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Reflection on conflict inadequate in private

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By Roy Garland The Monday Column

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A second day of reflection is scheduled for Saturday June 21 by Healing Through Remembering. The reflection is to be private and centred on the pain, loss and consequences of a violent conflict that many people still live with daily.

We are to reflect on our own attitudes and on what we might have done or might still do to ensure that it never

happens again.

The date chosen is the summer solstice, the longest day of the year when it seems an appropriate time to reflect on the past and look towards a better future.

I have long thought that such a day should be set aside each year but my gut reaction to the suggestion that such reflection be a private affair is that this seems totally inadequate.

The depth of trauma experienced throughout this community makes the idea of private as opposed to public reflection seem more like a travesty.

Last week I followed some of the brief but harrowing accounts of grief-stricken relatives reported from the Omagh bombing civil trial in Belfast.

The bombing took place 10 years ago but I can still recall the sense of shock and disbelief at the atrocity. Much time and effort had gone into ending the violence, facilitating dialogue and beginning to unlearn some of the myths that informed and still inform many mindsets.

There was a greater sense of dread and foreboding then than had followed the collapse of the first IRA ceasefire in 1996 with the Canary Wharf bombing.

The London bombing brought two deaths, 100 people injured and massive damage.

Immediately before Canary Wharf, republicans had shared their frustration at what they saw as a lack of political progress. Afterwards some of them seemed embarrassed and uneasy.

The IRA said the casualties were regrettable and claimed they could have been avoided had the authorities responded quickly to the IRA's specific warnings.

A senior policeman stated correctly that it was not a failure of security but a failure of humanity. The loss of life was small in comparison to Omagh but for loved ones, one death can seem like the loss of an entire world.

The scale of the Omagh tragedy – and that it took place in a quiet provincial town – made it especially painful and inhuman.

Significant political progress had been made and contentious issues were being addressed.

Shortly after the atrocity I listened to distraught voices from Omagh victims who could hardly contain their grief.

But as with so many tragedies, the holocaust of Omagh has tended to slip into the deep recesses of our minds.

As the old adage says, "out of sight out of mind" – all too soon the cries of victims are silenced.

But during the civil trial in Belfast last week voices of Omagh victims came through briefly but clearly.

One relative wept before her frustration burst through: "Nobody wanted to be reminded... people just don't want to remember."

Too many of us don't want to hear their pain. The voices are unsettling and disturbing so we prefer to forget.

There is after all a cacophony of other victims' voices from far-off places that fill television screens.

Listening to these innumerable victims can immunise us to the pain of our neighbours. People want to forget the dark deeds or even the dark days when seeds of violence were sown over many years. Perhaps the preference for quiet reflection reflects a concern not to upset the consciences of too many people.

Calls for universal public acts of remembrance and the donning of Ian Paisley's "sackcloth and ashes" would serve to suggest a shared responsibility whereas we prefer to deflect responsibility on to scapegoats in a way that leaves the rest of us with clear consciences.

But Healing Through Remembering suggests that "at this stage" we are not ready for public events.

We still live in a divided society with many caught up in the old ways or afraid to contemplate "abject and true remorse".

The Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on the Past suggests that we need to "dig deep" into our moral resources to find the strength to acknowledge wrongdoing and say sorry. The group looks to a time when "the giving and receiving of forgiveness are not signs of weakness but of great strength and courage". Words of forgiveness and healing would then surely need to be expressed through public acknowledgment of collective wrong.

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