (5). I will try to present here some of those experiences, as seen through the lens of my work with these people.

Essential Dimensions
When asked what I do I often simply say: “Building peace”. People wonder. How can that be done? Peace might be anything – calmness, absence of war, cooperation – usually something that is not yet here, that is not yet known and experienced. The task is far too broad. And hence there is a need to make peace happen on all levels – from the very personal to the global, as when one wants to nurture life itself.
Word building remains on bricks and mortar – but is actually sophisticated process consisting of acceptance, understanding of political reality and acting accordingly, and communication and
empowerment. Surely there are thousands of different ways of building peace (6). Mine is very much shaped by living through the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is colored by trying to find an appropriate way of responding to violence and creating space among people for civility. In its manifold manifestations, it holds in its essence diversified expressions, like protesting against human rights violations or establishing the Center for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights in Osijek (7,8). For example, on one side, my activities are deeply imbedded in practical work with people. On the other side, I consult a growing treasury of concepts and peace building theories. The most essential dimensions of peace building work are the following.

Acceptance

In 1996, I was standing one sunny day on a street in Gornji Vakuf/Uskoplje, a town in Bosnia and Herzegovina destroyed by war, in a quarter of it populated mostly by Bosnian Moslems, when bells from the church started ringing. I noticed how people around me became tense. It was clear that the sound of bells got on their nerves. As Moslems, they felt that a Catholic bell was provocative. Just a few streets further, in a part of the town populated mostly by Croats, I noticed similar reactions when the muezzin started singing from the minaret of the mosque. His voice was disturbing them. In many places in Bosnia I kept asking people "What are the muezzin's words?" or "Why are the bells ringing?" and found that very few understood that the song from a minaret and the sound of bells are an invitation to worship. The call to prayer for some was provocation for others. That misunderstanding, which existed before the war, now changed to mistrust, which almost had a physical dimension. There were broken threads of communication that could have been rebuilt only with a lot of patience – but does not happen by itself. We may have to work on it for the next thirty or forty years. In our region of the world it might well be the task for the entire first half of the next century.

Acceptance is at the heart of peace work. It means accepting everybody in his or her fullness. When working with people, sending a message of acceptance is especially important if the person was hurt by violence – either a victim of violence or the one who committed violence. Sometimes it is hard to accept and make sure that the person with whom we speak feels that.

When I walked into the home of somebody I was told by neighbors had committed war crimes, I behaved in such a way that the person would not feel my disapproval for him or her, or construe anything I did as a lack of respect. Otherwise I could not walk into his or her home at all – because there would be no basis for communication.

It took me many years to learn that basic lesson about creating an opening for communication by allowing myself to accept others. That does not mean giving up my own opinion of what has happened or being "obedient" or accepting the status quo. One should always keep in mind what has happened and always remain politically aware. It should not be forgotten who did what at which time, who was killed, or who is responsible for war crimes. But that does not need to be expressed through disapproval of the person – who maybe acted disgracefully but has not lost a chance to act ethically in the future. Through the act of acceptance, human capacity for change is cherished.

Understanding of Political Reality

In the moment of showing acceptance, one does not need to forget how important it is to understand political reality. None of us approve of every single act or behavior of another person, or a group of people. Surely, I do not approve of killing, mutilation, and torture. I condemn it. But expressing my political opinion is not at variance but complementary to acceptance. I can accept somebody and disapprove of his acts and deeds. The scalpel of reason, which enables us to understand what is going on around us and helps us articulate our own story about the world that we live in, can also hurt. But we should not give up expressing our opinion. Because saying what we think is also a tool for change.

Combining acceptance and expressing political opinions is an art itself – a rather difficult art. I feel obliged to respond when there is violence or injustice. When feelings of injustice, violence, and hurt are pushed aside and not listened to, sooner or later they will explode in our faces and hurt us again.

Communication

By combining acceptance and understanding of the political context, we can hope for real communication, in which messages are being sent and received with appreciation and interest.

Listening is the beginning of communication. It simply means listening to others, hearing what an individual wants to say or hearing what representatives of a group (especially if marginalized) want to express. That is not easy because in a competitive environment most people try to make their own point and do not hear what others might want to contribute. Cultural patterns, which often determine the context in which we live, do not allow us to really speak to others and, in addition, make us obedient to authority. In overcoming obedience we might find that the support and wisdom of others are crucial for a transformation to a more lively and democratic society.
Communication is not just about speaking out but also about writing. It is important to emphasize that the civil initiatives recognized early in the conflict that the Internet offers a possibility to promote horizontal communication. ZAMIR (9) transnational electronic system, established in 1992, enabled individuals and organizations to communicate across newly established political borders. When the phone lines were cut and mail service no longer functioned between post-Yugoslav countries, it was still essential to keep in touch. So much needed discussion in Croatia and between other countries was taking place more often in cyberspace then in real space. For many it was the medium safe enough for their first public expression of opinion. After first overcoming the fear of public discussion, it became easier to make additional steps and publish an article on this subject in a newspaper, although there have not been many newspapers that would publish something about peace building. Freedom of expression is a right that can be fully enjoyed only when there are independent media. The control of media space during the war in Croatia was eased through the work of several newspapers, which still struggle with state censorship, in order to provide citizens with more complete information. With the exception of electronic mail, other electronic media, such as television, is under the control of governmental institutions, which certainly may pose an obstacle to empowering more people to act.

Empowerment

The prevailing feeling in Croatia and other post-Yugoslav countries seems to be powerlessness. In many places where I have worked, people have been telling me: "We are the biggest victims of war." There is no doubt that there was an enormous amount of suffering on all sides, but what might be the reason that so many people willingly use that as an introductory phrase? Staying in the role of victim, even when there are no medical reasons for it, partially comes out from our cultural heritage in which the role of a victim carries in itself the only power still available. Most people rarely experience that the power of the marginalized can be stronger than the power of the victimized. I realized how important it is to find the strength to grow out of the role of a victim and how important it is to find a way to demand rights and build power to challenge ascribed roles.

Education, which is among the best tools for change, surely plays a significant role in empowerment. In MIRamiDA peace building training, organized in war-torn areas of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, participants have been encouraged to express their fears, wishes, and thoughts, and to realize that action is possible. The model of combining human rights, women's rights, and the peace dimension of education was also later used in curricula development for the first peace studies in Croatia (10).

Empowerment goes through recovery of self-respect but also respect for others, as well as through establishment of economic independence. It is arguably the most important part of the peace building process.

Essential Principles

In 1991 I committed to work for ARK for a year after which I wanted to return to my previous work. What a naive thought! Now that I am aware that peace building has become my life's commitment, I see some essential principles of peace work, which might be useful in other professions, including medicine.

Responsibility

I believe each human being has the responsibility to act and react to violations of human rights. When a person is hurt that is also my business. My field experience shows that the best protection offered is neighbor to neighbor. Spreading that spirit seems to be the best and cheapest defense net, which everybody can afford.

Each of us also has a responsibility for the consequences of our actions, whether intended or not. Living according to this responsibility might be a sign of our real maturity.

Part of the code medical professionals live by is: "In performing service to patients I will not be influenced by religious, national, ethnic, political or class affiliation". This sets a good foundation for peace-building. Some international networks, such as International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (11), speak soundly about the necessity for commitment on behalf of humanity. In Croatia, the promotion of human rights is advocated by Center for Mental Health and Human Rights (12).

Solidarity

Acting in solidarity was the most efficient way of learning and finding out how to listen and understand. It has given me a sense of security that is not based on income but on mutual trust in all the workers with whom I have cooperated on different projects (13). Nothing is more important than a phone call or a letter from the other side – from the "enemy" side – when bombs are falling. Many from all "sides" have called me and supported me in hard times (14). I can never repay this support, even with all my solidarity.
Cooperation
It is sometimes not easy to cooperate even with close friends. I have found out what cooperation is all about while negotiating a joint project in Pakrac, Croatia, a war-torn town in Western Slavonia, which was in the United Nations Protected Area between 1991 and 1995, partially controlled by the Croatian police and partially by Serbian militias. To be able work on both sides of the demarcation line we needed a partner from Serbia. We needed more than one year of preliminary discussions between ARK from Zagreb and Most from Belgrade to start a program of social reconstruction. Volunteer Project Pakrac of ARK was already running when Most started sending volunteers. All involved experienced the hardship of complete misunderstanding. However this harsh beginning eventually turned into a most rewarding cooperation between these two peace groups in Eastern Slavonia a few years later.

Nonviolence
It was not popular to stand for nonviolence in 1991 when war was just starting. But keeping the light of solidarity and tolerance alive made it clear that through those modest attempts the idea of goodness has survived. It became clear only later that what we treasured has survived the ravages of war to become common property again. In a surprising way, those actions became a departure point for the long journey of reconstructing human dignity.

By combining the dimensions and following the principles of peace building in our personal and professional lives, the age old questions of what the peace is or what a worthy life is receive new answers which bear the personal colors of each engaged individual. With joint efforts we might be a step closer to fulfilling our lives.

The results usually come rather late, or even not during our lives. As a famous Greek poet Constantin Cavafis would say, "When you go towards Ithaca, you should wish for a long trip." It is important to be on the way.

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Correspondence to:
Vesna Teršeliè
Center for Peace Studies
Rockfelerova 26
10000 Zagreb, Croatia
vesnat@zamir.net