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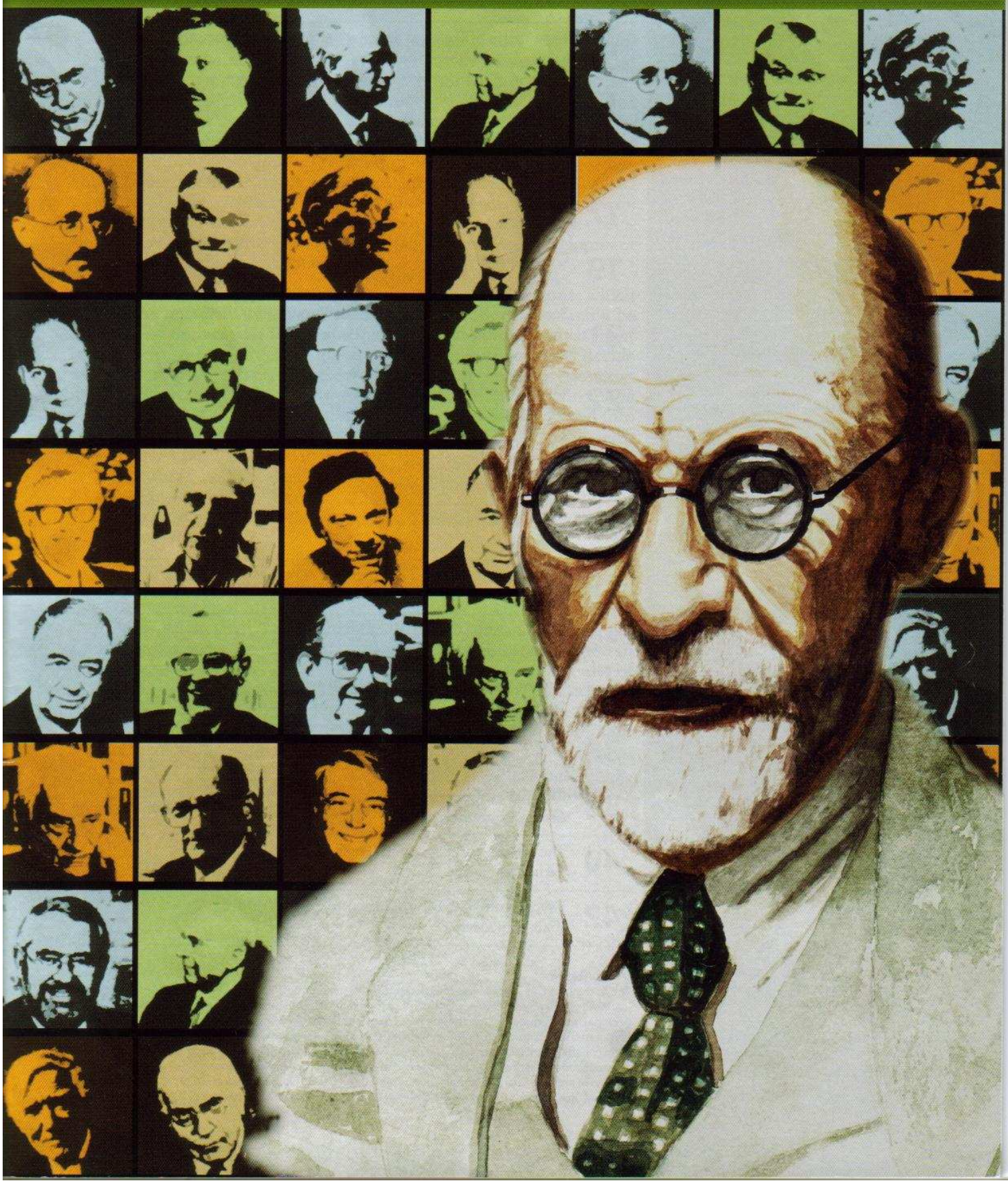

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Psychoanalysis, Democracy and Peace Building

John, Lord Alderdice

PSYCHOANALYTICAL TREATMENT of the severely mentally ill is not for the faint-hearted. It is intellectually challenging, emotionally draining and requires an unusual degree of patience and stamina. This is similar to peace-making in societies which have been divided in intractable, politically motivated violence. However there are many other shared characteristics.

Psychoanalysis has helped us to understand the extent to which the past is ever present, both in the development of character and in the breakdown of mental functioning. In studying and working with communal disturbance and terrorism in Northern Ireland and other trouble spots around the world, I have come to the view that terrorism usually appears at a late stage in a long societal process, and it is only possible to appreciate its meaning for those who participate in it if one can understand their past. However unreasonable their behaviour may appear to others, to the terrorist and his supporters theirs is a justifiable response, and indeed a response whose purpose is to right a perceived past wrong. To tell such people that what they are doing is wrong and criminal and to ask them simply to draw a line under the past is to fail to understand what is going on, and is likely to be dismissed as foolishness or worse. If the past in personal terms casts a cloud over decades of individual life, in communal terms the time frame may be centuries.

Psychoanalysis has also taught us about the strength of emotions. Our capacity to think and to act can be much more profoundly affected than most people imagine unless they have had the opportunity to observe it as therapists do. Similarly I find that even thoughtful and well-disposed politicians from stable, democratic societies find it almost impossible to appreciate that when people react in a destructive and often self-damaging way in inter-communal violence they are not playing games that can be set to one side when they choose. Such communities are in thrall to enormously powerful feelings that can overwhelm their capacity to think clearly and act constructively. It is also striking how these long-standing and seemingly intractable disputes can induce powerful emotional reactions in observers. While it is unsurprising that those who are caught up in the struggle should find it difficult to view the problem dispassionately, the fact that those outside the immediate context also tend to polarize sharply as partisans for one side or the other tells us that there is more to these insoluble problems than a mere local dispute over territory and resources.

The communal thoughts and feelings that have impressed me as most significant in generating group violence have to do with experiences of disrespect, injustice and humiliation. All of us have an almost insatiable desire to be treated with respect. Where individuals and communities are ill-treated, despised and humiliated a bitter sense of injustice is stored up, and an almost unquenchable desire develops for vengeance and the righting of the wrong. Contrary to what might be expected, terrorists may come from comparatively well-educated and well-resourced backgrounds, and terrorism often emerges or worsens substantially at the point where things are changing for the better and inequalities are being addressed, rather than when they are at their worst. Terrorists also subject their own people to profound deprivation and damage. All this suggests to me that terrorism is not a rational response in the interests of the community concerned. On the contrary it is symbolic, regressive

and immensely self-destructive, and is more related to memories, emotions and images of a deeply historic and violent nature than to current socio-economic deprivation, even though this is in itself important and can add to a sense of unfairness.

These observations imply that long-standing feuds are not a rational outcome of problems of resource allocation, but rather a group regression in the context of the disturbed emotional relationship between groups of people that prevents them living together and finding a rational way of mutually benefiting from their enjoyment of their shared territory and what it provides. Emotions are even more contagious than ideas, and those around a disturbed relationship tend to get caught up in such a way as to contribute to the worsening and widening of the violence. Once they are engaged in the maelstrom, their capacity to think is used to justify their emotional commitment and their desire to 'win', rather than think reflectively about how to resolve the situation in everyone's best interests.

These observations are as true about communities and countries as they are about individuals and families, and they can help us to understand why short-term interventions, even when they have the 'right' answer fail to make an impact on the problem. If these are indeed problems of disturbed group relationships, then political or economic fixes hatched in the hot-house atmosphere of a weekend conference will fail to make any substantial impact other than to confirm to the increasingly despairing observer the hopelessness of the situation. One is reminded of Churchill's observation about Ireland. After the catastrophe of the First World War, when it seemed that almost every institution and certainty had been washed away, he remarked that the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone (the church towers of Northern Ireland) re-emerged from the deluge with the integrity of their ancient quarrel one of the only things to survive. His despair at the intractability of the 'Irish Problem' was understandable, but, as recent years have shown, even that ancient feud could find resolution – not by the victory of one side, or the imposition of an external solution, but by a long process of dialogue and engagement which addressed the historic problems of all the relationships inside and outside the island, and was open to all those who were involved, even – and perhaps especially – those who used violence and terrorism to prosecute their aims.

In reflecting on my experiences in the decade and more of negotiations which led to the Good Friday Agreement, and in the twelve years since, during which we have worked with some success towards its full implementation in Northern Ireland, I have been struck not only by what we have discovered about such processes, but also by what we have learnt from others, especially those who participated in the South African peace process and in the post-Second World War project of European integration. While these were profoundly different circumstances in terms of their history, complexity and strategic significance, there seem to be a number of principles which are common and which may also be relevant to dealing with some other chronic communal conflicts.

Just as working psychoanalytically requires the creation of a process in which violent and other thoughts, feelings and behaviour can be contained, expressed and explored, so too helping a community in turmoil requires a process with the continuity, communication and boundary setting which are part of the therapeutic relationship. A sustainable peaceful outcome tends to be possible only when processes are elaborated and institutionalized which 'contain' the violence and create the opportunity of democratic participation for all parties to the conflict, especially those who were most obviously causing violence. It is also crucial that these peace processes continue over a long period of time, through and beyond the achievement of agreement, into a substantial implementation phase. The creation of such inclusive and long-term institutionalized processes is itself the outcome of years of quiet dialogue, diplomacy and reflective exploration, and the processes face many difficulties and setbacks.

It is also significant that when finally progress is made, it is not because some extraordinary solution has been invented out of the 'blue sky' thinking of an academic political scientist, but rather it has become possible to implement a compromise relational arrangement that, at least in broad terms, had been around for some time but to which the various parties could not accommodate themselves.

Finally, just as Freud once referred to the 'talking cure' as a treatment of love, so communal healing and peace-making requires all the patience, understanding and respect that are at the heart of any real work with people, whether as individuals or in groups. ■