

# socialhealing

Integral Health and Healing

JAMES O'DEA

**S**ocial healing is an emerging field that seeks to deal with wounds created by conflict, collective trauma, and large-scale oppression. It seeks to identify areas of collective experience that remain unresolved, neglected, and repressed within the psyche of groups and even nations. Its domain is centrally within consciousness rather than politics *per se*; it is psychospiritual in nature yet activist in its consequences. Its primary modalities are truth, reconciliation, forgiveness, and restorative justice. It requires individuals to assume the responsibility to become healing agents themselves and as such, it is experiential rather than ideological.

The movement toward a healing paradigm in the social domain in the last century was stimulated by charismatic leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Their emphasis on nonviolent approaches to conflict, their efforts to diffuse hatred, their refusal to demonize opponents, and their ability to affirm unifying principles undergirded their lifelong efforts to promote social harmony and reconciliation. Their passionate quest for justice was held within a ground of being suffused with creativity and compassion. They were not so much concerned with blame and retribution as with more healing forms of restoring fairness and justice.

Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu have taken on their mantle in our time to demonstrate the power of forgiveness and reconciliation in the social domain. They recognized that forgiveness and reconciliation require truth-telling. And for the truth to really be told it has to be so much more than the official story. People must be able to speak the truth of events as they have experienced them. Their work gave potent affirmation to the significance of individual human experience.

This kind of healing concerns itself particularly with the intergenerational transfer of wounds. If unaddressed, these wounds are fed rather than healed, and can become an

unhealthy aspect of an individual's or a group's self-definition. They can also be submerged in the collective psyche, only to be triggered by historical events.

There may be hope for an evolutionary shift in consciousness that will both heal and transform our relationship to the past. It is a shift that requires humility and an exploration of the science of being.

Social healing is an affirmation of our power to create meaning, relationship, and health by seeking truth and reconciliation with our fellow human beings. It invites us to see ourselves as empowered to dialogue with history—and history in the making—and not simply experience it as a series of externalized events or enactments that are beyond our reach. It is a form of self-actualizing democracy: It requires the participation of our inner lives. It places high value on the quality of being that we manifest together. It begins in our awareness, and is an expression of our longing for greater wholeness.

For that, we will also need heart and soul, and the love that sees beyond the visible surfaces of our existence into the deep space of our individual and collective being. Even the idea that social healing is beginning in various parts of our planet allows us to imagine that a future without brutality and oppression is a real possibility. Even more dizzying for me is the notion that I as an individual can make a contribution to that future, and that we all can—a healing by the whole system, for the whole system.

This article is excerpted from the forthcoming *Consciousness & Healing: An Integral Approach to Mind-Body Medicine*. For the full version, go to [www.noetic.org/about/president/cfm](http://www.noetic.org/about/president/cfm).



**JAMES O'DEA**, president of IONS, is the former director of the Washington, DC, office of Amnesty International, and executive director of the Seva Foundation. He is passionate about applying IONS' research to personal and social healing in our challenging times.