

Healing Memory

Mohamed Sahnoun
11 July 2010

Many people in the world inhabit a present, as we all do, envisage a future, as we all do, but bearing the tragic scars of an unresolved past. They cannot easily move forward, because they cannot forget! They will not let go of the trauma that has so deeply affected their lives and those of their loved ones, including in earlier generations. They are hostages of what they believe is their past, a past as they see it. A past with sometimes blurred images, but a past made of experienced trauma, grief, desperation and uncertainty that seeps into the present and prevents societies from reaching the levels of trust and unity that are so vital to the construction of a common future. These blurred images of the past feed desperation.

In reality, what these locked societies need in order to be able to move forward, forgive and let go of the past, is the real truth. They need to know what exactly happened to their loved ones or to themselves, why that happened and who carried those acts through. They need society to investigate the past and lift the uncertainty, and then, recognize their grief on the basis of the established truth. Only then, will reconciliation be possible. Only truth can bring it about. This is what we clearly witness in the delicate situation of Rwanda, but also in South Africa, Northern Ireland, Argentina, Cambodia, and many other countries.

The truth, is not easily established, and that is, of course, the problem. In traumatized societies, there are many who are fearful of it. Perpetrators fear it because it can entail retribution. Victims fear it because it might enable forgetting, or even imply some relativity of the facts.

But, truth is ultimately associated with the notion of justice. The deliverance of justice follows the establishment of truth and contributes to individual closure. There are two types of justice: retributive justice and restorative justice.

Retributive justice aims to prosecute and punish the perpetrator, which is what is demanded today by many people in Cambodia, because the scars are still open.

Restorative justice has proven its adequacy in healing the wounds of some traumatized societies, over time and through a process of mediation, such as in South Africa and Rwanda. There, the so-called Truth and Reconciliation Caucuses served as a venue for the impartment of restorative justice. The principles are the following: a) society can only be healed if the wounds of the past are reopened for examination, b) such examination should serve the purpose of reconstructing an objective version of the past, establishing a reasonable truth for all to accept and work with in the future and for the future, and c) the public recognition of past crimes together with an unflinching repentance for the said acts! All these should pave the way towards forgiveness.

These are, therefore, the basic principles we must all call our own. Openness, responsibility, repentance and forgiveness are the elements that lay the ground for a shared tomorrow.



Initiatives of Change

For openness and responsibility to be assumed, repentance offered, and forgiveness granted, individuals need a forum where they can freely meet, discuss and eventually reconcile. A place where victims can encounter their perpetrators, where they can ask questions about the loss of their loved ones, where they can recount their grief for others to listen. Such a venue would also allow victims and perpetrators to connect at a human level; to acknowledge each other's humanity and build new relationships, free from hatred and revenge. This kind of venue was offered by the truth and reconciliation process in South Africa, by the Rwandan Gacaca courts, some of which I personally attended, and to some extent, for Northern Ireland, recently, the Saville report. According to an article of the Economist, the report was received rapturously by the relatives of the victims. But the newspaper goes on to say that "the broader questions of how to deal with the past, and whether a truth commission or a peace and reconciliation process would help to lay it finally to rest, are yet to be answered. That confirms the need for a comprehensive approach with all the principles we mentioned.

There are indeed great dangers lurking behind a refusal to deal as sincerely and as broadly as possible with the wounds of the past. By treating such wounds with insensibility and indifference, one reinforces an already perpetual string of mistrust. This explains why Human Security is affected and conflicts perpetuate. Tending to the needs of survivors, promises to break that chain, and help construct new social relationships.

It falls upon a good governance, national, regional and international, including the Civil Society ensure that socially disaffected victims and perpetrators are given the chance to revisit the past, complete it, recognize it and put it behind for the sake of the future.

« Chers amis, puisque c'est dimanche, permettez-moi, pour terminer de partager avec vous des réflexions sur le pardon par un pasteur que j'ai trouvé dans une émission de France Culture ! « Le pardon délie la victime de l'outrage qui lui a été fait. Ce pardon peut donc commencer unilatéralement. Même si la personne en face n'assume pas les faits. Donner l'exemple d'un pardon unilatéral, ce n'est pas être faible. Il faut être devenu fort pour pardonner, il faut tout le temps nécessaire. Mais la victime est la première bénéficiaire de ce pardon qui la délivre de son obsession. Il y va de sa santé mentale, c'est en premier lieu pour elle, qu'elle pardonne. La mémoire, c'est l'antidote à l'oubli. Dieu est amour mais aussi justice. Il n'y a pas de paix durable sans la justice, sans la mémoire. L'amour de Dieu s'exprime aussi dans sa justice. Et sa justice sait aussi se faire aimante. Il n'y a donc pas de réconciliation en plénitude sans vérité, mais il n'y a pas non plus de réconciliation sans pardon. Le pardon semble une injustice, parce qu'il accepte que la faute soit impunie, et que l'offenseur n'exprime pas forcément de regrets. Mais le pardon stoppe l'enchaînement de la violence. »