

## Building Bridges of Understanding and Love

### OBJECTIVES

- To explore multiple meanings in the language of rights.
- To examine bridges of understanding—historical, cultural, religious, or other.
- To discover strategies for creating shared experiences.

### IN THIS SESSION

Working toward a compassionate society means continuously striving for what is best in humanity. A compassionate society is an aspiration, which grows stronger as more people join the effort. It is not something one can intuit, but takes discipline and rigor to manifest. The forces aligned against it—greed, chauvinism, intolerance, and ignorance—are very powerful. Compassion cannot happen by accident. Rather, peace, forgiveness, and love are the products of human effort and intelligence, and a little faith.

In her poem “Splittings,” from *The Dream of a Common Language*, Adrienne Rich wrote, “I choose to love this time for once with all my intelligence.” That is what we are trying to do as well. With all of our intelligence, we are reaching across what divides us—peeling back layers of meaning behind words that hurt, building bridges across differences, and finding common ground on even the most historically violent battlefields.

In this session, we will begin with short excerpts from an article by Chidi Anselm Odinkalu about what can happen to language when it is appropriated by an elite group or class. He cautions that everyday-people fighting for freedom and peace “will not build their struggle around the notion of human rights unless that language and those who wish to popularize it speak directly to their aspirations and survival.” Next we will examine our own language and words that cut differently for different communities. We will consider how different words hold different values and associations for communities on opposite sides of a dispute, and how important it is to understand the power of

words' multiple meanings when trying to build social and emotional bridges among people in conflict. The following reading selections and exercises examine extraordinary efforts of individuals and organizations who were able to build bridges of understanding among people divided by tragedy and violent conflict. From the capital of Liberia, to the line of control in Kashmir, to Ground Zero in New York City, the people in these stories lay the groundwork for greater historical, cultural, and religious understanding, against enormous odds.

The final reading selections are about people creating shared experiences and common ground for communities steeped in mistrust. We will look at what others have done and consider our own ideas for creating shared experiences. We will reflect on the emotional power of shared experiences, and address their transformative capacity and their limits for creating a more compassionate society.

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## READING ASSIGNMENT

*If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.*  
— Nelson Mandela

### Why More Africans Don't Use Human Rights Language

Chidi Anselm Odinkalu<sup>28</sup>

*Excerpts*

...Africa is living through a human rights crisis and a crisis for human rights. It is impossible to locate any African country in which the hope held out by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR),<sup>29</sup> or any of the standards that have mushroomed under it, is not habitually assaulted by a combination of abuse of public power, private privilege, and resulting popular destitution.

While Africa's human rights problems are immense, even ubiquitous, most of our people do not describe their problems in human rights terms. Many communities and groups involved in social justice movements and initiatives in Africa are reluctant to make the Universal Declaration, or language inspired by it, their mascot or medium.

To seek to explain this by reference to the high illiteracy level in Africa—itsself a denial of several human rights—is to avoid the problem. Nor is it enough to wish this alienation away by inveighing against the unfortunate historical fact, true though it is, that Africa was hardly represented when the Universal Declaration was negotiated or adopted. After all, the struggle for independence in Africa predated the UDHR and remains, with the anti-apartheid campaign, the most popular and successful human rights movement known to African peoples.

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28. Chidi Anselm Odinkalu is senior legal officer for the Africa Program of the Open Society Justice Initiative. Odinkalu is a lawyer and advocate from Nigeria and currently also chairs the Governing Council of Nigeria's National Human Rights Commission.

29. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by UN General Assembly in 1948 (at the time the UN was made up of 58 participating nations), is a non-binding declaration of universal aspirations.

What then explains the current crisis of human rights and the retreat from the human rights paradigm as an engine of struggle?

In Africa, the realization of human rights is a very serious business indeed. In many cases it is a life and death matter. From the child soldier, the rural dweller deprived of basic health care, the mother unaware that the next pregnancy is not an inexorable fate, the city dweller living in fear of the burglar, the worker owed several months arrears of wages, and the activist organizing against bad government, to the group of rural women seeking access to land so that they may send their children to school with its proceeds, people are acutely aware of the injustices inflicted upon them. Knowledge of the contents of the Universal Declaration will hardly advance their condition... .

**While Africa's human rights problems are immense, even ubiquitous, most of our people do not describe their problems in human rights terms.**

The current human rights movement in Africa—with the possible exception of the women's rights movement and faith-based social justice initiatives—appears almost by design to exclude the participation of the people whose welfare it purports to advance. . . . Instead of being the currency of a social justice or conscience-driven movement, “human rights” has increasingly become the specialized language of a select professional cadre with its own rites of passage and methods of certification.

All this is not to say that we should do away with the norms of human rights or with groups that purport to promote or defend them. Human rights norms articulate values that are truly universal and essential. . . . People will struggle for their rights whether or not the language of human rights is accessible to them. But they will not build their struggle around the notion of human rights unless that language and those who wish to popularize it speak directly to their aspirations and survival.<sup>30</sup>

## QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- What is Chidi Anselm Odinkalu saying is the problem with the international language of human rights?
- What is the harm in devaluing the currency of human rights language? Ultimately, who is served when the international human rights discourse carries little meaning or bears little weight?
- What do you think needs to happen for the language from the international human rights documents to have greater relevance for the peace and freedom advocates that Odinkalu is writing about?
- What are the long-term advantages of international human rights standards becoming part of the discourse and strategy of African rights advocates?

30. Excerpts from, “Why More Africans Don't Use Human Rights Language,” by Chidi Anselm Odinkalu, *Human Rights Dialogue* 2.1 (Winter 1999), December 5, 1999. Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs. [http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/archive/dialogue/2\\_01/articles/602.html](http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/archive/dialogue/2_01/articles/602.html).

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## | GROUP EXERCISE

*The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.*

— George Bernard Shaw

*That's what careless words do. They make people love you a little less.*

— Arundhati Roy

Amid social tensions and conflict, language and what people say to one another take on enormous importance. Words can be a lifeline between warring parties seeking to end the violence. Or they can be a match thrown into a puddle of gasoline, inciting rage and destruction. There are many words that carry multiple meanings depending on which side of a conflict you are on. Some words are never neutral. Being aware that one's words might mean different things to different people is indispensable in advocating for peace and human rights. Anticipating misunderstandings gives you the chance to communicate better and to hear what others are really mean to say.

Below is a list of words that are sometimes fraught with multiple meanings. Ask the group to discuss several or all of the words below, and what they might signify for different people and why. Participants may have additional words to add to the list for their discussion.

As you go through the list, write each word on a board or large piece of paper along with the participants' comments about its meanings and the different values associated with it.

(The group should pick which words it wants to discuss. You can add any additional words that participants identify for the discussion.)

Affirmative action	Fundamentalist	Non-state actors
Appeasement	Gender sensitivity	Peacemaking
Civil disobedience	Gender violence	Pluralism
Civil rights	Genocide	Proportionality
Collective punishment	Globalization	Protesting
Collective responsibility	Honor	Quiet diplomacy
Compromise	Human rights	Quotas
Cultural rights	Justice	Radicalism
Equality	Love	Reconciliation
Feminism	Nationalism	Revenge
Freedom	Peace-keeping	Security
Equity		

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## | QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- Which words were open to the widest interpretations or had the most meanings?
- How can being aware of words that are fraught with multiple interpretations help in coalition-building and negotiations?

Humans are enormously resilient and resourceful. In and as much as horrific acts have driven people apart, they have also brought people together in profound and durable ways. History is filled with examples of inexplicable friendships and extraordinary alliances that demonstrate humanity's capacity for decency and grace. Building bridges across cultures makes us wiser, but building bridges across tragedy and conflict makes us powerful.

Three remarkable stories follow about people living in conflict, building bridges of understanding and peace.

## Liberian Women for Peace: Turning God's Ear

For nearly a decade, warlords and rebel groups sought to dislodge long-time Liberian strongman and president, Charles Taylor. In the battles between Taylor's military troops and the anti-Taylor militant groups, civilians were caught in the middle—murdered, raped, or forced to fight themselves. Villages were destroyed and children were turned into soldiers.

In July 2002, two courageous Liberian women, Leymah Gbowee and Comfort Freeman, from different Lutheran churches, recruited several hundred women of faith to speak out against the violence. Their message read: "In the past we were silent, but after being killed, raped, dehumanized, and infected with diseases, and watching our children and families destroyed, war has taught us that the future lies in saying NO to violence and YES to peace! We will not relent until peace prevails."

At a gathering of the Christian women, a Muslim woman, Asatu Bah Kenneth, spoke out and vowed to organize Muslim women to join their peace efforts. They called their new organization "Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace." On April 1, 2003, Christian and Muslim women united to protest the devastating war. More than 3,000 women participated in protests across the capital Monrovia. One of the organizers, Vaiba Flomo, asked, "Can the bullet pick and choose? Does the bullet know Christian from Muslim?"

As the ranks of the women protestors swelled, international pressure for a solution to the conflict mounted. President Taylor agreed to meet with rebels for peace talks, but there was little progress. "Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace" occupied the building where the two sides were negotiating and refused to leave until peace was announced. People brought the women food, water, and encouragement. Within weeks, Charles Taylor was forced to resign and was exiled to Nigeria, charged by the UN with crimes against humanity.

Leymah Gbowee, who in 2009 was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, said, "The people of Liberia have hope. Our vision is for the unity of families and the elimination of hunger and disease. We believe God's hands are under us in this effort now. God has turned his ears toward us."<sup>31</sup>

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31. Information for this story was collected from: "The Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace: Women can make the difference," by Lucie Gil, Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, 2013; <https://culturaldiplomacyinafrica.wordpress.com/2013/05/23/the-women-of-liberia-mass-action-for-peace-women-can-make-the-difference/>; "Women's Peace Movement of Liberia," by Amanda Molinaro, Peacemaker Heroes, March 2015; [http://myhero.com/hero.asp?hero=womens\\_peace\\_movement\\_liberia\\_08](http://myhero.com/hero.asp?hero=womens_peace_movement_liberia_08); "Liberian women act to end civil war, 2003," by Kylin Navarro, edited by Max Rennebohn, Global Nonviolent Action Database, <http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/liberian-women-act-end-civil-war-2003>.

## Kashmiri Women Breaking the Silence

Allison Horowski<sup>32</sup>

Ashima Kaul grew up in North Kashmir near the military line of control on the highly contested India/Pakistan border. A Kashmiri Pandit, she was raised in an inclusive environment and attended a missionary school that welcomed students and teachers of all backgrounds and religious affiliations, including Catholics, Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus. In 1990, Ashima was living in New Delhi with her husband and young daughter when Kashmir erupted into violence. She was a freelance journalist writing on issues such as the environment, economic development, and gender, but was distanced from the social and political issues in Kashmir.

It was not until 1997, when a family friend gave Ashima a tip for a story, that she became more involved in the struggles of Jammu and Kashmir. The tip led her to a Muslim Kashmiri hospital, which was understaffed, unsanitary, and overwhelmed with women seeking care and family planning while their husbands and children filled the waiting rooms. Many were rural women who had traveled long distances to the hospital and had to return home immediately because they could not afford to stay the night. Ashima saw firsthand the toll of the Kashmir conflict on women, an aspect that she had never heard about in the news. She said, “this woke me from my slumber.” Ashima decided to return to the Kashmir region.

For two years, Ashima traveled from village to village, talking to women from different backgrounds and religious affiliations about their experiences. Despite their differences, Ashima realized that the women had valuable stories to share. All were deeply affected by the conflict, but, as women, their perspectives were minimized or ignored altogether, even within their own communities.

Convinced of the power of women to rebuild peace in Kashmir and Jammu, in 2000 Ashima founded *Athwaas* with several others, an organization to promote dialogue among the women of Kashmir. *Athwaas*, which means “handshake” in Kashmiri, was established to promote women as peacemakers. Women from around the Kashmir region traveled to New Delhi to participate in “Breaking the Silence,” an *Athwaas* conference for women to discuss the conflict and how it affected them. The conference was so successful that *Athwaas* became a traveling group in 2001, going to rural areas throughout Kashmir. A group of ten women, including Pandits, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, all from Kashmir, traveled from village to village, meeting with the women in each community. Ashima believed that despite their differences, *Athwaas* could be a way for women to “share their own realities.” As Ashima explained, the women did not have to agree with one another, but they could acknowledge each other’s painful experiences as they in turn shared their own.

Throughout their travels, the leaders of *Athwaas* strove to be neutral in the face of divisive and long-standing conflicts. Their hope was to promote the capacity of Kashmiri women to be a powerful force for peace by building common ground. As Ashima described it, “choosing sides is divisive and harmful to one’s identity.” The women they met with, including widows, Muslims, and Pandit

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32. Allison Horowski, Women’s Learning Partnership’s Program Associate for Events and Publications, interviewed Ashima Kaul Dec. 2, 2014 in Washington, DC, for this story.

refugees, shared stories of their experiences and survival. Many said it was the first time anyone had asked them for their perspective. Among the women themselves, often it was the first time they had heard another point of view.

*Athwaas'* work continued for ten years. For many women, forgiveness was a difficult process, but the dialogues in *Athwaas* were a step toward rebuilding the communities that had been torn apart by conflict.

**[P]eace is an intimate process....**

In 2010, the violence in Kashmir was ignited again, destabilizing the entire region and forcing *Athwaas* to put its work on hold. Ashima, however, continues her work encouraging others to work towards peace and is now running training workshops for Kashmiri youth. As she notes, “peace is an intimate process,” and she encourages participants to deconstruct their own prejudices to reveal their compassion, love, and humanity.

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## 9/11 Victim’s Mother Expresses Forgiveness 10 Years After

Tala Hadavi, Voice of America

*Excerpts*

*Sept. 13, 2011*

Many Americans felt the need to retaliate after the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001. And ever since then, U.S. forces have waged a world-wide war against the Islamic extremists who claimed responsibility. But not all Americans seek retribution to ease their pain. Phyllis Rodriguez is one mother who expresses forgiveness, not hate, toward those who killed her son 10 years ago on September 11.

Phyllis Rodriguez’s son Greg died in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. He was a computer specialist working on the 103<sup>rd</sup> floor of the north tower. She recalls how she found out that something terrible had happened that Tuesday morning.

“On our answering machine was a message from Greg, our son, that said, ‘There’s been a terrible accident at the World Trade Center. I’m OK, call Elizabeth,’ our daughter-in-law.” But Greg Rodriguez was not OK and neither were nearly 3,000 others. “I was just hoping, hoping that he had survived, and not allowing myself to admit the worst,” recalled Rodriguez.

That came soon enough when Greg Rodriguez was declared dead. And with it came his parents’ conscious decision to make a difference. “The main thing that we realized very early the morning of the 12<sup>th</sup> is that our government, given its history, was going to do something military and violent in retaliation in the name of our son and that that wasn’t going to do any good and we didn’t support it.” Phyllis Rodriguez and her husband Orlando released an open letter to then President George W.

Bush. “It ended up being circulated around the country and around the world. It was part of the way that helped us cope with the loss,” Rodriguez explained.

The couple wanted no part of revenge. They opposed the death penalty for the man who became known as the 20<sup>th</sup> hijacker, Zacarias Moussaoui. Phyllis befriended Zacarias’ mother, Aicha el-Wafi. “I felt that this woman has to be very, very courageous because her son is the most hated person probably at the moment and here she was standing up for her son,” said Rodriguez. “We realized what we had in common was our common humanity. We were human beings. It is a very valuable part of my life and my healing.”

... Phyllis Rodriguez says she copes with the loss of her only son by opposing war and participating in human rights and forgiveness projects. “I don’t think it happened for a reason, but it did happen and I feel fortunate that I had the inner resources to respond in the way that I did,” Rodriguez said.

Rodriguez says she is at peace knowing she will never see her son again, but is not at peace with the state of the world. That is why, she says, she is trying to make a difference.<sup>33</sup>

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## | GROUP ACTIVITY

Ask the participants what themes unite the three stories above: Liberian women coming together for peace, Kashmiri women sharing stories, and Phyllis Rodriguez meeting Aicha el-Wafi? Record the answers on a board or large piece of paper.

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## | QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- What did the Christian and Muslim Liberian women have in common? What did the Kashmiri women participating in Athwaas have in common with each other? What did Phyllis Rodriguez and Aicha el-Wafi share?
- Was the source of the women’s power the same in each story? Why or why not? What was their source of power?
- Do you have any power in your life that comes from working with people who are very different from yourself? Can you describe that power?
- Do you think you would be empowered by connecting and dialoguing with others with whom you have been in conflict? Why or why not?
- What are some groups of people you think would benefit from finding common ground? What do you think they have in common? What could they accomplish if they could unite?

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33. “9/11 Victim’s Mother Expresses Forgiveness 10 Years After,” by Tala Hadavi, Voice of America (VOA) News/USA, September 13, 2011. <http://www.voanews.com/content/article-911-victims-mother-expresses-forgiveness-10-years-after-129804118/174865.html>.



## *How do people live with the knowledge that their neighbors wanted to kill them?*

Anne Hoiberg, US-based psychologist and former president of the San Diego United Nations Association, traveled to Bosnia in 1995 to supervise voter registration. During the three-year war in the Balkans, citizen and voter records had been destroyed. The fragile peace accord had patched together a political solution to the conflict, but the extreme tension between neighbors, Bosnians, Serbs, and Croats was still palpable. Anne met with WLP staff in 2014 and shared the following story about how some people dealt with the constant animosity that threatened to explode into violence:

As Anne described it, there was a pervasive atmosphere of sadness from the conflict that left the people who remained ragged and downtrodden. Anne asked “How do people live with the knowledge that their neighbors wanted to kill them?” One coping technique was the Sunday coffee gatherings that her Bosnian landlord held for the community, sometimes as many as five gatherings in one day. Men and women came to talk with one another to heal and alleviate their hatred. This communication allowed the community to find common ground and to begin to move forward after the trauma and violence they had endured. This counseling, informal as it was, allowed people to persevere in the face of horrific tragedy and start to rebuild their community.<sup>34</sup>

## **Goma Festival Seeks Healing, Peace Through Music**

Hilary Heuler, Voice of America

*Excerpts*

*February 18, 2015*

Several years ago, fed up with the violence engulfing their region, a youth group in Goma set out to hold a music festival for peace. The first attempt in 2013 was canceled as mortars rained down on the city. But in 2014, 25,000 people came to Goma to hear their favorite Congolese artists play. . . . Now in its second year, the Amani Music Festival has started to attract some of the continent’s biggest names, despite recent clashes in the area.

For decades Goma has been synonymous with crises. Desperate refugees converged on the city after the Rwandan genocide in 1994. In 2002, a nearby volcano buried part of the city in molten lava. Various rebel groups have taken and re-taken Goma in recent years, including M23, which was driven out of the area in 2013.

34. Lina Abou-Habib and Allison Horowski, Women’s Learning Partnership, interviewed Anne Hoiberg at the ‘Defying Extremism’ conference hosted by the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice, University of San Diego, in California, November 2014.

One ambitious youth group dared to imagine that their city could be different, however, and they seized on the idea of music. Vianney Bisimwa, one of the youth group's organizers, said they wanted to change the image of a town slowly clawing its way back to stability.

“We went through war, and the war really negatively impacted the promotion of culture,” said Bisimwa. “So the idea was, how can we try to change the way people see this town? Because all the reports on DRC were, ‘don’t go there, people are killed, there is no way, no hope, no future. . . . People were really traumatized, there was a lot of frustration, there was anger. There were many things coming from this experience of this special year of struggling with M23. So the first edition was an opportunity for people to breath,” said Bisimwa. Peace, he added, is a process. He said he hopes events like this finally will get people talking about the past, and thinking about the future.”<sup>35</sup>

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## Religious Leaders Gather in Good Faith to ‘Make a Difference’

Elvina Fernandez, Voice of America

*Excerpts*

*October 15, 2015*

Thousands made their way to the Go MAD (Go Make A Difference) carnival at the Church of Visitation, Seremban [in Malaysia], yesterday. Leaders and followers of different faiths came together to join in the celebration, with the theme “Mission Towards Transforming Humanity.”

The carnival featured a dunk tank, face painting, rock climbing, an inflatable playground and various food stalls. There were also entertaining performances by church members and the local community.

Parish priest Father Harrison said the carnival kept in mind the need to welcome all races and religions to come together and unite in their differences. “It is time to open our church and welcome brothers and sisters of other faiths to come together as one,” he said.

The Go MAD carnival began with the reciting of Quranic verses. This was followed by Hindu Sangam Negri Sembilan reciting Hindu holy scriptures. The Sikh community was represented by Giani Napinder Singh and the Buddhists by vice-chairman Goh Kim Seng.

The Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur later joined these representatives in releasing two white doves as a symbol of purity and peace. He declared that such events should be held more often to bring the various races together. “Such events should be held more often to prove that Malaysians can live peacefully together.”<sup>36</sup>

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35. Voice of America, <http://www.voanews.com/content/goma-festival-seeks-healing-peace-through-music/2648987.html>.

36. The Malaysian Insider. <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/citynews/seremban/article/religious-leaders-gather-in-good-faith-to-make-a-difference/religious-leaders-gather-in-good-faith-to-make-a-difference>.

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## QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- How do you think the participants felt in each of the activities above?
- Do you believe that meeting in a café, dancing at a concert, or playing at a multi-faith festival can make a difference in a community? Why?
- What sort of connections are being formed among the participants at the different events? What are the organizations trying to accomplish? What do you think is accomplished? Tolerance? Forgiveness? Love?
- What types of activities could communities engage in to bring more women together from the sides in conflict?

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## TEAM EXERCISE

From informal meetings in cafés to traveling panels of women leaders, common ground can be established nearly anywhere. The spaces need to be safe, violence-free zones, where people can simply talk to one another, and listen to each other. Sometimes, the most valuable space is one in which the issues that divide the community are not discussed at all, but instead the participants focus entirely on something that brings them mutual joy. These can be sports competitions, musical performances, art shows, plays, building projects, community picnics, joint-religious services, youth councils, computer classes, cookbooks, book fairs—the list is endless.

Divide the group into teams of four or five participants. Ask the teams to consider communities in conflict in their neighborhood, village, city, or country and to choose one. Next ask the teams to plan an event or project that would bring the people in the community together. Ask the teams to consider:

- What is their plan?
- Where would the event be held or project take place?
- Who would be invited?
- How long would it last?
- What measures would be taken to ensure everyone felt safe?
- What could be accomplished?

Ask a volunteer from each team to take notes on the team's plan. When the group reconvenes, each team volunteer should report on her team's idea.

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## QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- Which project gatherings stood out for you the most? Why?
- Do you think the gatherings were realistic? Why or why not?
- How do these sorts of gatherings promote tolerance? How do these sorts of gatherings promote human rights?
- Do you think there is a spiritual component to gathering people together? Why or why not?
- If you do think there is a spiritual component, what is it?
- Do you think opposing sides to a conflict, or victims of human rights violations, can ever love their former enemies? What would it take for love to exist where there was formerly only hate?