

Healing Historic Memories¹

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Abstract

The history and reality of violence ceaselessly plagues communities all over the world. There is no history book and news agency that lacks a piece on violence. Retaliations and reactions as a result of fear and anger quickly turn to violence whether it is protecting one's boundaries from invaders, fighting for one's rights, or even the simple prioritizing of the self over the other. Narratives of protection from violence through violence have been (dangerously) immortalized through the collective memory of these injuries that are relived through both myth and history, promoting the conqueror/conquered and hero(ine)/victim narrative and cultivating prejudice. Despite the multiplicity of views that accompany the presence of numerous cultures, we must collectively turn away from this instinctive response to harm and move toward a healing of these memories. Forgiveness alone can break this cycle of violence.

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We must realize and understand that we become fully alive only when we share with others the values and ideas that are precious and true. Self-interest is a reality of life, but we must learn to combine it with a concern for humanity. We must prioritize the ‘higher motives’ that persuade us to forgive past injuries and create a new start together.

Keywords: *collective memory, forgiveness, healing, historic memories, prejudice*

History is Full of Violence

Thomas Hobbes argued in his book *Leviathan* that a “man is a wolf unto man” and had to be restrained by force. His perception, of course, reflected his own bitter experience of having to flee England during the anarchy of the Civil War that killed 100,000 people.² Machiavelli’s experience of social chaos in the city-states of Italy had led him to a similar conclusion. In our own times, William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* shows a few dozen boys in the Pacific learning from experience that humans are compulsive killers; the author concludes that the human psyche is hardwired for violence, that the Beast is in us, that civilization can only suppress the symptoms and not bring healing.³ Neural scientists attribute

² Ian Morris, *War! What is it good for?* (London: Profile Books, 2014), 15-16.

³ *Ibid.*, 53.

hate to a primitive neural system, beginning from the reptile stage.⁴

Humanity's association with violence is written deep into the collective memory of human beings. Great epics like *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Mahabharata*, and *Ramayana* are mainly about wars and violence. Repulsive as violence is, it remains a gripping theme for the study of humans. According to Lawrence Keeley, there are 50,000 books on the American Civil War alone.⁵ History thus is full of violence, one group provoking the other. From the time of Herodotus and Thucydides in Greece and Sima Qian in China, historians have kept war as their central theme.⁶

Fierce fighters like Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan the Mongol were heroes for their own people, mass murderers for others. World-conquerors wiped out entire races. Romans may have eliminated five million during the centuries of their expansion; Caesar alone eliminated a million in Gaul. They were ruthless in putting down rebellions, slaughtering a million Jews in 66–73 AD and half a million in 132 AD.⁷ They liquidated entire communities like the Senones and destroyed much of Carthage. When they burnt down human habitations, they destroyed everything. Tacitus quotes

⁴ Rush W. Dozier, *Why We Hate* (New Delhi: Tata McGraw-Hill Publishing, 2002), 230.

⁵ Morris, *War!*, 21.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

Calgacus, who said that Rome's style was to make a wasteland of a country and call it peace.⁸

Historically, human creativity in producing new tools was always quickly transferred to the production of new weapons: bronze for tools, bronze for swords; horses for transport, horses for assault; vehicles for trade, tanks for invasion. Weapons spread faster than any other equipment. Men who came out with Vasco da Gama made 400 guns within a year for the Sultan of Calicut. Soon enough, guns were being made for local markets in China.⁹ Every new specialization is roped in to serve the cause of violence within a short time. It is shocking when one thinks how soon Einstein's formulae were used for the production of nuclear weapons and the promotion of hate.¹⁰

Cultivating the Memory of Historic Injuries

A tragedy is that individuals, communities, and nations retain the memories of the injuries they have received in their history, cultivate them, and even build myths around them to promote anger. The Turks had defeated the Serbs in 1389 in Kosovo on the Field of Blackbirds. The Croatians had taken advantage of the Serbs during World War II. It was not easy for the Serbs to forget these hurts and humiliations. Slobodan Milosevic's 'this is your land' speech aroused their wounded

⁸ Morris, *War!*, 32.

⁹ Ibid., 182.

¹⁰ Dozier, *Why We Hate*, 103.

memories. The Serb media whipped up anger among the Serbs; and the Croatian media did the same among their own people. The media war ultimately led to actual conflict. The Serbian forces invaded Croatia. Untoward events occurred: Muslims and Croatians were beaten, tortured, mutilated, and killed; churches and monasteries were attacked and even destroyed. At Sarajevo, the Serb army targeted the Oriental Institute, destroying thousands of its Islamic and Jewish manuscripts. They shelled the National Museum and the National Library, destroying over a million books and thousands of manuscripts and records; elsewhere in Bosnia, the Serbs destroyed Ottoman architecture and 800 mosques.¹¹

History is often written in such a manner as to keep alive negative memories and promote prejudices. The winners boast, and the losers remember. China and Japan have serious differences of opinion about their recording of World War II events. Communities in India and Pakistan seem to be competing to foster negative memories of various events in their shared history. Positive contributions of one community are being undervalued or negatively interpreted, and negative incidents are highlighted or exaggerated. The Ayodhya issue seems to keep tempers alive. It is evident that neither side is the beneficiary for it.

¹¹ Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (London: Pimlico, 2001), 147.

There is a general human weakness that when we revive our memories, we tend to be selective, prejudiced, and often lost in self-pity. Only a healing of memories can take away all emotional scars and bring a less destructive world into existence. In recent years, prayer-services and the commemoration of the dead have been conducted on sites associated with wars, with unhealed or unacknowledged collective wounds: Verdun, Gettysburg, Auschwitz, Hiroshima.¹² What if we do something similar to the response regarding the issues of the Somnath temple, Ayodhya site, Panipat film, and the Battle of Plassey? *We cannot change our past, but we can change our response to the past.*

Since memories shape present identities, neither ‘I’ nor ‘the other’ can be redeemed without the redemption of the remembered past. When we entertain profound hurt feelings over the memories of our colonial past, we are doing more hurt to ourselves than to others. We attain true freedom only when we have redeemed our past and removed all rancour and ill feeling. We must dig up the anger that is buried in our hearts and transmute it by the power of genuine forgiveness into re-invigorating spiritual energies.

Working on Emotions

When myths replace history, societies are in danger. Slobodan Milosevic’s creation of a Serbian national mythology

¹² Russ Parker, *Healing Wounded History: Reconciling Peoples and Healing Places* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2001), 57.

proved disastrous to the populations of the Balkans. Croats and Muslims had to pay heavily for it. Myths are kept alive by commemorative events and public display. Irish republican myths and Soviet Marxist myths were reaffirmed by marching, parading, flag swinging, and performing gymnastics. Hitler manipulated rituals, and so did Mussolini. Soviet ideology came alive during May Day parades. Hutu-Tutsi hatred was fomented by political rhetoric.¹³ In America, the national flag was visible even on baby carriages and sports stadiums after September 11, 2001. There are groups even in my country, India, that seek to disturb collective human emotions. Symbols stir human hearts. It is said that men possess thoughts, but symbols possess men.¹⁴ Anger rises. Others react, and both groups are trapped by the violent responses of each other.¹⁵

Small grudges accumulate and become linked to bigger grudges that eventually explode. Penetration of local issues by regional and national issues, a combination of personal quarrels and communal anger or political grievances, aggravate tensions. Latent hostilities are drawn toward new avenues that open. Occasionally, local demonstrations against one grievance gets compounded with ethnic or inter-religious quarrels. Then, all forms of hostilities become intertwined.

¹³ Glover, *Humanity*, 121.

¹⁴ Gerald Arbuckle, *Violence, Society, and the Church: A Cultural Approach* (Minneapolis: Liturgical Press, 2004), 18.

¹⁵ Glover, *Humanity*, 123.

Emotions can be worked up out of proportion to the grievance. At times it happens that more serious emotions are being roused over lesser issues, while people who are suffering under far greater hardships remain silent.

Working on Prejudice-Reduction

Edict XII of Asoka (c. 261 B.C.) reads: “For he who does reverence to his own sect while disparaging the sects of others wholly from attachment to his own sect, in reality, inflicts, by such conduct, the severest injury on his own sect.”¹⁶ Suppressed anger often expresses itself in the form of prejudice. History records any number of instances of mutual prejudice. People had negative images of each other, they stereotyped each other. Their memories of events differed. Communities deliberately passed on prejudices to the next generation. Where there is actual prejudice, nothing else matters: your education, job, knowledge, ideas, the great things you have accomplished—all of these are meaningless—you are just a stereotype of your community.¹⁷ For the Nazis, Einstein was just a ‘hated Jew.’

History provides ample evidence to mutual dislike and exclusion. Jews were confined to ghettos in medieval Europe. There were zones for coloured people in Western towns. There were reservations for indigenous communities

¹⁶ Vincent A. Smith, *Asoka: The Buddhist Emperor of India*, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1920), 183.

¹⁷ Glover, *Humanity*, 152.

in America and Australia. Gypsies were marginalized. South Africa believed in keeping the black people apart. In India, castes and communities were kept at a distance.

Different communities may understand the same events differently. For the Americans, Pearl Harbor was unprovoked aggression. For the Japanese, it was a response to the encirclement policy of the Americans, Chinese, British, and Dutch.¹⁸ In 1914, what was the containment of Germany for Moscow, Paris, and London was ‘encirclement’ for the Germans.¹⁹ Most consider the Korean and Vietnam wars as failures. But for the American government they were symbols of proud resistance to Communism, and the official policy of America would not allow any public grief over the loss of personnel in those two wars.²⁰

Ideological prejudices can lead to grave injustices. In the Russian Revolution, millions of people who were slightly better-off than others were declared ‘oppressors’ and killed. When the Soviet soldiers killed the ‘kulaks’ (mere peasants described as bourgeoisie), the criteria for identifying them was vague.²¹ The same thing happened in China, Vietnam, and Cambodia. In Cambodia, Pol Pot’s men even considered people who wore spectacles or those knowledgeable of a foreign language as foreign collaborators! In these catastrophes, more innocent

¹⁸ Glover, *Humanity*, 166.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 229.

²⁰ Arbuckle, *Violence, Society, and the Church*, 116.

²¹ Glover, *Humanity*, 238.

people died than those who were guilty. “The distinction between justice and injustice in specific cases usually are not as clear-cut as the partisans think they are.”²² It is not easy to distinguish between justice and “socially specific prejudices and self-interested claims to power,” says Young.²³

But the education of the public is not easy. People always want to tag responsibility onto someone else. In 1993, BBC reporter Kate Adie said the following about Yugoslavia, “if you take the stand that nobody is totally good or totally bad, the viewers are not pleased.” And yet that is the truth. Things need to be explained. John Dawson says, “Paradoxically, the greatest wounds in history . . . have not happened through the acts of some individual perpetrator; rather through institutions, systems, philosophies, cultures, religions and governments.” That is why no one wants to appear responsible and everyone is happy to disclaim responsibility. *However, all are responsible in varying ways.*

Since all disown responsibility, the situation becomes a blind man leading the blind. When we propagate ideologies that condone violence, we are not fully aware of what we are supporting. We cease to be promoters of life. A cold legal view of all reality, not a human vision of life, begins to reign. Eric Fromm said that emphasizing only on law and order

²² Theodore Runyon, ed., *Theology, Politics and Peace* (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 67.

²³ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 199.

without worrying about life and structure, stricter punishment for criminals, and love of destructive violence does not contribute to the growth of man, does not promote love for life.²⁴

One person's justice is another person's barbarity. Even the concept of Human Rights has different connotations in different parts of the world and in different cultural contexts. President Carter said that for the Americans human rights are about freedom of religion, press, rule of law, etc. Soviet concern focused on a decent home, right to have a job, family, medical care.²⁵ In the Asian context, there may be further differences.

If, after World War I, the winners had abstained from exercising some of their supposed rights and thought of forgiveness and reconstruction, they would not have alienated Germany altogether. It is sad to think that the injustice of the Peace Treaty of Versailles, demanding that Germany alone take the full responsibility for World War I, led to World War II. Justice as understood by the Allied Powers differed from justice as perceived by the Germans.

We can learn from history. A new beginning can be attempted even after a long period of mutual alienation. Prophetic gestures can reduce tensions. Forgiveness can lead to better times. When Tony Blair took over as the British

²⁴ Eric Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (London: Penguin, 1990), 33.

²⁵ Runyon, *Theology, Politics and Peace*, 6.

Prime Minister, he issued an apology on behalf of the British for their contribution to the infamous Irish potato famine. This gesture met with the universal approval of the Irish political leaders.²⁶ In the 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev withdrew his forces from Eastern Europe and told the West that he had deprived them of an enemy.²⁷ The Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee's bus trip to Lahore thrilled millions of Indians and Pakistanis.

Suffering can lead to vindictiveness or to redemption. "Suffering can also lead to the belief that, having suffered, one has acquired a right to impose suffering upon others. It is the special task of the survivors of violence to show us how such suffering may be transformed into redemption."²⁸ *Redeeming the past . . . that is forgiveness*. Difficult as it may sound, forgiveness is the only reliable strategy for ending the self-repeating phenomenon of unfairness in human history. Forgiveness alone can break the cycle of violence. It holds the ultimate key to that treasury that can pay all historic debts.

Healing Collective Memories

Edward Said in his *Culture and Imperialism* points out that during the colonial period, intellectuals who should have been the guardians of the conscience of their own nation and

²⁶ Arbuckle, *Violence, Society, and the Church*, 10.

²⁷ Glover, *Humanity*, 232.

²⁸ Veena Das, ed., *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors of South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1992), 33.

culture were no more than echoes of their community's prejudices, their noble ideals notwithstanding. Slave trade, world conquest, and unfair commerce were all part of this so-called "civilizing, modernising" mission—a form of "civilization" that led to holocausts, apartheid, and ethnic cleansing! It is the task of today's intellectuals to heal such memories in their own communities—those communities that suffered this colonial injury—restore them to health and help them to look positively to the future. That is the only way they can transform their wounded cultures and the disturbed social situation in which they live, bringing health and wholeness. They have a vocation to be healers and not a depository of grievances.

Paul Ricoeur's recent suggestions to the European Union contained meaningful words like 'exchange of memories' and 'forgiveness.' These concepts are extremely useful for situations where people still retain hurt historic memories. We need a 'healing of collective memories.' When you happily meet the other and forgive, the demon in the other disappears. In fact, you begin discovering yourself in the other and are filled with compassion even for his failure. You discover that they are also human, just like you!

Prince Shotoku of Japan introduced a liberal constitution in 604 AD. He said, ". . . nor let us be resentful when others differ from us. For all men have hearts, and each heart has its own leanings. Their right is our wrong, and our right is their

wrong.”²⁹ In light of this marvellous insight from a great prince who lived in our ancient continent, can we decide to bring a non-confrontational approach to our problems? Can we be true Asians, living in the tradition of Buddha, Asoka, Prince Shotoku, and the Dalai Lama? The mission of peace calls for a new way of thinking. It lays on us the compulsion of awakening a new consciousness within ourselves. It demands that we bring new themes for discussion, create a new public opinion, build up new philosophical and theological bases for peace.

To begin with, we ought to search for the roots of aggressiveness in ourselves. We must canalize and tap that hidden energy for new purposes. Only when we have unmasked injustice and evil in our own inner world and have subjected ourselves to a spiritual surgery shall we be able to discover the forces of evil in the society that surrounds us and commit ourselves to working on them. Or else, even as we work for peace, we may find in ourselves a striving for unfair superiority, an eagerness to manipulate others; we may discover traces of individual and collective selfishness, unwillingness to share power and material means.

The Koreans have the word ‘han’ (한) to refer to the experience of pain, bitterness, helplessness, and eagerness for revenge imposed by injustice and oppression that, at times, is

²⁹ William George Aston, trans., *Nibongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1872): 128–33.

accumulated over centuries. The result is a self-image of victimhood that we must be liberated from. Particularly, young people need to be guided out of self-imprisonment in bitterness, lest they retreat into themselves in a permanent manner. Listening, affirming, appreciating, questioning, searching together, and leading people to *creative dialogue even with opponents* are some of the steps that the healer of memories takes in the fulfilment of his/her ministry.

It is a Higher Motive that can Persuade

“What should I do with that, by which I do not become immortal?”³⁰

Human beings come fully alive only when they share with others those values and ideas that they consider precious and true. These satisfy them more than anything else. Martin Luther King said, “If you haven’t found something that you’re willing to die for, you’re probably not fit to live any way.” Self-interest is a reality of life, but creative and sensitive people will learn to combine it with a concern for others, sensitive leaders will combine it with national interests and with those of humanity.

People like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Nelson Mandela were inspired by a higher motive when they adopted an approach of refusal to retaliate to injuries. They entertained a vision of love as an agent of change and communicated this message with demonstrative action. Their

³⁰ Muller, Freidrich Max, trans., *The Upanishads* (New York: The Christian Literature Company), 109.

actions did not exclude protests, the deliberate breaking of the law for conscience's sake (civil disobedience). They acted out of conviction.

Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen was deeply impressed by a question raised in the Upanishads, one of India's ancient classics. He was referring to the question of Yajnavalkya's learned wife Maitreyî when she asked, "What should I do with that, by which I do not become immortal?" This profound question in the Upanishads inspired him in his efforts to propose an economic theory that gave central importance to the human side of economic development and won him the Nobel Prize. It is truly a 'higher motive' (that will make us immortal) that can persuade us to forgive past injuries and create a new start together.

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