CommonVisions: Photography and Conflict Transformation

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Positive community change came in a place long entrenched in racism through the *CommonVisions: Photographic Explorations of Unity in Diversity project*. Here an arts-based photography project was used as a means to overcome racism, a major impediment to peace, equity and justice in the world. It was built on the concept of the oneness of humanity, a Bahá'í principle, and was listed in the 2000 *Directory of Faith Based Promising Practices for Racial Unity and Justice* of the National Conference of Community and Justice (NCCJ) and was a grant project selected for the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation (ZSR) "Race Will Not Divide Us" initiative. Since verbal dialogues on racism were often derailed and stifled by entrenched prejudices, *CommonVisions* was designed as a bridge over that verbal quagmire. It applied new strategies using the universal language of photography and a medical model to bring relief and healing from the disease of racism. This article gives peace and conflict studies practitioners a glimpse at the seldom seen evolutionary steps on the winding pathway from concept to praxis.

Keywords: Creating race unity, Photography as a change agent, Bahá'í, Faith-based change project, Conflict transformation through art

"The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera, Dorothea Lange once wrote ..." (Kirsch, 1978, p. N1)

"...one thing about the pictures is it's almost like a window. It allows us to see through the eyes of someone else and gives us insight into what the other person may be feeling or how their life is or how they perceive something." (Participant comment in Easterling, 2000, p. 5)

I am a photographer and educator with a passion for seeking peace, justice, and our common humanity. This article seeks to lay out the elements of my project *CommonVisions: Photographic Explorations of Unity in Diversity* (see Figure 1) that blended dialogue with photography to heal the wounds of racism.

Figure 1. Portraits of participants in the *CommonVisions* project, illustrating their racial, cultural, and generational diversity and the *CommonVisions* logo.

From Concept to Praxis
To understand the power implicit in using photography to facilitate healing racism visualize this scene: you are sitting in a circle, with fellow community members from very diverse backgrounds to discuss racism. All are looking at a photograph of a car with a confederate flag license plate (Figure 2). It was taken that week by a participant in the circle as part of the assignment to "show us the barriers you face." Imagine the dialogue that followed. -- Now imagine that dialogue without the photograph. The photograph made concrete a participant's point of view to all who saw it and helped shift focus to the issue, not just the person sharing it.

Figure 2. A participant's photograph of a car with a confederate flag license plate for an assignment to: "show us the barriers you face."

In my experience, approaching the healing of racism through verbal means alone often lead to frustration. Interactions that were solely verbal seemed to facilitate the mechanisms of "denial, deception, secrecy, minimization, intellectualization, displacement, and rationalization" (Stevens & Spears, 2009, p.9), and cloaked the guilt, pain, and personal responsibility to address racism. The result of the display of these symptoms was to thwart progress, undermine trust, bolster resistance to change, and hinder individual transformation (Fisher & Ury, 1981 p. 20). *CommonVisions* was designed to carry participants over this verbal quicksand by taking the form of an action oriented non-verbal photography activity.

Design of the Structure

"Racism is a major barrier to peace," an *"outrageous…violation of the dignity of human beings,"* that *"retards the unfoldment of the boundless potentialities of its victims, corrupts its perpetrators, and blights human progress."* (Universal House of Justice, 1986, p. 7)

CommonVisions used a medical (or disease) model as its approach to overcoming racism (Skillings & Dobbins, 1991; Webel & Galtung, 2007). The dialogues facilitated a diagnosis of the nature, symptoms, manifestations, and perpetuation of the disease of racism. They also framed a prognosis of potential human health, alliance, unity, and justice expressed by the oneness of humanity. The gestalt of *CommonVisions* fostered a therapeutic healing process creating a safe space for learning and unlearning, making mistakes and re-framing identities, to ultimately build trust and bonds of friendship across racial lines. Figure 3 showing a fence above and water below were described by

the photographer as visual metaphors for the barriers faced by Latinos crossing the border from Mexico into the United States. This photograph acted as a visual diagnosis of the illness required before the process of applying a remedy.

Figure 3. Two photographs taken by a participant of Mexican-American background to illustrate the assignment: "show us the barriers you face."

Dialogues centered on nine diagnostic and prognostic topics: defining prejudice and racism, perpetuating racism, stereotypes, white privilege, internalized oppression, the oneness of humanity, unity in diversity and ally building (Center for the Healing of Racism, 2013). Trust was built as participants pursued a common creative task creating photographs. Dialogue on these topics was infused into photo sharing and photo taking sessions.

A logic model (Figure 4) was designed in collaboration with Dr. Doug Easterling[2]. It models program activities, program-level outcomes and community-level outcomes as cited above but with a directional flow indicating strengths and challenges.

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[2] Doug Easterling, Ph.D. was director of the Division for Community-Based Evaluation, Center for the Study of Social Issues at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro and director of assessment for ZSR's twenty-three grant projects. He personally assessed the CommonVisions project.

CommonVisions, Asheboro

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES **PROGRAM-LEVEL OUTCOMES** **COMMUNITY-LEVEL OUTCOMES**

Participants connect with
- family, friends and strangers
- own culture
- different cultures

Racially Diverse Group of Participants
- Take photographs on assigned topics
- Discuss the photos and associated experiences, issues
- Group dialogue
  - *racism and prejudice*
  - *honesty*
  - *unity in diversity*
- Journaling

Participants Gain:
- Increased awareness about
  - *one another as people*
  - *racial/cultural differences*
  - *commonalties across race*
  - *the disease of racism*
- Communications skills
- Photography skills
- Journaling skills

Leadership

New Ideas

Role models

More and healthier interactions across racial /cultural divides.

Increased:
- *unity*
- *understanding across races, cultures*

Overcome fear of differences

Participants form their own community amongst each other

Group show, public dialogue

Increased public awareness of :
- race issues
- commonalties
- who makes up "the community"

Catalogue, video

ZSR

Replication in other sites

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Figure 4. *CommonVisions* Logic Model

In his assessment of the project Easterling (2000) observed "Although the dialogue was a critical feature in *CommonVisions*, it is unclear that a 'straight' dialogue based program would have allowed participants to share as openly and personally as they did. The photography element of the program balanced the dialogue by providing participants with

a concrete task … photography served as an effective tool for sharing experiences and feelings with one another" (pp. 5-6.). Figure 5 Is an example of how a young African-American participant made a self-portrait in her home environment that shared personal context and meaning about her life to her fellow participants.

Figure 5. A young female participant took this self-portrait on her front porch in rural North Carolina as part of a photography assignment: "Show us who you are."

As a participant commented, *"The camera has become the tool for us to give one another a view of who is within our heart"* (Easterling 2000, p.6).

Project goals were to effect transformation on two levels: personal and community. Personal level goals were a) an increased awareness of each other's humanity, b) exploring unity in our diversity c) exploring the oneness of humanity, d) understanding the disease of racism, and e) nurturing community and relationship building between participants. Community level goals were to a) build leadership, b) foster new ideas, and c) create role models to overcome racism.

These goals were achieved using photography in two different ways. The first was to have individuals take photographs in their own personal spaces, aware their images would be shared with the group. Participants were provided single use film cameras to complete these assignments. The commonality of a simple inexpensive film camera leveled the technical experience between participants. This basic photographic tool belied its powerful transformative capacity. Photographic assignments sent participants on visual explorations to share self-portraits, their home place, family, friends, school, and place of worship as well as historic family photos. Specific photographic assignments asked them to visually illustrate: "the barriers you face," "show us who you are," "unity in diversity" and, "the oneness of humanity."

The second way these goals were achieved was by taking photographs during group sessions using professional equipment (with assistance), and Polaroid instant film in a college photography studio as a part of regular meetings there (Figure 4). This public

process of making photographs was more deliberate and included an element of performance. Group members could design and construct images with fellow participants, using wardrobe, props and posing to convey literal or metaphoric meaning and illustrate their experience and learning non-verbally. Aligned to the relationship between storyteller and listener, the intimate interaction of photographer and subject cultivated unity and respect through the simple compassionate act of being really seen by another (Senehi, 2002). Another level of intimacy and trust was built during this group work.

An example is seen in Figure 6, with a photograph designed by an African American participant. The upper image shows him draped in chains, a symbol of his ancestor's enslavement and the oppression of racism. The lower image depicts white and black hands bound together by chains illustrating that racism entraps both the oppressed and the oppressor (Freire, 1993).

Figure 6. These two images were taken during a group studio photography session.

During sharing sessions participants' photographs were projected for all to see and quickly built mutual trust as they visually invited each other into their lives. The collective picture taking and viewing experiences often became a "symbolic transformative act" in a specialized and transforming ritualistic space. Personal stories accompanied each photograph encouraging group interaction (LeBaron, 2005; Minow, 1998; Schirch, 2005). These sessions created a unique shared space that gave participants opportunities to forgive and ask for forgiveness, see through the eyes of others, recreate personal identities, establish a new worldview, and build new friendships (Egerton, 2000). Important issues of reconciliation and forgiveness were addressed in discussions and gained meaning as they were directly processed in context of photographs made on their own and in small groups. The non-verbal, creative expression in these sessions provided a much-needed bridge over potential verbal intractability (Helmick & Peterson, 2001, p. 20-22; LeBaron, 2005, 238; Zehr, 1995, p. 47).

CommonVisions **Participants and Their Participation**

"Our differences are superficial, our commonality runs much deeper." Participant comment. (Egerton 2001).

Over one hundred *CommonVisions* participants had national origins in the United States, Nicaragua, Canada, Panama, Mexico, Pakistan, Lebanon, Niger, Spain and Vietnam. They represented Cherokee, Sioux, Hmong, Black Indian, Middle Eastern, African American, European American, North American, and mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds, many languages, wide-ranging educational levels and ages from twelve to sixty four (see Figure 7). They were also religiously diverse, coming from Jewish, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, and Bahá'í as well as agnostic and atheist perspectives. This participant diversity was vital to the goals of the project and provided opportunities for interaction and learning not possible elsewhere in the community.

Figure 7. This group photograph of nineteen participants was taken in one of the *CommonVisions*' studio sessions. Participants often wanted group photos as a document of their identity with the project to demonstrate their unity in diversity.

Figures 7 and 8 express both the cohesion of participants and their enjoyment being and working together in *CommonVisions*. Acquiring a collective identity to be part of a group that could bring transformation, and individually as artists creating something new were key factors in generating a healing environment.

Figure 8. A studio photography session showing two female participants, the portrait subject is white and the photographer who is Latina, assisted with professional equipment by photography students.

Participants selected photographs for a final exhibit and installed them in a local art gallery. They wrote captions, descriptions, stories, poems and quotations to accompany their images. The exhibit's opening event included a dialogue between *CommonVisions* photographers and the public, friends, and family. They often drew two to three hundred people including television and print media coverage. The project also developed an active website (Egerton 2005) to make *CommonVisions* available to a wider audience[3].

Figure 9. A photograph of the first gallery show of *CommonVisions* designed and hung by the participants themselves.

Captions can be seen next to each photograph in Figure 9. It was in this space on opening night that the participants held a dialogue with friends, family, and the public on the learning and experience of the project.

Easterling (2000) noted, "The task of reducing racism in Randolph County involves a substantial change in the community's culture and character. *CommonVisions* employs a highly principled, yet somewhat subtle model for promoting community change – by relying on a cadre of enlightened residents who work to raise awareness (and self-awareness) of the people they interact with" (p.11). This "subtle model" was disarming to resistance and denial, and an essential feature of the project. It helped bypass the full force of opposition and resistance to change, and also cultivated a sense of intimacy among participants making dialogue honest and reduced the fear of making mistakes. "One of the things about this group," a participant observed, "is the

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[3] http://www.commonvisions.org

sincerity…They say things that they feel. That opening is what makes the group …
We're here to talk and try to solve the problems and communicate and learn from each
other. That's very rich" (Easterling, 2000, p.11). Placing emphasis on the creative act
helped recruit participants and reduce the anxiety encounters on racism can provoke,
nurtured trust, and softened participant and public perceptions. "*CommonVisions*
provided a safe place for individuals to dredge up and work through painful memories –
not only incidents where a person of color was wronged on account of his or her race, but
also incidents where a white person acknowledged culpability in perpetrating racism"
(Easterling, 2000, p. 6).

The Bridge

 *"Like many of the expressive therapies, photo therapy is a way for clients to access
thoughts and feelings that may not come to the surface in talk therapy,"* It *"… puts them
into the mode where they put aside a verbal, logical side to gain memories and insights"*
(Train-Blank, 2009, p.15)

Another observation gleaned from the field of photo therapy informs us that the innate
qualities of photography can be a means to transformation and healing because a

> … photograph has the ability to transport a client from a state of anxiety to a state
> of relaxation by encouraging deep, often critical, engagement of alternative
> communication. Although studies have produced little research data, the results
> seem to indicate that nonverbal and artistic verbal communication modes are
> effective ways of expressing hard-to-reach feelings. (Stevens & Spears, 2009,
> p.10)

Figures 10 and 11 are examples of expressing the trust participants had in each other to
share this "relaxation" and illustrates the power of the "magic mirror" to reflect self
image and family intimacy to others.

Figure 10. A self-portrait taken by a young Latino male participant

Figure 11. Photograph by a participant showing the intimacy of Latino family life seldom shared with others and illustrating the assignment: "show us who you are."

The Magic Mirror

 An overview of the development and implications of photographic communication will help underpin photography's potential in peace and conflict studies praxis. When photography emerged in 1839, the remarkable images so faithfully recorded visual reality on polished metal and glass they were called "magic mirrors." (Rosenblum, 2007, p.15; Magic Mirror, 1858) Photographic portraits became the rage when high quality mirrors were rare. At that time many people could not recognize their own faces, as the photographer Nadar reported his portrait customers often left his studio having picked up the wrong portrait (Ewing, 2012, p.12). As the popularity and accessibility of photography grew, its capacity to "mirror" the world in a permanent visual way and express shared meaning solidified relationships and built community (Lederach, 1995). For example, in 1843, English poet Elizabeth Barrett wrote to a friend about her emotional attachment to photographic portraits of her family:

> I long to have such a memorial of every being dear to me in the world. It is not merely the likeness which is precious … but the association and the sense of nearness involved in the thing … the fact that the *very shadow* of the person lying there fixed forever! (Sontag, 1973, p.161).

Barrett was referring to the fact that a photograph is formed from actual rays of light reflected off a sitter's face and captured onto light sensitive materials, making the image intimately related to the subject. The world shrank as these pictures could be held in one's hand. For the first time in human history common folk were able to suspend time and preserve images of family and friends. Without travel or personal experience one could see famous faces, events and distant landscapes, all displayed in exquisite realistic detail. The capacity of the photographic image to create socially unified meaning changed the way we see the world. The technical ability to make photographs quickly passed from experts to amateurs. Today cellphone cameras are in almost every pocket and those images can be easily shared immediately with wide audiences on social media such as Facebook®, Twitter®, Intagram®, and Snapchat®. It is now common for

individuals to assemble collections of hundreds of selfies[4]. More images, it is said, have been uploaded to Facebook® than are stored in the U.S. Library of Congress at a rate of about three hundred million per day. The overwhelming popularity of photographs in social media is evidence of how much we value our self-image and viewing images of others. In less than two hundred years, the use of photography has become seamlessly integrated into our daily lives, has transformed self-image, and strengthened our sense of common humanity. But how does non-verbal photographic communication affect social cohesion, and transform conflicts?

The photograph in Figure 12 is illustrative of the conflict between what we think about an image and how it makes us feel. Its contents can be easily described, categorized, counted, listed and measured, but how it makes us feel and what it means depends on ones own worldview and is far more difficult, if not impossible, to describe verbally.

Figure 12. A portrait taken during a *CommonVisions* studio session depicts an African-American woman close to the camera and a white man in the background.

The following section describes why and how the merger of photography and dialogue came about in *CommonVisions* and the reasoning behind the assertion that verbal methods alone were deficient in the pursuit of racial healing and justice.

Non-verbal Communication and the Brain[5]

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[3] "selfy" is a term coined to describe photographic self-portraits uploaded to social media.
[5] Pop culture hijacked and oversimplified the scientific findings of hemispheric asymmetry into "popular dichotomies." This discussion acknowledges that the whole brain is in some way involved in most all

It is generally accepted that the right hemispheres of the brain are responsible for sensations, images, and the nonverbal multiple meanings of words, and the left hemispheres appear to be responsible for processing language ... (Stevens & Spears, 2009, pp. 8-9).

Photography is particularly important to peace building for two reasons. First, it functions as a permanent shared record of a perception of who, what, where, when and how; it visually encodes culture and meaning as writing and storytelling do verbally (Senehi, 2002, p. 43). And second, it bears through time a visual representation of a sliver of time and space, each viewing evoking an emotional response akin to re-experiencing the moment itself (McGilchrist, 2009). One only has to recall viewing the Zapruder film of John F. Kennedy's assassination or the terrorist falling of the World Trade Center towers to understand this. Again tapping into the knowledge gained through photo therapy, the "meaning of any photograph lies less in its visual facts and more in what these details evoke inside the mind (and heart) of each viewer" (Weiser 2007, p. 4).

A photograph has the power to stand simultaneously as a visual record and as a meaningful visual metaphor, giving meaning by comparison to things words cannot express (LeBaron, 2003; Lederach, 1995; Zehr, 2005). Furthermore, "photography can bring awareness of self and the environment, providing an opportunity to gain insight and opening doors to healing" (Trainin-Blank, 2009, p.15).

The brain's hemispheric asymmetry is essential to the discussion of how photography can be used to dismantle racism in the context of peace building. Similar to the many lenses of social cubism, our two hemispheres are wired to see the world from very different points of view while at the same time coordinating, assembling, and grasping a unified personal reality (Carter & Byrne 2002; McGilchrist, 2009, p.2).

The left hemisphere's mode of processing breaks information down into parts and pieces and sees details, distinctions and sharp dichotomies. It names, categorizes, and expresses what it knows in words and language. It views the world as though it were parts of a machine. It lacks empathy and approaches conflict explicitly. By contrast, the right hemisphere's mode of processing perceives wholeness not parts, relationships, feels empathy, connectedness, and concern for others; it explains what it knows with pictures. The world is viewed as a living organic whole (McGilchrist, 2009). Its approach to conflict is implicit (Lederach 1995).

Visual communication in the form of photography is one of the best vehicles to convince the mind to take on new perspectives and attitudes. This is because visuals enter the brain through an unguarded gateway and are processed less analytically. This open gateway is precisely why advertising is so insidiously effective (Rossiter, 1982) and is an example of how photography can be used for destructive propaganda as well as constructive peace building (Senehi, 2002). Verbal and written communications are symbolic not concrete, meaning they require interpretation, comparison, and analysis before acceptance. The verbal/symbolic gateway of the brains' left hemisphere is well guarded and often thwarts input that challenges its historic cache of firmly held assumptions, thereby upholding its own beliefs, biases, and prejudices. Figure 13 is a

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functions but focuses on *how* the uniqueness of each hemisphere approaches these functions. (McGilchrist, 2009, 10-11, 56)

good example of non-verbal visual communication creating a visual paradox as it conveys a complex concept through an explicit common childhood activity yet implicitly demonstrates inter-racial empathy.

Figure 13. This photograph depicts a young white girl playing with a black doll, taken by her mother, a participant in the project.

The left hemisphere is in photographic terms, like a macro lens, enlarging small details from a close perspective. In fact the verbal/symbolic gateway leading primarily to the left hemisphere is incapable of receiving new information. Its realm is previously gathered and known information (McGilchrist, 2009). This is important because new positive information can powerfully challenge the assumptions of a "known" point of view and remove prejudice.

The non-verbal/concrete right hemisphere gateway, through which the brain processes images, is by contrast wide open; it is like a wide-angle lens, seeing the big picture. The visual/spacial oriented right hemisphere is also a key to experiencing newness. The input of non-verbal, visual, concrete communication, like photography, is a primary means for the brain to create the possibility for change, and the transformation of conflict. Figure 14 presents Channels of Knowing, a detailed model that represents how these pathways convert input to knowledge (Kegan & Lahey, 2001; LeBaron, 2003).
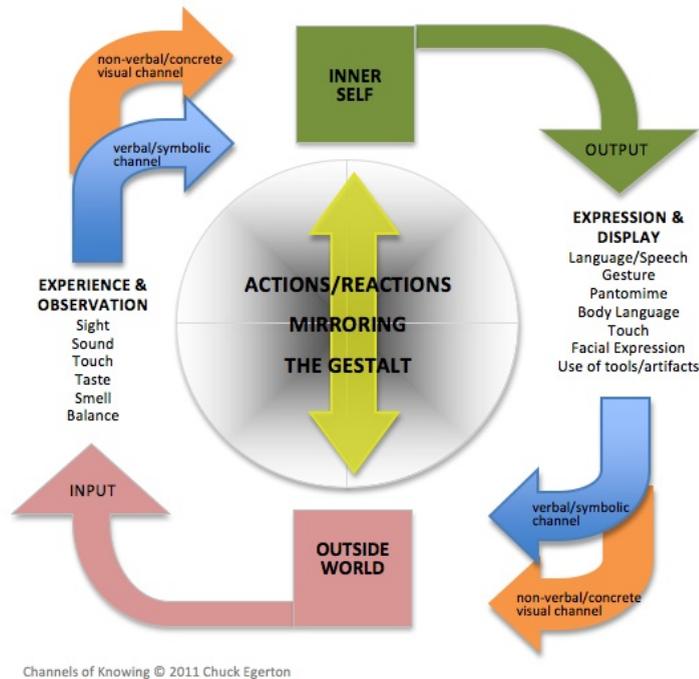
Channels of Knowing © 2011 Chuck Egerton

Figure 14. Channels of Knowing

The alternate perspectives each hemisphere presents are key to grasping concepts, observing physical reality and problem solving, especially for those engaged in exploring the relationships between photography and peace building practices. Like a hand with no opposing thumb, the perspective of one hemisphere is severely weakened without the other, with both hemispheres we gain the ability to 'grasp' an idea.

Artists are often able to optimize their creativity using the right hemisphere. They are comfortable with the wordless input it gathers, and the emotional wholeness, empathy, and connectedness it perceives. Figure 14 illustrate this "channel of knowing" as a way of perceiving and knowing that is non-verbal/concrete and visual. The parallel "verbal/symbolic" channel re-presents our sensory input and experience by transforming it into language and speech which is one step removed from the reality itself. It is the concrete perspectives of the right brain, the wellspring of compassionate emotion intelligence, that we can find creative ways to leverage conflict transformation (Lederach 2005; McGilchrist, 2009). *CommonVisions* participants were encouraged to tap into their inner identity as artists. The next section describes how four Bahá'í principles were implicitly infused into *CommonVisions'* conceptual foundation.

Faith-based Footings

"Baha'i[s] make working for peace a high priority. They are associated with movements for gender and racial equality and social justice in all the countries where they are found." Elise M. Boulding, Quaker pioneer of Peace and Conflict Studies (Boulding, 2000, p.26)

Bahá'í [6] teachings inspired this journey, providing agency and underpinning the theoretical, methodological, and structural construction of the *CommonVisions* project. The National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ) listed *CommonVisions* as a Bahá'í inspired promising practice in the *Directory of Faith Based Promising Practices for Racial Unity and Justice,* a project prompted by President Bill Clinton (NCCJ, 2000, p. 1-3). The following explains the four Bahá'í principles utilized and how they concretely related to the praxis of *CommonVisions*.

   The first principle was the oneness of humanity, a pivotal concept for the project, offering hope that the pinnacle of human evolution is attainable in peace and justice. The concept is distilled in the phrase: "The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens" (Bahá'u'lláh, 1990, p. 117). The Bahá'í faith believes that humanity is one and that all religions sprang from the same source. This concept helps to reframe human identity as sharing a common interdependent destiny, much like the loyalty to humankind inferred in the term "humatriotism" coined by Theodore Lentz (Lentz, 1976). The concept of the oneness of humanity was openly discussed during the *CommonVisions* group dialogues and was used as a photographic assignment. Figure 15 demonstrates how *CommonVisions* represented the human family including Asians the largest population on the planet, but a tiny minority in Randolph County, NC. This photograph is a metaphor for humankind itself, which is predominantly female and Asian.

Figure 15. A portrait of a Hmong girl at home taken by her sister. Both were participants in the project.

   Second was the responsibility to independently investigate truth for oneself, to strive to become free from prejudice and blind imitation of the past. Misinformation, stereotypes and lack of information can best be corrected through personal investigation, seeing through your own eyes and first hand experiences. Photography projects gave each participant the opportunity to show others their point of view through their own eyes and in the process overcome the "emotional commitment to ignorance," used in our working

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[6] Read more about the Baha'i Faith in: Egerton, C. (2013) Humanity's Coming of Age: A Bahá'í View on the Process Towards World Peace. In Matyók. T., Flannery, M., Tuso, H., Senehi, J., Byrne, S. (Eds.), Peace on Earth: The Role of Religion in Peace and Conflict Studies. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, chapter 18. Or visit http://www.bahai.org.

definition of prejudice.[7] Seeing the points of view of other *CommonVisions* participants was another aspect of personal investigation and an antidote to the disease of racism.

Third was the principle of unity in diversity, an expression of the oneness of humankind in action. Embracing unity in diversity means to reject dichotomies and reductionism, and recognize the vital need of uniqueness to genuine unity. An example is how the very diverse components of the human body work together in harmony to maintain our life. This principle was most evident when observing photographs and discussing their diverse points of view during picture sharing and dialogue sessions. Rather than capitulating to conformity and uniformity *CommonVisions* participants quickly came to the realization that each person is like me but also has a unique worldview. Imagine the dialogue surrounding the photograph in Figure 16 and the emotions it evoked among a diverse group of participants in the southern United States where the American Civil War remains a sensitive topic. Recognizing and respecting unity in diversity provided an essential element in healing racism.

Figure 16. An African-American participant who accidentally encountered this scene near his home took this photograph depicting a Civil War reenactment troop marching with the Confederate flag.

Finally the fourth principle sought to reframe the work of creating art as a sacred act; this was expressed in many ways depending on participants beliefs, i.e. homage and reverence for creation and nature, or for the Creator, but found common ground in a recognition of the sacredness of all life ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1972). An example of how this principle was applied in *CommonVisions* was when participants spontaneously adopted the use of the Native American/Aboriginal concept of the talking stick, instead using a woven basket held by the speaker during dialogues. The basket, made for that purpose by a participant, was displayed prominently in the final exhibit symbolically holding the pain, joy and healing expressed in dialogues.

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[7] Prejudice was defined as "an individual's emotional commitment to ignorance." (Center for the Healing of Racism, Houston Texas, 2013).

Resistance to Change

"… the flame of the fire of love… comes through the power of attraction and not by effort and striving" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1990, p. 129).

Overcoming and healing the weight of generations of entrenched racial prejudice and racist cultural violence (Galtung,1990) is not easily or quickly accomplished. Genuine healing means both the oppressed and the oppressor must change their worldview, and this required an understanding of why there is resistance to change, the nature of that resistance and nurturing the will to change (Freire, 1993). The photography focus of *CommonVisions* was an element that attracted participants. It employed approaches to self-expression and change that were subtle, indirect, and stimulated personal volition and choice. Fresh non-verbal methodologies and subtle approaches facilitated a transformation from resistance to acceptance in some participants, a process highlighted in LeBaron, 2005 and Schellenberg, 1996. This approach was at the heart of the faith-based principles underpinning the project.

It was vital to the project to learn how people are infected and conditioned with the disease of racism and how it is perpetuated. Understanding unearned white privilege, as a manifestation of the disease and a major perpetuator of white supremacy in the world informed the discussions of *CommonVisions* as well. (McIntosh, 1990)

Figure 17. A portrait of two older female participants, one black, one white, posed according to their direction to illustrate the oneness of humanity.

Conclusion

It is evident that the creative non-verbal focus of *CommonVisions* helped deflect resistance to change; bypassing the verbal bottleneck often encountered in dialogues on

racism and promoted the healing volition for self-transformation. The final assessment report on *CommonVisions* included the following thoughts:

"When people begin to expose their own prejudices and hurts, and to listen to others as they do the same, ignorance loses its ability to dictate behavior. Participants clearly experienced this sense of becoming 'free' and open. Many of them reported they now feel personally responsible for helping others reach a similar state of openness. " (Easterling, 2000, p. 13)

CommonVisions gave participants a shared goal and built an identity as a community of artists working for social justice. "It [*CommonVisions*] has given me a feeling of fullness. We are all human and add to the beautiful picture that is existence on this marvelous planet. It is good to be involved with my other selves" (Participant comment in Egerton, 2001). Figure 17 and 18 are hopeful and positive symbolic images representing this statement.

Figure 18. This photograph depicts a young African American girl holding hands with a young white boy at the beach while looking out at the ocean. Taken by the white boy's grandmother, a participant in the group, to illustrate the oneness of humanity.

CommonVisions is just one example of largely untapped non-verbal, arts-based methodologies available to peace and conflict studies practitioners. If it is true that 65-93% of all human communication is non-verbal (Mehrabian 1972), it is time to liberate ourselves from a dependence on words as the primary means to transform conflict.

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