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## Brian Rowan: To engage the future we must start to resolve pain of the past

By Brian Rowan  
Thursday, 6 November 2008

In a conversation in an office in the School of Nursing and Midwifery at Queen's University in Belfast there is a reminder of the work that still has to be done as Northern Ireland looks for a way out of its violent past.

Marianne Moutray and Marie-Therese O'Hagan use words that underline the unfinished business in the transition from conflict into a developing peace. They speak of unresolved justice, unresolved grief, the consequences of living in a prolonged silence and the important role of recognition in trying to heal some of the many hurts.

Ms Moutray — associate head and director of education at the school — said that for some there is "nothing past about the Troubles" — a comment made to emphasise the continuing pain. Ms O'Hagan works with WAVE — a group that offers care and support to those bereaved or traumatised in and by our violent past.

And in a few days' time, when Queen's and WAVE host a masterclass to launch their courses in Trauma Studies, one of the guest speakers will be Denis Bradley, co-chairman of the Consultative Group on the Past.

That group is getting ever closer to finalising and publishing its report although it is not yet clear if a hoped for December 9 deadline will be met.

On Monday at Queen's Denis Bradley will challenge wider society to help deal with the legacy of the past and not to place the entire burden on victims and survivors.

What he will be saying is that this process needs everyone to be involved. He will have a listening audience.

The Trauma Studies courses have brought people of many different backgrounds into the one room — from healthcare, the emergency services, the victim-survivor community and others who have experience of politics, the police and prison.



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They, in their learning and in their story telling of past experience, will have already discussed and debated many of the big issues that will be at the heart of the Eames-Bradley report.

And, in their small groups, they will have heard the different perspectives of recent history. The classroom and the conversations have presented many challenges, a place where not just your side of the story, but the other side of the story is heard.

Ms O'Hagan as programme co-ordinator has shared in those difficult discussions — not as referee, she says, but facilitator. And she has watched and listened as people and the debate have moved.

"Moving the broader debate into the classroom helps the students gain a sense of perspective," she says.

It is about the importance of setting personal experience in that broader context, achieved by hearing the stories "of other experiences".

Professor Linda Johnston, who is head of the School of Nursing and Midwifery, believes the Trauma Studies courses are becoming increasingly relevant as Northern Ireland waits for the Eames-Bradley recommendations and places "a growing emphasis on dealing with the past".

"Managing the complexities of unresolved grief and trauma and its effects in individuals, families and the community means these courses now have a greater relevance than ever. To engage fully in the future one must resolve at least some of the pain of the past," she said.

And she believes the Queen's-Wave partnership has "developed a truly unique learning resource".

And those who are part will now listen on Monday as Mr Bradley seeks to shape the debate from the learning of the Consultative Group.

He will know that its report will answer some but not all of the questions — and that after its recommendations are published and implemented there will still be unresolved grief and unresolved justice and that there will still be those who will live in a continuing silence.

That is one of the scars — and the reality of peace after war.



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