

## **We Need Peace Building Stories in Media**

In *Mirror*, a Muslim newspaper  
by Sarah Sayeed

"Violence and humiliation no longer pacify; security can't be obtained by keeping enemies out. We need Human Security, a new interdependence... new decent institutions locally and globally to heal and prevent dynamics of humiliation, and new social skills as to how to maintain relations of equal dignity. It is not a dream. It is a necessity." These are the words of Evelin Lindner, one of the co-founders of the Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies group ([www.humiliationstudies.org](http://www.humiliationstudies.org)). In a recent talk, she mentioned that humiliation may be perpetuated through access and exposure to media. When the poor see the life of the rich and famous on television, they may either accept their own lot as God's will, or they begin to feel humiliated and ashamed about their own lack of resources. However, she noted that global human rights movements give the poor an alternative message: it is that they have a right to basic dignity, food, shelter, and clothing, and rather than falling into despair, they may organize and mobilize for these rights.

Listening to her, I recalled a scene that Vali Nasr describes in his work, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*. In 2003, he happened to be visiting the headquarters of the Jamaat-e Islami in Lahore, where the office television set was turned to CNN's broadcast of the Shia procession on Arbaeen, which commemorates the 40<sup>th</sup> day after the martyrdom of Imam Husain at Karbala. His hosts at the Jamaat office noted that these scenes from Iraq would "open sectarian wounds in Pakistan and that the struggles to ensue in Iraq would be played out in the mosques and on the streets of Karachi and Lahore."

In both the first example of the poor seeing the life of the rich, or the Sunnis of Pakistan seeing the Shia practice their rituals, images and narratives broadcast on television challenge viewers' understanding of their own lives, their identities. From an optimists' perspective, media images of life in another part of the world can help us learn, see new possibilities and hear new ideas for how to live our own life. Images of violent conflict could create a scenario where people become tired of war, and perhaps this is what is now behind a growing movement to get the U.S. out of Iraq. However, from another (perhaps pessimistic) perspective, new images can drive people to yearn for more material goods and perhaps be less content with what they do have. In addition, events broadcast from another nation could also be seen as threatening to one's own way of life, so the solution is to fight back against others who look and act like the images we see on television. Sectarian conflict may be ongoing in every Muslim community, but it could be made more acute as images of Sunni-Shia conflict are broadcast globally.

One way for us to break the cycle of humiliation and violent conflict is to use the very media that perpetuate the images that keep the cycle going. Most approaches to conflict resolution focus on the interpersonal dimension- having people come together to dialogue about their differences. Others prefer to not talk about the divides, but rather work together on projects that help build connection. However, these approaches can only go far if they remain at the interpersonal and group level. Those who want to work

out their own differences must also deal with the larger social contexts, and educate others about how we get along and work together to resolve conflict. Sharing stories about dialogue and successful joint projects widely is an urgent need for our global village and global media. What is also urgently needed is a way to reframe conflict so that in every story told, the listener or reader does not walk away with a sense of despair. We need to embrace that conflict is a part of daily life, not just on the battlefield. If we can see it for what it is, and equip ourselves to deal with it when it first crops up, we may keep ourselves out of war.

Muslims need to look in our tradition, to learn the ways of Islamic diplomacy and reconciliation of conflicts. At a communication conference a year ago, Jake Lynch, one of the authors of *Peace Journalism*, spoke about the Sunni-Shia conflict, and discussed the story of our beloved Prophet Muhammad as he helped the tribes of Mecca who were arguing about who would replace the black stone in the corner of the Kaaba. Lynch stressed the creativity and innovativeness of our Prophet's approach, as he simply asked the chief of each tribe to hold a piece of the sheet on which the black rock was placed; they jointly lifted the sheet, and then Muhammad, peace be upon him, lifted the black rock and set it in place. If we take the time to reconnect to stories like this one, to do our research and educate each other, we will be much better off as a community. Insha Allah, we will also be able to give Islam its due place in contributing not to protracted war but rather to world peace.