

Like many of his colleagues, Father Leonel Narvaez, the Co-Founder and President of the Colombian peace-building organization [Fundación para la Reconciliación](#) (Foundation for Reconciliation), has a gift for weaving anecdotes throughout his presentations and sermons.

Here in Izcalli, Mexico, at the Fourth International Meeting of the Fundación's [Escuelas de Perdón & Reconciliación](#), (The "Schools for Forgiveness & Reconciliation," known by the acronym ESPERE), Narvaez relied heavily on his full arsenal of stories. Between the 22nd and the 24th of November, representatives from ESPERE programs from 10 countries gathered to share their experiences, discuss best practices, and mark their collective progress as an organization. One of Narvaez' stories in particular resonated among the attendees:

As Narvaez tells it, as a graduate student in the late 1980's he had met and befriended Dick Cheney, then a relatively unknown Defense Secretary under President George H.W. Bush. At some point he had been invited to stay at Cheney's house, which he described as a "museum" of firearms: "This man had all kinds of guns and rifles on the walls," he said. "Guns for hunting, guns for fighting, old guns, new guns. I had never seen so many guns in a house."

Cheney also had countless animal trophies on display. "This man was a very serious hunter," Narvaez said.

Cheney also took Narvaez on a personal tour of the Pentagon at the time, at one point showing him a display model of an intercontinental ballistic missile.

"He told me, this is the most intelligent missile we have – it can reach 30,000 miles and we control it by satellite. And it only costs... I don't remember exactly but I think he said \$10 million dollars. It was *a lot*. And I don't know how many missiles they had. Maybe 1,000 or more, I don't remember. But they spend so much money on these things."

"I told him: Mr. Cheney, do you know how much good I could do with what you spent on just one of these missiles?"

To a man who had dedicated his life to building peace, the experience must have been surreal. It is also a testament to Narvaez' character that he has nothing bad to say, about his former host, apart from some good-natured ribbing about his [skill as a hunter](#). This is remarkable, considering the vast gulf between their philosophical approaches towards violence.

Among other things, Cheney is known as an outspoken advocate of pre-emptive military force, large-scale military spending, and probably the highest-ranking

government official to defend [torture](#) and rendition of suspected terrorists. It would be difficult to find a human being further on the political spectrum from Father Narvaez, who has spent his life working to reverse the damages wrought by five decades of conflict in Colombia.

The contrast is compelling: Narvaez, unassuming and self-deprecating, engaging the then-Secretary of Defense Cheney, challenging him on the wisdom of the priorities of US Defense spending. At its heart, the story is also about being able to engage in meaningful dialogue with people of opposed worldviews. This is at the heart of Narvaez' story about Dick Cheney, and it is also the heart of the tremendous success he has had at the helm of the *Fundación para la Reconciliación*.

Since it was founded in 2003, the Fundación has touched countless lives in Colombia, and contributed in meaningful ways to the peacebuilding efforts there. The Fundación has also seen its model of forgiveness and reconciliation spread beyond Colombia's borders and across Latin America with a speed that would have drawn jealous interest from Exxon or McDonald's (or Dick Cheney, for that matter).

The primary vehicle for this rapid expansion has been the *ESPERE* curriculum, a pedagogical workshop that is built on the simple yet powerful premise of forgiveness and reconciliation. Born out of the difficult work of Narvaez and his colleagues in Colombia, *ESPERE* (which also translates as "Hope") has been adapted for a broader international audience, and tailored to meet the needs of a diverse continent. Today, *ESPERE* is thriving in countries with experiences of recent conflict, such as Peru, but also in countries like Mexico, where an explosion of organized criminal activity in the past fifteen years has introduced new cycles of violence and retribution.

ESPERE has also shown itself to be adaptable to environments that have not experienced these more familiar forms of conflict, but where the need for forgiveness and dialogue is nonetheless great. These include countries as diverse as Chile, Brazil and the United States, where traditional categories of conflict are not present.

Examples of *ESPERE* programs are further testament to the program's adaptability: From the Pacific Northwest to the Mar Del Plata, it has found its way into federal prisons, to shelters for victims of domestic violence, to classrooms in remote villages and urban shantytowns.

And it has not stopped in the Western Hemisphere. In a remarkable development, elements of the program have found their way into the villages of Northern Uganda, where the Acholi people are coping with the reintegration of child soldiers returning home after fleeing the ranks of the Lord's Resistance Army.

In describing the organization's core values, Narvaez favors a phrase, "*La violencia es el fracaso del diálogo*," violence emerges from the collapse of dialogue. This idea is as powerful in its simplicity as it is universal. But, as Narvaez can attest through his own experience, dialogue without understanding and without the goal of teaching forgiveness, has limited results.

This is a concept that, according to Narvaez, is earning an increasing share of attention in academic and policy circles focusing on post-conflict reconciliation. However, it remains far from the mainstream.

His point was illustrated in an unexpected and tragic way, when, on Monday the 24th, the town of Ferguson, Missouri erupted into violence after a grand jury found no probable cause for criminal charges against a police officer accused of shooting an unarmed teen. The televised coverage of the angry demonstrations and looting were broadcast around the world, including to Mexico, where it coincided with the last night of the ESPERE conference.

A failure dialogue has been present at every stage of the Ferguson story, a vacuum that allowed a verbal confrontation between Michael Brown and Officer Darren Wilson to escalate into the use of deadly force on the streets of Ferguson. These same conditions persisted through the response to the news of his death: angry protests, met by a heavy-handed, militarized police overreaction, which eventually escalated into rioting, tear gas and growing outrage on both sides.

La violencia es el fracaso del diálogo: A new cycle of violence is born out of a failure of dialogue and an absence of forgiveness.

But, as the ESPERE conference showed, the world is also full of men and women armed with tools for breaking these cycles, and with the courage and energy to try.