

Difficult Conversations as Moral Imperative: Negotiating Ethnic Identities during War

By: [Spoma Jovanovic](#)

Jovanovic, S. (2003). Difficult conversations as moral imperative: Negotiating ethnic identities during war. [Communication Quarterly](#), 51(1), 57-72. DOI: [10.1080/01463370309370140](https://doi.org/10.1080/01463370309370140)

Made available courtesy of Taylor & Francis (Routledge): <http://www.routledge.com/>

*****Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from Taylor & Francis (Routledge). This version of the document is not the version of record. Figures and/or pictures may be missing from this format of the document.*****

Abstract:

I found the claim of a "moral imperative" as reason to bomb Kosovo and the sovereign nation of Yugoslavia to be untenable because as an American of Serbian descent, I saw the media portrayal of my relatives, culture, and ancestry reduced to descriptions of savagery and barbarism. Thus began my autoethnographic exploration of ethics and communication in the emotional work of identity construction within a context of war. In this essay, I use my personal experiences with conflicted identities as the basis for discovering a discussion strategy for difficult conversations that is capable of helping us understand the connections between personal actions and political solutions, lived experiences and the new terms for global dialogue.

Key Concepts:

identity negotiation, autoethnography, global dialogue, difficult conversations, ethics.

Article:

In times of war, it is not uncommon for people to be sad. By definition, war means that people will die, sometimes for causes that are noble and just, and oftentimes for reasons less grand in character. In 1999, the images of war, sadness, and death were vivid in Kosovo. We Americans saw the suffering faces of people forced from their homes. We saw the blood and hearts of civilians torn from their bodies. We saw anguish and misery, and we were tormented by the images.

I felt a deeply personal stake in these representations. As an American of Serbian descent, I was connected to this war on a personal and emotional—as well as political—level. The war progressed, and with it my ethnic identity grew more socially noticeable, and my views more conflicted.

All around, I found myself confronting difficult conversations. There, I was doing the work to preserve an ethnic identity that marks my (first) language, religion, history, and way of life. And, I was maintaining other constitutive features of my identity, such as my professional interest in communication and my commitment to ethics defined as a response and responsibility to "different" others. Negotiating among these various subject positions within a climate that characterized my relatives, culture, and ancestry as savages and barbarians brought with it a reminder that our identities, though reflective of our individual histories and stories, are contingent upon interactions with others. As a result, our identities can shift dramatically, sometimes at a moment's notice. Though we may never be prepared for the thrust into the abyss of change, it is inevitable that we will encounter just that whether in response to war or other crises.

In recent decades, the United States military has fought battles on the soils of most continents in the world, but the ugliness of war remains an event located somewhere else, not here, not in the United States. War is removed from our backyard, always imminent somewhere, but always somewhere else.

September 11, 2001 changed our lives. But even as the planes hit the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon, the war on terrorism traveled abroad. At home, we had our losses to bear as our nation mourned for

an innocence forever lost. We changed our habits, checking our mail for Anthrax and arriving at airports two hours in advance of all flights to undergo stricter airline security measures. We did not, however, face the famine, bombings, air raids, and upheaval of governments that others experience when their homelands are at war. We still remain distant from that kind of horror, that kind of life. And yet, sometimes the distance between these images and experiences of war shrinks even when the problem is somewhere half way around the globe.

In our technologically advanced world, the mediated mobility of images is instantaneous and our interaction with the other is guaranteed without the benefit of physical co-presence, forcing us into the immediacy of global affairs (Davis, 2000). Therefore, our identities—the selves we live by and the others we construct as others—are no doubt influenced and shaped, in part, by mass media intervention.

In 1999, I turned everywhere to find out what was "really" happening in Kosovo and the surrounding region where my relatives live. I read letters from family and friends still living in Yugoslavia. I searched the satellite television channels for foreign information that might provide an alternative spin on what U.S. television was reporting. I found emails and different constructions of the news through Internet sources.

As the chaos in Kosovo unfolded, the United States in unison with 18 NATO allies began bombing the sovereign nation of Yugoslavia in response to the "...Serbian forces responsible for the brutality in Kosovo" (Clinton, 1999). President Clinton spoke of our country's "moral imperative" to step forward to halt a human rights crisis there that had already seen the killing or forced evacuation of primarily Albanian civilians. The American news media cried out that Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic was to blame. The NATO attack began, transforming what had been a civil war into an international conflict. Military installations, economic strongholds, and public infrastructure were the primary targets of the bombings; as each one went up in smoke, the foundation of an entire culture was reduced to rubble and ashes, and dead bodies and ruined lives. We learned—particularly those with no first-hand experience of the region—that history, culture, and religion collide there where economic, social, and political ideologies are also at odds.

It was the phrase "moral imperative" that lodged in my throat. It was that phrase that brought such a swell of emotion that my voice could not cry out loud enough to drown the words I was hearing. I could not accept that the bombing of my relatives' homes and cities was President Clinton's final solution to a break down in diplomatic negotiations between the Serbians and the Albanians.

To me, "moral imperative" speaks of a benevolent response in each of us to reach out toward the other in recognition of our mutual social dependency (Levinas, 1969/ 1961). The process may include conflict and dissent but it surely does not speak of killing, mass destruction, fear, or threat. The "moral imperative" I write about and think about favors a world marked by care, a wondrous spirit, and compassion that comes from a commitment to other people as manifested in communication (Levinas, 1969/1961). Perhaps because of my own ethnic background, I do not see conflict as a necessary evil, but rather as a constitutive feature of democracy. So while I yearn for a peaceful life, I recognize that conflict, disruption, debate, and critical inquiry are necessary to compose such a life.

In Kosovo and in America, where was the inclination toward peace? Did it vanish in favor of a conquering vision? Or did we all too easily accept that the road to peace is always littered with the remains of war? Was this war a wake up call to show the world that for all our talk of progress, we still rely on one solid way to assert ourselves—through means that kill and maim? I wondered who was waging the justified fight here. The Serbians killed to retain control of their Holy Land. The American-led NATO troops killed to retain control over the lives of displaced people. Did either fight occupy the higher moral ground?

As a communication scholar, I speculate on the role of ethics and communication in the concrete lived experience that includes not only a desire for a world more just, but also an acknowledgment of the day-to-day happenings in life that are often dark, grave, and unjust. If we believe that communication constitutes our social world, what are we saying when war is the solution we adopt?

I questioned my own resolve, my moral imperative to challenge and change the course of history. As I wavered between hopefulness and despair in response to the images and emotions of war, I want to believe now, as I did then, that a peaceful world is possible. It is an everlasting hope that flickers in my heart, though dimmer today than it was before that war. It is a hope that manifests itself as the assault on injustice, not with weapons, but with a dedication to ethical communication and dialogue to address our future conflicts in ways not embraced wholeheartedly by recent generations. It is a hope grounded in my American upbringing influenced by the democratic ideals of opportunity, participation, and dissent. It is a hope informed also by my Serbian roots where passion dictates that I practice what I believe, no matter the pain that may have to be endured along the way. It is, as well, a hope that is in Emmanuel Levinas' conception, a desire for a deepened sense of goodness that can never be fully satisfied yet nevertheless is deserving of our sustained pursuit through discourse that invites response (1969/1961).

The quest to articulate my moral imperative is presented here to interrogate the implications of war on the construction of identity considering the intersections of ethics, emotion, and discourse. Through an understanding of ethics in the domain of personal strife, I argue that whatever our country's collective moral imperative may be, it cannot be as the bombings in Kosovo bore witness to, a society based on principles that allow mass destruction, aggression, fatal errors, and human suffering to be the final solution to the settlement of differences. Our moral imperative, in order to advance higher ideals, must instead be dependent upon the substantive concern and care for the other that emerges in the face-to-face encounters of our everyday lives, even in the midst of difficult conversations and cultural interruptions, rather than from any prevailing structure of power that invokes grand claims to justify murder (Gardiner, 1996). To bear the brunt of inevitable disagreement, we need to transform our understanding of the antagonistic us/them dualism into a reordering of social relations and identities that legitimizes difference as a value, and recognizes the limits of any one's (person, social group, nation) rights through discourse rather than violence to adjudicate competing claims (Mouffe, 2000). As long as we treat the other as morally inferior, we can dismiss them, or kill them. The inclination for talk and its attending care cease. If instead we recognize the moral worth of differing identities, even if we disagree vehemently along the way, we are in a position to engage in more critical dialogue (Pearce, 1989). In doing so, we create the potential for peace, not annihilation.

A CALL FOR AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

This autoethnography, like many others that have been written across the disciplines of the academy, aims at providing a glimpse of a life that is contingent, political, personal, and partial, pointing to the interplay between voice and social life (Gubrium & Holstein, 1999). Autoethnography is both a way of writing and a research method that insists on forging connections between personal identity and cultural forces. Its contribution to academic research is that autoethnography captures local stories in an attempt to move away from or beyond what facts and generalizations offer, toward meanings, understanding and social criticism (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

During the turmoil of the war, I attended a pro-NATO rally, by mistake. I thought the protest on the capital steps was supposed to be advocating for the withdrawal of troops from Yugoslavia rather than for support of more to enter the region. Though there by mistake, I stayed, drawn to and repelled at the same time by the spectacle of 50 people parading in a circle holding banners and posters decrying Serbian actions. A patrolling state trooper, not part of the protest, added his commentary to the event: "Personally, I believe the more bloodshed, the better. Let the (war) games continue." His matter of fact statement was as chilling to me as his words. I turned quickly and left, holding in the tears that I harbored until I was a safe distance from the scene. All around me, I heard, "Fight, fight, fight" like some distorted football chant that targeted death and destruction to claim victory. My culture, my family, and my identity were in this game but our fans were absent.

I could not walk away so easily in other situations. In a seminar, Tom spoke out about the war. He had recently completed a documentary on young adult Muslims, Croatians, and Serbians and said as the resident expert, that

the war was a "logical" reaction to punish the inhumane acts being carried out by the Serbs. I wondered, like 1.5 million Serbians who claim American citizenship, if my voice was irrelevant during this time of war. My situated identity was not a resource now; it was a condemnation of guilt.

Though we cannot generate broad-based findings from autoethnographies, what we can learn about is how our emotional engagement with social issues merges with intellectual description and analysis (Behar, 1996). The quest for stories shows us how we live and make meaning of our interactions with others according to the values we hold. In that way, storytelling itself is a moral imperative.

Autoethnography also calls for the representation of identity through closer consideration of the researcher's self, body, and emotions:

The point is that we cannot separate the researcher from the social and intellectual context of fieldwork. In recognizing that we are constructed, shaped and challenged by fieldwork, we can become more attuned to what is actually going on in the specific cultural setting (Coffey, 1999, p. 158).

To accept the central role of the body and emotions in the research process fits within an ontological position wherein emotions and reason affect our construction of reality (Bohannon & Van der Elst, 1998).

Veracity and verisimilitude are ways to consider validity in the realm of autoethnographic research. Veracity judges success by asking how well did the research depict what/who it claimed to represent (Stewart, 1998). Verisimilitude is "...a style of writing that draws the reader so closely into subjects' worlds that these can be palpably felt" (Adler & Adler, 1994, p. 381). Both of these measures seek to make the case that coherence and authenticity can be rendered through storytelling.

Rather than emphasizing the subject-object dualism inherent in more traditional research methods, this study conflates the distinction in suggesting that what I "know" is inevitably tied to what I "live." Thus, the analytical lens is positioned to capture stories, interpretations, and meanings from the author's perspective within the experience of the lived moment. Communication scholar H. L. Goodall, Jr. speaks of the need in our discipline to use writing in more profound ways to depict the personal experience of communication and the construction of identities and meanings in our social world:

Research becomes integrally connected to writing and impossibly connected to lived experiences; writing itself is the real experiment...to invoke/inspire human connections to lived experiences; and...something ineffable within me and between us...compels me to act as if I must do this—that I am supposed to read these signs as meaningful—instead of any thousand or so other things I could be doing or signs I could be reading as meaningful (Goodall, 1994, p. 180).

Embarking on this study was a journey I had to take to bring sanity to the madness of the world condition where I was so centrally located and yet so far removed.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Autoethnography offers readers a personal narrative that is reflective and constitutive of the self, grounded theoretically in phenomenology and hermeneutics (Ricoeur, 1992). By studying the phenomenon as it is experienced, we catch a glimpse of the human condition through the evocative description of feelings and sense making. Following the lead provided by Heidegger to understand identity through the interaction of phenomenology, existentialism, and hermeneutics, this essay brings forth both the publicly concealed and privately revealed dimensions of communication that constitute our identities in the world.

The dialectical features of responsibility and despair, care and fear, and connection and alienation, characterized my daily experiences, critical reflection, and on-going analysis of communicative events during the 78-day war

in the winter and spring of 1999. Although self-reflection and its attending emotions are often assumed to be the property of the private psyche, they occupied a distinct public location in my life in sometimes abrupt and disturbing ways.

Emotion in social interaction resonates with the study of hermeneutics. "Emotionality is a dialogue with the world...like all dialogue, it turns back on itself, and assumes new forms and dimensions..." (Denzin, 1984, p. 57). Understanding, then, is gained through the back and forth processes of questioning and interpretation, drawing upon historical traditions and dialogic candor.

This investigation locates itself in the interaction of self and other, both at the level of individual identity, and within the broader social and cultural fabric of our time. Admittedly, the individual affects the social, and in turn, the social affects the individual. In that context, discussions of self and other are displayed within their conventional social garments, and then stripped of those same adornments in order to interrogate and describe what surfaces as the more vulnerable, bare conditions of living.

Emmanuel Levinas, a philosopher deeply affected by the atrocities of World War II, begins his treatise on human experience with the disturbing admonition, "The state of war suspends morality" (1969/1961, p. 21). Sanctioned violence, dressed in the finest that military artillery has to offer, moves us to focus on political messages, forsaking our ethical inclination to preserve life and celebrate its glories. War distorts the very foundation of the self by its suggestion that to annihilate life is a logical consequence when we reach a certain breaking point. Life devoid of ethics is justifiable in times of war when what is at stake is preserving an ideology, securing a position within the world powers, safeguarding an economic advantage, justifying an identity, or even advancing a humanitarian mission.

At the same time that we prepared to welcome in a new millennium, we were writing the final chapter in a book of hate, dispute, and war that marked and distinguished the 20th century. It was a time in history devoted far less to our intermittent years of peace and more focused, instead, on the inhumanity of systematic deaths attributable to a politics of language and action aimed at creating a totalizing world view. Zygmunt Bauman's critical study of modernity suggests that the concentration camps of World War II were more than just a reflection of one man's obsession:

I propose that whoever asks her/himself how the camps were possible must not look into the statistics of overt or crypto-sadists, psychopaths and pervers—but elsewhere: to that curious and terrifying socially invented modern contraption which permits the separation of action and ethics, of what people do from what people feel or believe, of the nature of collective deed from the motives of individual actors (Bauman, 1995, p. 195).

Like Levinas, Bauman urges us to consider our culpability in the war regardless of our physical proximity to, or distance from the battlefield.

THE WAR IN ME

The real, tactile nature of the war touched my heart, every day, all the time, for months. I looked inside, at the war in me. I could not escape its grasp and the fear it imposed on my soul. I looked outside, at difficult conversations among politicians, in the media, and among everyday people with whom I spoke.

I, like millions of other Americans, saw the photographs that routinely found their way to the front pages of the country's daily newspapers, where the tragedy of a world gone very wrong was so dramatically portrayed in the faces of Albanian refugees. As an American who has lived the good life, and participated actively in individual and collective actions to embrace diversity, I was horrified by the sufferings of people who were being herded out of their homes and into camps or foreign lands. As a Serbian, I was confused and hurt by the depiction of my relatives as savages who had no sense of decency in the modern world. Jack, a holocaust survivor declared on a local radio show, "The Serbian-Americans who deny what's happening in Kosovo are just like the Nazis

who carried out atrocities because they were 'under orders' to do so" (J. Adler, personal communication, April 7, 1999). Identity, constructed through language, is situated within the representations to which we are exposed (Sarup, 1996). To be a Serb, identified with the Nazis and ethnic genocide was unreasonable to me, yet it was the way people talked.

At the same time, I heard and felt the pain of the "unauthorized stories" of this conflict from my relatives who spoke of the persecutions the Serbs sustained over and over again, without response from the Americans, without hope of help from anyone.

Cacak was bombarded 11 times and many monasteries were ruined. In one of those hits, five persons died and 16 were wounded. Other cities have been heavily damaged and civilians killed. They do not choose the targets. NATO has massacred many civilians in their homes in Nis, Aleksinac, Surdulica, Belgrade and Novi Sad. One thought that is always with me is wondering what the new day will bring and what will be destructed the next. Who among my friends will survive the awful killings? I am writing this by candlelight, soon it will be midnight. Please pray to God for us (V. Radanovic, personal communication, May 16, 1999).

The war in me was playing itself out in communication that was reflective of a paradox of a rising ethnic identity typically dormant, set against my more publicly known and enacted American identity (Nagel, 2000).

I was the one under attack. In the pristine condition of my world in a suburb of one of America's finest cities, I could not sleep at night, haunted by the images of destruction and hatred. I, like many of my relatives, accepted that I had no choice here or power to affect a change in Kosovo. And, my life was saturated by images of war and consumed by grief.

News reports of the war surrounded me—I could not throw away the stories of suffering that filled the front pages. The stacks of newspapers in my house kept growing as the force of the crisis continued its movement toward increasing destruction. The stories became my connection to a land half way around the world. The stories remain near me, today, years later, on a shelf in my office. I cannot let them go.

I could not help but want to know more about the deaths. I rushed to read the paper, in fear of what I would see. I kept making phone calls to relatives, and checking Internet sources for word on how people in Yugoslavia were coping with this tragedy. Every new message seemed to arouse tears inside me as I felt the pain of the Serbians and Albanians alike, who wore faces stained with blood, sweat, and tears, calling forth in me a response to be responsible for them...and I felt my agency stripped from my soul, for what after all could I do to help them?

Was this war an expression of our American "moral imperative?" Was this the best the most powerful nation on earth could do? My grief and my questions made me feel guilty.

THE GUILTY ONE HAS NO PLACE IN DIALOGUE: IDENTITY RECONFIGURED

My exploration of the transformation of the privileged self into the guilty other is solidly connected to the covenant I have with my Serbian ancestry. My parents were born in Serbia and most of my relatives today live in Belgrade, Sarajevo, and neighboring small towns. I was raised to be proud of my ethnicity. It is that identity that in the midst of the war in Kosovo more prominently defined my social being.

To most of the people I have encountered during my more than forty years of life in the United States, Serbia has remained a mysterious place, confused with Syria or occasionally identifiable as a country somewhere in Eastern Europe. The greatest claim to fame I could point to growing up was that a Serbian's attack on Archduke Ferdinand was the defining moment that began World War I. What a claim.

I cannot escape, nor do I want to, the influence of my parents on my ethnic identity. Our lives are joined not only through genetic composition, but also through historical, cultural, religious, and political stories. This was

abundantly clear in conversations with my mother and my father, who though American citizens now, struggled as I did, with communication about the crisis in Kosovo.

My father has always enjoyed speaking out about Serbian matters, foreign policy issues, U.S. domestic politics, and what he perceived as criminal actions waged by NATO on the Serbian people. During World War II, my father was among the forces that fought the Nazi invasion and willingly sacrificed lives to save some 800 American airmen shot down by the Germans during a melee over Yugoslavia. My father eventually fled from his homeland where his father, a police commissioner, was murdered. The communist faction confiscated his family's significant personal property.

My mother's story is filled less with fighting to retain an identity and more with bittersweet memories of a childhood in Serbia. At age 10, she was buried under rubble when an enemy bomb fell on her home. Her screams saved her life and her brother's as well, but nearby her mother's voice remained quiet, never to be heard again.

As NATO prepared to celebrate its 50th anniversary in Washington, D.C. in 1999, my mother and father found different ways to express their views. My father's actions focused on his trip to participate in one of the nation's largest demonstrations ever against NATO and to protest the actions targeted at innocent civilians in Serbia. He found great joy in being among thousands of people making a political statement for all the world to see. My mother spoke with me, expressing her anguish and concern more privately. In fact, when someone commented on her lovely accent as people always do, and asked where my mother was from, my mom responded with a laugh, "Oh, I'm an American," fully aware she said that it wasn't "appropriate" to speak of her Serbian roots at a time when everyone hated us.

I planned to go to another demonstration on the same weekend that my father was in Washington, D.C. It was an event similar in scope and tone to the one I attended a week earlier where two dozen of us gathered. There were young people and old, some who spoke only Serbian, others who did not know the language at all. Together, we gathered to raise our anti-NATO and anti-Clinton signs to passing traffic on a busy city intersection, waiting for the car horn honks of support. When we heard those honks we clapped and cheered, interrupting for a moment our talk with one another. Our talk served as an important means to discover our voices and shared identity that were conspicuously absent when we were away from each other (Young, 1990).

We planned to convene that day in between soccer games and dinners with friends, adding political action to the to do list of our busy lives. In the end, however, we did not protest. Instead, we attended or watched on television the memorial service for the Columbine High School students who were murdered by the hands of other students in our community of Littleton, Colorado.

On that weekend in April 1999, my father protested on the grounds of our nation's capital and stayed up all night in conversations with others who shared his political passions. I was ready to demonstrate on the street corner in my community. My mother watched CNN sporadically, but focused more solidly on not watching too much. She yearned to lead a life devoid of the pain she already experienced so intimately 55 years ago under a pile of dirt when she was forever thrown from the safety of her mother's arms into World War II.

We each communicated our concern differently though we focused on the same discourse themes: horrible injustices being waged by Serbia's president Slobodan Milosevic as well as the U.S.-led NATO operation; unmitigated concern for Serbians and Albanians not associated with paramilitary forces on the one hand or the Kosovo Liberation Army on the other hand; the need to talk of how we Serbians are not mere objects to be maligned; and the visceral objection to violence as the avenue to peace.

The feelings I express here are ones I recognize do not begin and end with me. The intense emotion that I felt during the time of the war, always on the brink of tears, and the estrangement I experienced were symptomatic of a profound distancing of myself from others. In my case, I traced the cause to the Kosovo conflict. For

others, the loss of community and assault on identity may come from different sources—race, gender, and class (Shiffrin, 1999). The work of emotion is a source of emancipation from the detached, egocentric, self-interested politics the self so often employs in everyday living. It is important, I think, to critically reflect on how alienation, distance, sorrow, and horror can emerge within the undefined moments of everyday life, oftentimes without warning, and without recourse.

I asked myself, was it unethical for me to unleash my sorrow on those around me? Or, was it the ultimately ethical act that permitted me to show my raw vulnerability? In an attempt to be sympathetic to my plight perhaps, my friends pulled back, they did not ask me about "my" war, and they did not infringe on my space. Maybe my swell of emotion was a far greater force than the response it could possibly generate. From another vantage point, I sometimes felt that my call for understanding or compassion simply went unanswered. Is it possible that they saw me as the guilty one, the one not deserving of their sympathies?

IF NOT DIALOGUE, THEN WHAT?

Early on, when the NATO bombings had just begun, I tried to communicate with others about the situation. The rational side of my discourse, however, could not bear the weight of my emotional pain, and so the tears overrode my words. I shouldered a deep responsibility to do something; all my life I had found the resources to assert myself to affect positive outcomes. If I could not stop the war, if I could not help my relatives from dying, then at the very least, I wanted to encourage dialogue and introduce another perspective of the war to the people I encountered.

I wanted to do this, but I was rendered mute. The trouble is that living what one thinks is far more demanding of the soul than talking about it, because "...cognition constitutes merely a moment in this experiencing-affirming" (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 13). In addition to talking about our lived experience, we must account, too, for our actions and our emotions. The unpredictable, spontaneous, interactive nature of life means that our identities, even in the best of times, are tenuous, relational, and incomplete (Grossberg, 1996).

I was always aware of my situation, walking a fine line between having the authority to speak, and not having the right to speak. I considered my communication carefully as I weighed the ethical standards to which I hold myself. Where before I could speak often without concern of public scrutiny of my identity, I was instead extremely sensitive about what I said and what others said to me. Was I opening up the boundaries of dialogue or was I closing them down? Was I willing to consider my own responsibility for the war? Was I strong enough to invite in the different perspectives as I so easily advocate in my work, when my identity and my heritage were under siege?

When a colleague proclaimed his support for the NATO bombings in Kosovo, I was stunned, realizing that educated people who advocate for peaceful settlement of disputes generally were favorably inclined to this war. I interpreted my colleague's message to mean that there was something so awful about the Serbians that death and destruction were justified in this particular case, not in all cases. We are that bad.

The answers to many of my ethical questions were ambivalent, complicated, and not always affirmative. At some level, I feared that my deep convictions were in fact keeping others away. I felt as if my identity was conflated with a country that was under attack by the American press. New York Times Magazine writer Cynthia Ozick (1999) described how "this once-principled nation" forced the exodus of refugees who were "...mercilessly driven from home, stripped, terrorized, murdered." Serbia—what was once good, was now evil. Was the same true about me?

I became angry with people around me in the academy who were on the one hand so forthright in their indignation of the injustices of our own government to minority groups and then, on the other hand, so supportive of our government for its oppressive military actions in a foreign land. I could not understand how we speak of the virtues of communication and then forsake discourse as a means of settlement.

The emotional force of my confusion and frustration with the construction of identities—mine, the Serbians, and the myriad others—mounted during the war. Ambivalence, "...the possibility of assigning an object or event to more than one category" (Sarup, 1996, p. 50), however, remained. There, residing along side my disdain for intolerance, was my own silent admission that the situation in Kosovo may have been doomed from the beginning, destined to be the site of violence. Hundreds of years of fighting and ethnic tensions there have ebbed and flowed, giving rise to periods of sustained conflict. To lose faith, however, in the ability of people to construct a world where words can be used to affect positive social change is to lose faith not only in my research interests of ethics and communication, but to lose faith in life itself. I recognized this angst as what fueled my fury and my sorrow.

The Chief of Surgery at Belgrade University Hospital during the war wrote to a friend of his in London, capturing a feeling that I shared.

The worst part is wondering why this all is happening. All of my life I tried to be decent, honest and dignified doing no wrong to anyone. I cannot leave my people in time of greatest need and none of my friends has done so. We can only speak our mind and promote moral principles hoping that sanity will prevail. Unfortunately, no one wants to hear (Milicevic, 1999).

Under a blanket of emotional pain, I was afraid. I could not provide the definitive proof to counter or defend what was being reported in the media. I could not read the reports of the Serbian version of the war without also being told by our United States government that it was propaganda devoid of any truth. By my very heritage, my own voice was not deemed worthy of respect or understanding. Because of my voice and my views on the war, I felt like the condemned other who was left out of and avoided, conversation.

In the face of my identity crisis, what was I to do? I was (am) a patriotic American and as my name poignantly suggests, I am deeply Serbian. When my nationality was at war with my ethnicity, to what side was I to pledge allegiance? These were (are) not simple questions.

To retain a sense of identity linked to a personal commitment to care and service, rather than one associated with genocide as it was being characterized in the media, I relied on talk to constitute a peaceful settlement of these avowed and ascribed sentiments. I attended NATO protests invoking my democratic right to non-violent protest. I spoke with my Serbian friends to foster community. I visited web sites, I watched the news and read the newspapers, and I called my parents for regular updates on how our relatives were surviving. I recognized the affects of globalization on my identity. I was becoming my country, or a representative of it, here at home far away.

At our urging, my aunt finally left her home where bombs were falling regularly, taking refuge at her in-laws' home where the skies were still quiet at night. I was relieved somewhat, while knowing that there was no getting back to normal in Yugoslavia. The annihilation of villages, power plants, communication centers, hospitals, refineries, apartment buildings, bridges, and people was certain. When the fires subsided, and the sirens fell silent, a deep despair was what I and my Serbian countrymen were left with for having witnessed a war fought in the name of both holy and human rights that left in its wake the death of what is sacred and the devastation of community.

Identity is a social construction; it is also a political formulation. Identity is reflective of an environment or a culture, imbued with particular values, enacted in stories, and reflective of our emotions (Eisenberg, 2001). Moving back and forth between the political and the social, I watched and wept.

I took action at home the way I knew how by sitting with a child who was crying over the unjust actions of the playground bully. I offered to host an assembly on disabilities to teach elementary school children that many people have special needs, including the need to be loved and accepted. I visited a friend recuperating from

surgery who rarely, if ever, asked for help. I spent time with my best friend who was moving away so that we could revel in the unconditional love that binds us. I made dinner for another friend who celebrated a birthday without the fanfare of a party. I stopped at the top of a highway off-ramp to give a dollar to the stranger I had never known. I assembled gift baskets for the teachers, bus drivers, and office clerks who saw my children every day to make sure they knew how much I appreciated them. I consoled a colleague whose daughter struggled with her first year in college by hurting herself. I listened intently to a student who was beaten by two strangers because his skin was dark.

I discovered that communication does not really stop, not even when we are rendered mute in one venue. There are always other locales where our voices rise. Leaning on practices that are productive in their reach for connection can be what leads us back to the fray to engage in dialogue where we once thought it was impossible.

COMMUNICATING A MORAL IMPERATIVE

It is in the moments I share with others, when we connect in ways that communicate our joys and troubles, either in conversation or in silence, that I express my moral imperative. It is a call that is not informed by a "have to" or "should do" voice, but rather it is a desire that creates the space for meaningful discourse to occur. I am proud of my life, sometimes, when I have been a part of a moment that transcends the conventions of role, habit, and fixed positions. I am ashamed of my life, other times, when I have contributed to a moment that denies expression, rejects another, or disrespects the views that another holds deeply.

With war all around us, whether that is in the remains of Kosovo, among the Chiapas in Mexico, in the hills of Afghanistan, or in the Democratic Republic of Congo, we have to seriously question how peace can ever emerge from the ashes of war. Threat-based diplomacy has long been the policy of the United States, with only a limited record of success in changing the behavior abroad that it has targeted with economic sanctions or military interventions (Hoagland, 1999). The uncomfortable reality is that in the last century, we have been witness to far too many battles, wars, and displays of military might without being much closer to world peace. Even within our own borders, war has been waged in different, though still ruthless ways, in nearly all our larger cities, on school playgrounds across the country, and within the walls of federal buildings. Perhaps it is time to consider an alternative vision, one in which peace comes not from the bowels of violence to enforce political goals, but rather from communication, from the unconditional acceptance of the other, even when the other is the oppressor. Emmanuel Levinas helps us cast this radical vision.

WELCOMING ANOTHER VISION

Though the deaths associated with the war in Kosovo were disturbing and wretched for me, it is precisely those deaths that give me reason to pause and consider again the call for ethics as compassionate expression (Levinas, 1998/1991). This recurrent theme in the work of Emmanuel Levinas reminds us that without expectation of reciprocal action, remuneration, or reward, "...we must be moved in our afflictions by the afflictions of our fellow humans" (Cohen, 1999, p. 180).

Some might argue that the United States and NATO were operating from precisely the principles on which Levinas bases his philosophy. We acted in order to stop violations against human life. We intervened, responding to a call for help. We were ethical as we sacrificed our own resources for the rescue of others. Yes, but...

How can we justify the consequences of our actions that caused immediate destruction and death to so many, and more long-term, yet unidentifiable effects associated with the dangerous substances used in the bombings? UCLA Professor of Sociology Rogers Brubaker says that a policy that protected NATO pilots from all risk while acquiescing that civilian casualties were inevitable was a policy not only irresponsible, but immoral (1999).

Although preaching a rhetoric of war as last resort, there were other alternatives available to us beyond reacting to a flawed Rambouillet agreement that neither the Albanians nor the Serbians wanted.

Kosovo is a dominant part of the national psyche and it would have been suicidal for Milosevic, or for any other leader, to agree that Kosovo be occupied by enemy NATO troops. In the Rambouillet negotiations, all the other features of the agreement drafted by NATO were accepted by the Serbian delegation. The Serbs suggested that, instead of NATO troops, the UN be requested to provide the peace-keeping force. The United States Secretary of State Madeleine Albright refused to even consider it and gave no explanation (P. C. Nikitovich, personal communication, April 17, 1999).

The alternatives that regard all human life as precious and worthy of our utmost respect are what Levinas urges us to apply to the seemingly impossible situations in life. But if not that patient, vigilant approach to peace, there are still other alternatives. Embracing conflict sans violence as a means to bring forth our overlapping interests is surely a more acceptable proposition than war. Abandoning the notion of "truth" in favor of peace as the ideal may be the most important ground on which to begin negotiations.

Deliberative processes are rooted in discourse dating back to Athenian politics. Communication, then, remains a constant tradition in a renewed sense in this age of cultural pluralism. In the past, our homogeneous public spaces coupled with a focus on normative styles of argumentation served to advantage dominant groups while forsaking others.

Today, if we are to take the notion of multiculturalism seriously where ethnic or other groups are afforded equal access and opportunity, we need to recognize that competing power structures, rivalry, and even violence constitute the identities of those groups (Mouffe, 2000). It follows then, that harmony is not the likely outcome. Instead, we need to recognize the other as, "...no longer an enemy to be destroyed, but as an 'adversary,' that is, somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 102).

In Kosovo as in other parts of the world where war rages today or peace exists just barely, diplomacy must remain the focus of bureaucratic, judicial, and military operations as the default position, the area where we ought to commit the majority of our funds and expertise through discursive means. However, this diplomacy to be effective and ethical, cannot be limited by pre-assigned rules of conduct. Instead, we need to follow democratic guidelines and then go further, inventing solutions and alternatives in dialogue, in response to the conditions that erupt before us (Derrida, 1995/ 1993).

Necessary to this process is that politicians consider "them" in the context of responsibility rather than eradication. Journalists, too, must not fall prey to sensational storytelling that presents images of one kind only, over and over again. Instead, their responsibility is to bring forward the pluralistic imagery of a culture and of a war. Academicians can play a part, too, in advancing discourse through public dialogues that bring forward more nuanced images and claims than those offered on television.

Finally, we can take a step toward discourse by engaging in dialogue rather than shying away from it. Remaining open to opposing ideas, no doubt, is easier when our personal identities are not consumed by the rhetoric of the times. My story is testimony to just how difficult the task is. More often than not, I failed to engage positively in the solutions I advocate here. Those who are implicated have a responsibility to share their stories, despite their fears or pain, while those who are outside the war zone need to recognize that pain in the other may require even more discrete invitations for conversation.

Discourse, Levinas says, is our hope for a world at peace because speech is not just a mode of transmission, or a function "...subordinate to the consciousness we have of the presence of the other..." but the actual condition of that consciousness (Levinas, 1998/1991, p. 6). In other words, speech is what allows us to be non-indifferent to the individual other, and to the notions of ethics and justice in our social world. Our responsibility for the other

then does not come from social contract, law, or normative standard, it is instead prior to that. "To be in relation with the other face to face—is to be unable to kill," explains Levinas (1998/1991, p. 10). Here, Levinas speaks of the face not as a set of physical traits, but as discourse. What are the conditions of this discourse?

First, there is the self's responsibility for the other. It is a powerful declaration, Levinas defends, that moves me beyond my pain, my shame, my guilt, and my agony to consider what it must be like for the others who also grapple with social injustices. In this case, the others include the Albanians and the Serbians, my relatives and my ethnic brethren, my colleagues, and my adversaries. They all demand of me a response that does not annihilate their differences in relation to me, but instead elevates those differences to take precedence over me. Ethics in communication compels me to be vulnerable to others, in service to them in the most hospitable ways, even as we disagree about policy, procedures, and practices (Sussin, 1999). To be vulnerable is to be uncertain, like walking on sand that is unable to be fixed. It is, admittedly, scary. Yet, clinging to our views, truths, and other positions to establish a sense of certainty is not without its costs for "...what we gain in certainty, we lose in possibility" (Eisenberg, 2001, p. 540). Vulnerability and uncertainty, when coupled with desire, point the way to options, choices, and hope.

Second, in applying the philosophy of Levinas to the war in Kosovo and our moral imperative to engage in finding a solution to intractable differences between ethnic and political groups, we are forced to confront individually and collectively our commitment to a vision of justice in which identity, responsibility, mercy, and benevolence underscore our discourse and actions (Levinas, 1998/1991). Barnett Pearce suggests that among the resources we have to validate the stories and identities of others and ourselves are truth, time, self, and society (1989). Recognizing that truth has many faces, depending on how it is expressed, is a beginning step toward understanding and global dialogue. Next, Pearce reminds us that identity emerges not in a linear sequence, but unfolds in response to events. Appreciating the sometimes contradictory and fractured nature of identity can release us from binary thinking and propel us toward appreciation of differences (Sarup, 1996). For Pearce, the stories we tell articulate our identities and reveal a common drive to make sense of our worlds, albeit through different means and values. Finally, if we can see that what was once thought to be intractable as actually constructed, then we are poised to "make" the world better (Pearce, 1989). Levinas commends democracy as the best means for achieving the ethical ideal with its "...legislation always unfinished, always resumed, a legislation open to the better" (1998/1991, p. 230).

Levinas wants us to consider that to the degree we are responsible for our persecutors, is the degree to which we can evaluate our own moral positions, not as a choice, but as a fact of our existence (Davis, 1996). We are before being, ethical in the sense that we are for the other. It is possible to turn away from that obligation, as many do, but it does not mean that the obligation is any less there (Levinas, 1981/1974).

Ethics in communication, then, is an on-going process, one in which I hold myself responsible and responsive, always. It is the challenge I must consider, rather than the solution I hope to find.

CONCLUSION

There is no neutral territory within which stories reside, only the ethical dimension of the social and political world in which those stories are embedded (Ricoeur, 1992). My story, offered here, is an exploration in how to live in a world marked by totality and war, with a spirit that longs for possibilities and peace. Our decisions about how we communicate and our choices about what we communicate really matter in the mundane moments of everyday life, and also amidst the extraordinary events of the world.

It is at moments of crisis in our personal and public lives when our resolve and faith are challenged in ways not before considered. Kosovo is a striking example of the personal and the public clashing in my soul. For many of us, attacks on the World Trade Center hit a similar chord where overlapping family matters and public issues could not help but be tested. When the day-to-day negotiations of living rise to a level of national or international attention, it is difficult to skirt the hard questions that confront our most basic beliefs. We cannot

hide them, or wish them away, or put some other questions in front of those that already monopolize center stage. Instead, we must see the connections between our personal actions and world affairs. We must acknowledge the dependency and influence of the social on our identities. When we move fluidly from personal experience, to community response, to global imperative, and back again, we have the opportunity to challenge injustice at every level. Then we can reaffirm or rewrite our destiny. When we confront the central issues of what it means to live in a social world, and question ourselves once again about our ethics, our communication, and our commitment to humanity, we open up the space and the dialogue to envision a world where discourse overrules violence.

This essay began as a response to the baffling use of the term "moral imperative" to launch a war. This essay ends with a plea, through autoethnographic exploration, for discourse that reveals our emotional and ethical responsibilities for peace in order to "...deepen and enlarge our sense of a human community" (Bochner & Ellis, p. 18).

REFERENCES

- Adler, P. A. & Adler, P. (1994). Observational techniques. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 377-392). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1993). *Toward a philosophy of the act* (V. Liapunov, Trans.; V. Liapunov & M. Holquist, Eds.). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Bauman, Z. (1995). *Life in fragments*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Behar, R. (1996). Ethnography: Cherishing our second-fiddle genre. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 28, 472-484.
- Bohannon, P. & van der Elst, D. (1998). *Asking and listening*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland.
- Brubaker, R. (1999, June). Counterpoint: How could we not have foreseen the catastrophic consequences of our actions. *UCLA Magazine*, pp. 13, 16.
- Clinton, W. J. (1999, March 24). Clinton address to the nation on NATO air strikes (Presidential speech) Retrieved April 4, 1999, from <http://www.usia.gov/current/news/eur/balkans/kosovo/kosoitem.html>
- Coffey, A. (1999). *The ethnographic self*. London: Sage.
- Cohen, R. A. (1999). On suffering and evil. *Philosophy Today*, 43, 176-183.
- Davis, J. E. (2000). Introduction: Social change and the problem of identity. In J. E. Davis (Ed.), *Identity and social change* (pp. 1-10). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Davis, C. (1996). *Levinas: An introduction*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Denzin, N. K. (1984). *On understanding emotion*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Derrida, J. (1995). *On the name* (D. Wood, J. P. Leavey, Jr. & I. McLeod, Trans.) Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. (Original work published 1993)
- Eisenberg, E. M. (2001). Building a mystery: Toward a new theory of communication and identity. *Journal of Communication*, 51, 534-552.
- Ellis, C. & Bochner, A. P. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject. In N. K. Denzin & Y. L. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gardiner, M. (1996). Alterity and ethics: A dialogical perspective. *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 13, 121-143.
- Goodall, Jr., H. L. (1994). *Casing a promised land*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Grossberg, L. (1996). Identity and cultural studies-is that all there is? In S. Hall & P. du Gay (Eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (pp. 87-107). London: Sage.
- Gubrium, J. F. & Holstein, J. A. (1999). At the border of narrative and ethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Research*, 28(5), 561-573.
- Hoagland, J. (1999, March 28). The risk of threat-based diplomacy. *Denver Post*.

- Levinas, E. (1969). *Totality and infinity* (A. Lingis, Trans.). Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press. (Original work published 1961)
- Levinas, E. (1981). *Otherwise than being* (A.Lingis, Trans.). Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press. (Original work published 1974)
- Levinas, E. (1998). *Entres Nous* (M. B. Smith & B. Harshav, Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press. (Original work published 1991)
- Lincoln, Y. S. & Denzin, N. K. (1994). *The fifth moment*. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2"d ed.) (pp. 575-586). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Milicevic, M. (1999). *Attacks on Belgrade are driving us mad*. Retrieved May 4, 1999 from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk:80/et?ac>
- Mouffe, C. (2000). *The democratic paradox*. London: Verso.
- Nagel, J. (2000). *False faces: Ethnic identity, authenticity, and fraud in Native American discourse and politics*. In J.E. Davis (Ed.), *Identity and social change* (pp. 81-106). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Ozick, C. (1999, April 15). 'We know these faces.' *New York Times Magazine*, pp. 32-35.
- Pearce, W. B. (1989). *Communication and the human condition*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1992). *Oneself as another* (K. Blarney, Trans.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Sarup, M. (1996). *Identity, culture and the postmodern world*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press.
- Shiffrin, S. H. (1999). *Dissent, injustice, and the meanings of America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Stewart, A. (1998). *The ethnographer's method*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sussin, L. C. (1999). *Ethics and optics: The occidentality of Levinas from the heart of the Americas*. *Philosophy Today*, 43, 135-142.
- Young, I. M. (1990). *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.