# Reconciliation: How Societies Learn to Live with What Has Happened

In 2017 during my time studying International Relations with a focus on humanitarian studies at Webster University Geneva, and while interning at The Permanent Mission of the Republic of Maldives to the United Nations Office at Geneva, I was immersed in a steady rhythm of comparative case studies. Each week, we examined a different national response to conflict — different histories, different harms, different paths forward. And yet, beneath the variation, there was a shared question: **What does it take for a society to move forward after harm has been done?**

## The Tension

At first, I approached these cases as separate models — distinct frameworks shaped by culture, politics, and history. But over time, a tension began to surface. There was no single approach that could be universally applied. What worked in one context did not translate cleanly into another. Even when outcomes appeared similar — peace agreements, public acknowledgments, institutional reform — the processes that led there were deeply specific.

This challenged a common assumption in international work: that best practices can simply be transferred across contexts. They cannot. Not without transformation.

### The Core Question

How do we live with what has happened — and still build what comes next?

This question lives beneath every case study, every peace agreement, every act of institutional accountability.

## The Pattern Beneath the Moment

Across these cases, what became clear is that reconciliation is not a standardized process. It is an adaptive one. Each approach below reflects more than policy — it reflects worldview.



### South Africa

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission centered public testimony, acknowledgment, and restorative justice grounded in collective witnessing. Truth-telling was positioned as the primary pathway toward national healing.



### Germany

*Vergangenheitsbewältigung* sustained confrontation with historical wrongdoing. Memory, education, and institutional accountability became long-term commitments, not one-time interventions.



### Japan

Post-war responses reflected a complex and contested relationship with historical accountability where remembrance, responsibility, and national identity have been navigated differently across time and audiences.



### Ubuntu Philosophy

Across many African contexts, the philosophy of *Ubuntu* offered a relational lens: a belief that one's humanity is bound to the humanity of others, shaping how harm, responsibility, and repair are understood.

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# What These Systems Are Really Doing

What fascinated me most was not which approach was "best," but what each was trying to solve for. At their core, these systems are not simply about justice or resolution. They are about **meaning-making**. Different societies arrive at different answers, but the underlying challenge is shared: human beings are trying to find ways to live with what has happened — without allowing it to determine what comes next.

### On Harm and Identity

How do we acknowledge harm without becoming defined by it? Societies and organizations alike must find language and process that honors what occurred without allowing the wound to become the organizing principle of collective identity.

### On Generational Accountability

What does accountability look like across generations? The question of who bears responsibility and for how long  is one that no single model resolves cleanly. Context shapes the answer every time.

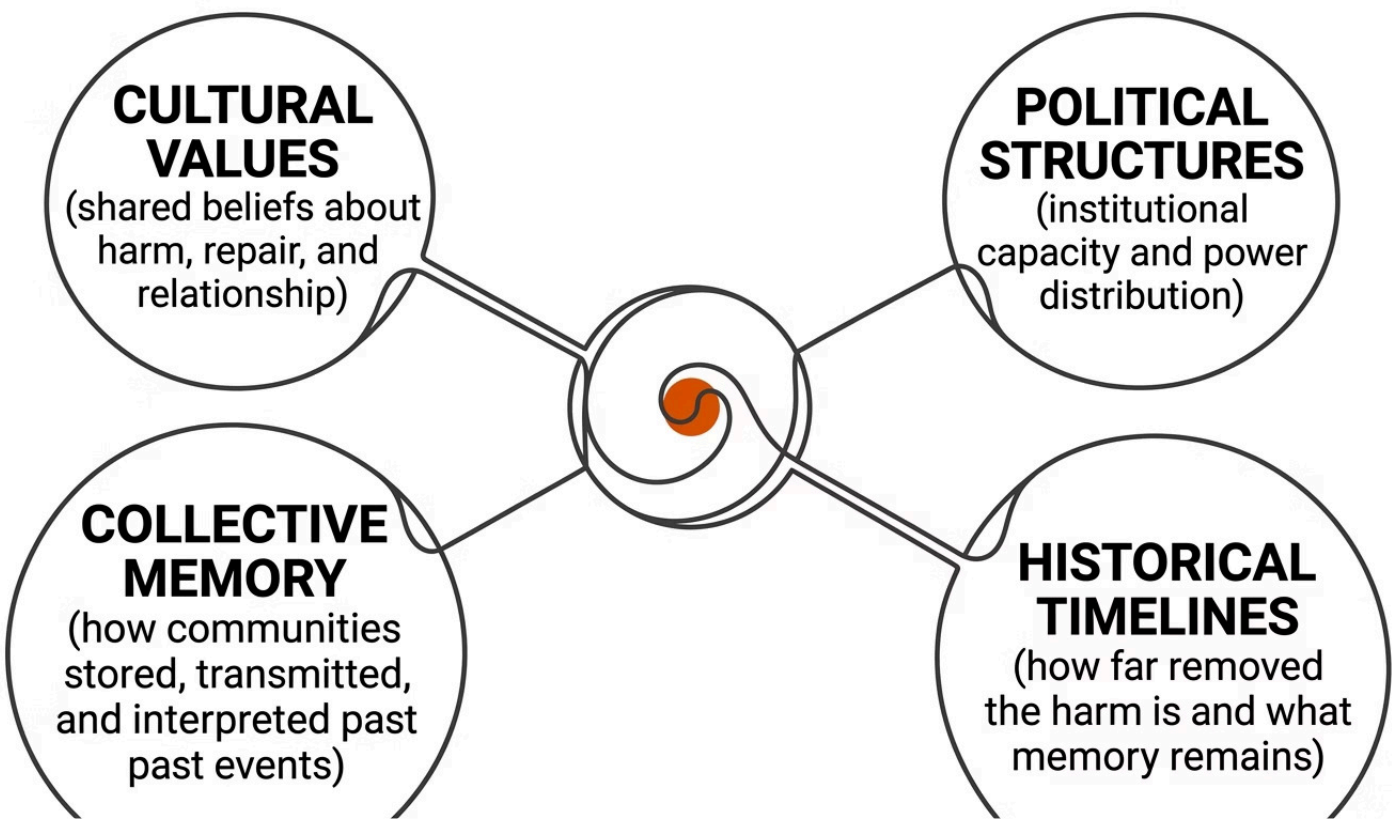
### On Institutional Trust

How do we rebuild trust when the system itself was the source of harm? This is perhaps the most difficult challenge: restoring legitimacy to structures that failed — or worse, participated in — the original harm.

# When Context Becomes the Constraint

One of the most important lessons from these comparative cases is that approaches to conflict cannot be separated from the conditions that shape them. Cultural values, political structures, historical timelines, and collective memory all influence what is possible. An approach rooted in public confession may resonate deeply in one context and feel destabilizing in another. A model built on legal accountability may bring closure in one society and deepen division in another.

> This is why replication often fails. What works is not the model itself, but the alignment between the model and the context in which it is applied.




These four forces do not operate in isolation. They interact, reinforce, and sometimes contradict one another — making any single-template solution insufficient. Understanding this constellation of context is the prerequisite to designing an effective path forward.

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# Organizational Translation

This pattern extends beyond nation-states. In organizations, teams often look for the "right" framework to address conflict — whether through mediation models, communication tools, or leadership strategies. But conflict systems, like national reconciliation efforts, are shaped by context. The risk is assuming that effectiveness travels unchanged from one setting to another.

### The National Level

Reconciliation processes succeed when they are designed around the specific cultural, political, and historical conditions of the society navigating harm. Borrowed frameworks that lack contextual alignment tend to fail — or worse, deepen division.

- Truth commissions succeed through cultural resonance
- Legal accountability requires institutional trust
- Educational approaches depend on long-term political will
- Relational philosophies must be organically embedded

### The Organizational Level

The same logic applies to teams and institutions. Before adopting a conflict resolution framework, leaders must examine the conditions in which they are operating.

- Team culture and shared norms
- Leadership trust or its absence
- History of unresolved tension
- Power dynamics and structural inequality

## Pausing the Pattern

These experiences introduced a different kind of pause. Not, *"What is the best model?"* But, *"What does this context require?"* This shift moves the focus from adopting solutions to designing them. It is a more demanding question — because it cannot be answered by searching a best-practices database. It requires observation, inquiry, and a willingness to sit with complexity before moving to resolution.

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### Standard Approach

Search for the best model. Identify a proven framework. Apply it to the context.

2

### The Pause

Stop before adopting. Ask what this specific context actually requires before reaching for a solution.

3

### Designed Approach

Adapt frameworks. Build alignment between the model and the conditions. Design rather than replicate.

This three-part shift is deceptively simple. In practice, it requires resisting the institutional pressure to move quickly — and choosing deliberate design over convenient replication.

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# A Practical Shift

Whether at the level of nations or organizations, working through harm is not a single event. It is an ongoing practice — one that requires consistent attention, willingness to adapt, and a commitment to meaning-making alongside process design. Several principles have emerged from this comparative work that apply across both scales.

### 1 Prioritize context before implementation

Before selecting any model or framework, invest time in understanding the specific cultural, relational, and historical conditions at play. Context is not background — it is the design brief.

### 2 Adapt frameworks rather than applying them rigidly

Proven models offer starting points, not blueprints. Effective implementation requires translation — adjusting assumptions, language, and sequencing to fit the environment.

### 3 Recognize that reconciliation is ongoing, not event-based

There is no finish line. Healing and accountability are iterative processes that require sustained institutional and relational investment over time.

### 4 Center meaning-making alongside process design

Procedural steps matter — but so does the narrative. People need to understand not just what is happening, but why it matters and what it means for who they are and what comes next.

### 5 Accept that different paths can lead to stability — without being identical

There is no universal model. Pluralism of approach is not a limitation — it is a reflection of the diversity of human experience and context.

# Closing Reflection

What stayed with me from Geneva was not a single model of reconciliation. It was the realization that there isn't one. Across countries, cultures, and systems, people are working to make sense of conflict in ways that allow them to continue forward. Different approaches. Different philosophies. Different outcomes. But a shared effort to answer the same question: **How do we live with what has happened and still build what comes next?**

> Pause the pattern. Choose one place this dynamic exists, examine what sustains it, and take a deliberate step to change it — by design.

If you're navigating this in your organization, you can learn more or take the first step by scheduling a consultation at **Lowe Insights**.

*Nashay Lowe, PhD | Lowe Insights | Field Notes, April 2026*