

Making Choices/Peace Builders

MAKING CHOICES

(29 minutes)

THE PEACEBUILDERS

(27 minutes)

Discussion Guide

For both films

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Making Choices The PeaceBuilders

Discussion Guide

These two films deal with the problems of ethnic and religious discord in the Balkans that emerged and intensified during the period of political strife and war following the fall of Communism. The historic political, religious and socio-economic complexities of the region are well known, if little understood. But the problems facing today's communities have evolved in large measure out of that background. This includes the religious diversity of Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity and Islam; the political legacies of the Ottoman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Yugoslav Federation under Marshall Tito; and the economic and cultural impacts of modern life.

Croatia and Macedonia are two of the countries in which the forces of discord have been a concern. The Balkan wars of the last decades of the twentieth century took a terrible toll in the region, and communities throughout the Balkans have found it necessary to react to these circumstances. How individuals and institutions within these communities react, the choices they make and the potential for building more secure and peaceful societies are the themes of the two films.

The PeaceBuilders tells of the effort undertaken by organized groups of individuals to resist ethnic hatred during, and following, the war that broke out in 1991 when Croatia declared its independence from the Yugoslav Federation. Before the war, a mix of Roman Catholic Croatians and Eastern Orthodox Serbs had traditionally populated the region of Eastern Croatia. In spite of religious and ethnic differences, these two communities had coexisted peacefully for

generations in the cities of Vukovar and Osijek and surrounding villages. While religions and customs differed, there was a substantial degree of integration between these two groups in economic and social relationships.

Nevertheless, with the outbreak of war in the border area, and the invasion, siege and conquest of these towns by Serbian Yugoslav troops, ethnic loyalties became an issue. In the course of the war, most Croatian Catholics from the areas overtaken by Yugoslav troops were expelled and fled to the west, leaving behind their homes and their cities to their former Serbian neighbors, some of whom had close relationships with the Yugoslav army. This situation continued until the Dayton peace accords were concluded in 1995. During the period of the occupation there were violations of human rights, mistreatment of civilians and the opportunism that accompanies breakdown of social order, all of which made the task of post-war reconciliation more daunting.

With the end of hostilities, Croat refugees began to return to their homes, to rebuild their lives and the destroyed physical and economic structures of their cities. The peace settlement was intended to recreate the multiethnic prewar communities, but it was difficult for returning Croats to reconcile with their former Serbian neighbors, who had remained in Eastern Croatia during the Yugoslav occupation. The enormous challenge was to promote the reintegration of these two communities, whose peaceful lives together had been shattered by the war.

One organization, the Center for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights started its program in the early days of the war. While bombs were falling in

1992, this group, composed of both Croats and Serbs, sought ways to limit ethnic enmity between these two communities even knowing they could have little, if any, impact on the political issues involved in the war itself.

With the end of the war, this organization, as others, turned to promoting peace and reconciliation between the two communities that had found themselves caught up in the politico/ethnic struggles within the former Yugoslav Republic. The film includes several interviews of representatives of these organizations, and other citizens, who express their attitudes toward the task of rebuilding trust and unity within the two communities within the region and describe the steps they believe necessary to address this important challenge.

While the war had ended in Croatia, leaving behind the job of creating a lasting peace, strife continued on within other parts of Yugoslavia. In the province of Kosovo, on the Macedonian border, "ethnic cleansing" between Orthodox Serbs and Moslem Albanians resulted in the kind of crimes against humanity not seen in Europe since the Holocaust.

Macedonia itself was fortunate in avoiding the direct violence and terror of the conflict in Kosovo. The indirect impact, however, was extremely profound. Albanian refugees from Kosovo fled into Macedonia, altering its traditional religious and ethnic balance. Fear of the kind of ethnic strife seen in Kosovo became an intense preoccupation for Macedonians concerned about maintaining peace and stability within their own country.

Within this context, the film Making Choices focuses on the attitudes of Macedonians both Orthodox Christian and Moslem, in addressing ethnic and religious differences within their own society. It asks the questions that many countries, as well as Macedonia, must face in determining whether they will resolve their differences through peace and stability, or war.

Orthodox Christians are in the majority in Macedonia (65%) and identify themselves as ethnic Macedonians. Moslems are in the minority and are characterized often, not as Macedonians, but as ethnic Albanians. The two cultures, Albanian Moslem and Christian Macedonians, intermingle somewhat, but the communities are in many ways quite separate within both rural and urban areas. As a generality, there are also significant differences in their cultures and response to modern ways. The question is whether these two cultures can still relate positively to each other and create a positive future for their country, Macedonia.

In the film, the attitudes of students toward people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds are explored in several interviews which highlight the role of the educational system, the media, and religious leadership in addressing the relationship between the two ethnic cultures.

At the same time, some of the problems in that relationship emerge in the interviews. Examples include the separation caused by the use of different languages, which results in separate classes for Albanians and Macedonians within the same school, and different newspapers and news broadcasts for each community. Other differences, such as neighborhood separation and even shopping patterns (as between open air markets and supermarkets) also seem to limit full integration of

two still very separate societies. But as the film argues, it is the choices made by ordinary people, young and older, that will determine whether dangerous stereotypes can be diminished and ethnic differences bridged.

Discussion Issues

While both films concern the Balkan crises of recent decades there are differences in the situations addressed. The Macedonians are trying to avoid the strife and bloodshed that took place in Croatia and across their own borders in Kosovo. In Croatia, the objective was to resist ethnic enmity during the course of war and its aftermath. In each case it could be helpful to identify the commonality of attitudes and actions that can help foster positive relationships between diverse groups under both circumstances.

Further, in discussing these films, it is important to recognize the universality of the issues involved. One suggestion is to identify some of the themes addressed and then enlarge the discussion to consider these themes as they apply to other countries. This could lead to a broader consideration of the problems of diversity and conflict in many modern nation states, including our own.

Suggested discussion questions for each film are listed separately below. However, many of the themes may be relevant to both films and could be considered in that context as well.

Making Choices

1. The young people interviewed sounded very positive and tolerant in their attitudes toward the minority community. Do you think there was an element of “political correctness” in their responses? What do you think of the importance of consciously seeking to be positive and trying to overcome negative attitudes toward others? Can that help bring about a stronger social consciousness within society?
2. Do you think that awareness of the breakdown of ethnic relationships and the violence against innocent civilians in Kosovo was the only reason for the positive attitudes reflected in the film? Must it take the imminent threat of ethnic and religious carnage before people are willing to address the dangers of hostility among its diverse communities?
3. What is the role of empathy in making the choices that lead to a more tolerant society? How much more empathetic are people when they have close meaningful relationships with others (like the young lady with a close Albanian friend)? How can these close relationships be fostered in diverse and separate communities?
4. How realistic is it to expect tolerant attitudes to prevail against perceived economic and social threats? For example, how can you respond to the concerns noted by the Orthodox priest when he says that the demographics of Albanian birthrates and Macedonian emigration lead to fears that the Macedonians will become a “minority” in their “own” country?
5. The narrator characterizes “ethnic cleansing” as the excuse for what is in fact a “land grab”. This raises a question of the relationship between religious or ethnic hostility and economic interests. To what extent is religious intolerance and hatred a cover for a struggle over the resources of a country, its land and its jobs? How can a society recognize and overcome these concerns?
6. To what extent does contemporary culture lead to intolerance toward more conservative, “old fashioned” communities – and vice versa? Some students, in rejecting intolerance toward Albanians, said that they (the Albanians) were “all right”. But do you think they truly regarded Albanians, with all their cultural differences, as their equal? How important is it for people with different attitudes and customs to allow each other to enjoy their own customs and traditions without being despised?
7. How can a country establish a strong set of common goals and aspirations for a diverse citizenry to create a unity strong enough to overcome the differences between ethnic and religious groups? Is it sufficient to base unity on the fear of civil strife or is more needed, a more positive set of goals that all can aspire to. In Macedonia, for example, the examples of Kosovo may lead to a determination to avoid ethnic strife. But is this enough, or should not all segments of the society feel that economic and political progress is being made to the benefit of all?
8. In a country like Macedonia questions arise about the extent to which the assimilation of ethnic or cultural minorities into a broader “mainstream” culture is desirable. Assimilation raises a number of

difficult issues. First, to what extent is there a common mainstream culture, with shared values, interest and traditions? Can minorities enter into that mainstream without a dispiriting loss of their own traditions and values? Will the mainstream culture adapt to and welcome some degree of diversity and will society as a whole perceive value in the diversity of its different cultural and ethnic groups?

9. What are the policies and practices that will foster some degree of assimilation while allowing for a welcome degree of diversity? In Macedonia, for example, what about the issue of classes in separate languages in the same school? What about television news, where Macedonian speakers may not understand what the Albanian media is saying and vice-versa. What impact does the very name of the country have, since Macedonia is not only the name of the country but also the name of the majority ethnic group within the country?
10. The problem of the pace of change seems to be illustrated in Macedonia. Because of the war in Kosovo and the influx of refugees, the strains on the society may be more apparent than in the case where social and demographic changes occur over a long period of time. How might a country like Macedonia address the process of acculturation in the face of accelerated social and political change? How can it do this without undercutting important connections with an ethnic community's own social structure? To what extent is maintaining this traditional structure important to the stability of communities undergoing rapid social change?

The PeaceBuilders

1. How can efforts to minimize hostility between ethnic or other diverse groups succeed during the course of war? In Croatia, relationships between Roman Catholic Croats and Eastern Orthodox Serbs suffered terribly during the war. What factors existed within the communities of Eastern Croatia which could have helped reduce ethnic and religious fears and tensions, both to limit their impact on the civilian populations during the war and provide the basis for postwar reconciliation?
2. What is the relationship between post-conflict reconciliation and the question of accountability for actions taken before and during actual hostilities? How can a distinction be drawn between the instincts for revenge and retribution and the need for victims to receive psychic, as well as material recompense? How can the felt demands for justice and the ideals of reconciliation both be met?
3. Why did the long tradition of interethnic peace and harmony in Eastern Croatia deteriorate so rapidly? This was a region in which it appears that a high degree of assimilation existed between the two groups and yet ethnic mistrust quickly emerged when Croatia determined to separate from Yugoslavia. What are the values of a community that can help prevent suspicion and enmity between diverse ethnic and religious groups under politically stressful circumstances? How can these values be inculcated within the community?
4. The ideal of reconciliation between one-time enemies often contains elements reflecting a strong religious or messianic tradition. Yet religious

exclusiveness can also make the task of reconciling diverse communities more difficult. What are other ethical, social and political commonalities that can help promote reconciliation between former enemies? In fact, does characterization of other groups as "former enemies" make the process more difficult?

5. It must be recognized that all too often ethnic or religious groups are involved in or identified with opposing sides in serious conflict. Yet there are many members of such groups who are wholly innocent and who may even be in opposition to many aspects of the conflict. How can people be treated as individuals under such circumstance and be respected and protected in the face of suspicion and fear? What is the relationship between group identification and individualism when social conflict begins?
6. An important element in recreating the cohesiveness of communities is the recognition and welcoming of the various contributions that can be made by diverse cultures to the reintegration process. An example is the work of returning Croat woodcarvers in the village of Dalj and their active participation in developing an artistic tradition supporting reconciliation and reunification. What other kinds of activities and relationships promote reconciliation? How can organizations such as the Center for Nonviolence and others develop programs that offer practical as well as moral support to reconciliation? The program of joint visits by Croat/Serb teams to assist needy families is one example. What might be some others?
7. What is the relationship between political or economic strife and ethnic or religious differences? The immediate cause of the war between Croatia and Yugoslav seems to have been the Croatian declaration of independence from the Yugoslav Republic. How can the political or economic causes of the conflict be separated from ethnic and religious differences within communities at war?
8. How important is individual character to attempts at promoting peaceful reconciliation? In the film, the former Yugoslav soldier speaks with passion about his own commitment on the subject, and others speak as well about the need to develop as individuals in order to resist the tyranny of hatred. The emphasis on youth programs speaks to future generations, raising the question about the passage of time leading to better relationships among diverse groups. What are some of the factors that that can help assure that the next generations can move beyond the hostilities of the past?
9. Unlike most of the interviewees, a Government Minister seems to speak more strongly about holding those responsible for atrocities accountable than she does about the need for reconciliation. Does this suggest a limitation on the ability of government, compared to private organizations and individuals, to promote reconciliation? What are the respective roles of government private groups and individuals in seeking to assure positive relationships for the future?
10. What is the relationship between "idealism" and "realism" in promoting peaceful coexistence among diverse groups? In the film, some say that even if diverse groups don't like each other, they should

respect one another. There is recognition that the human rights situation is never ideal, but that a continuing effort is always needed to make things better. What is the right balance between optimism and pessimism?

Conclusion

In considering these films, the analogies to other situations around the world are obvious. The Balkans are not the only places where diverse communities and ethnic and religious issues co-exist.

The issues of diversity and unity within any society or country are both historic and continuing. How are these issues being dealt with elsewhere in the world? How have they been dealt with here at home? What kind of political structures and institutions support a peaceful diversity and what is the role of political and social institutions, including religion, schools, the media and parents in achieving this goal?

Both films are concerned with making choices and building peace. Perhaps in the end the point is that people need to think more deeply about themselves and their society to find a certain level of tolerance and empathy to guide their lives. The hope is that this process will help lead toward a common vision of a better, more just society in which many diverse communities can flourish together as one human community.