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Reconciliation – source of individual and collective well-being.

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For more than 35 years I have been engaged in projects relating to non-violent resolution of conflict, both on the practical level and in research, and publishing articles on the subject. I have been drawn to consider reconciliation and forgiveness, to read the accounts of others, but nevertheless I am unable to speak personally of reconciliation.

What I propose to do today is to present to you the personal and collective accounts of reconciliation to show that it is a source of well-being both for individuals and for groups. We will however explore the limitations of collective moves for reconciliation.

1 – Individual experiences of interpersonal reconciliation

The change of heart of one woman with regard to the German race.

“My grand-parents were violently anti-German. I lost numerous relatives during the two great wars. My husband was hunted down by the Gestapo. I really hated the Germans.

Much later when my son Francois was learning German, a young Bavarian lad, Rudiger, came to stay with us. At the Douaumont ossuary, near Verdun, he looked devastated, on seeing the photos of the slaughter. During the whole of his stay I continued to see evidence of and admire this young man’s sensitivity and willingness to be helpful. On the eve of his departure, I said to him “Rudiger, thanks to you, I no longer have an attitude that I was ashamed of and I want to thank you.” A few moments later, I had cause to return to his room. He was lying on his bed in tears. It was necessary for me to meditate on sacred texts for a year to free myself from my hatred of Germans.”

(My mother Yvonne Godinot, 94 years old, widowed since 2002, mother of 8 children.)

Maïti Girtanner and her torturer.

Maïti Girtanner joined the Resistance during the war. When she was arrested by the Gestapo she was tortured by a young SS doctor who destroyed her nervous system. Once released she was hospitalized for eight years, was never able to play the piano again and suffered constantly day and night.

She had two burning desires: an irresistible urge to forgive the one who had destroyed her, and to find ways of still being of service. For 40 years, Maïti prayed for her torturer. She became a Professor of Philosophy.

In 1984 she received a phone call. It was her torturer, asking if he could visit her. “Come!” And so, 40 years later, she met again this man who was dying. He had probably come to ask forgiveness. “As he was about to go, standing at the head of my

bed, I felt the irresistible urge to lift myself from my pillows even though it was very painful, and I gave him a hug so as to place him in God's heart. And he, very quietly, said "I'm sorry!". When this man returned home, he confessed to his family and close friends what he had done during the war, and he was moved to express his affection towards several loved ones that he had neglected." Later, Maïti was to say "Forgiving him freed me; it gave me peace."

(Barbara Dobbs - Le Matin Dimanche, 15 août 2009)

Kim Phuc, a vietnamese girl burned by a Napalm bomb.

Kim Phuc was 9 years old in 1972 when her village in South Vietnam was bombed with napalm. Burned by the napalm, she threw herself on the road, screaming in terror and pain. The photo of her, taken by a journalist, published all over the world, contributed towards ending the war. When she was baptised 10 years later, she threw herself into a campaign of forgiveness. She is now 38 years old and lives in Canada with her husband and children. Even though her body still bears the scars of the napalm, both visible and invisible, she decided one day to forgive.

Kim Phuc expressed her forgiveness during a ceremony commemorating the Vietnam War in Washington, where she explained to the veterans that if she came face to face with the pilot who dropped the bomb, she would say to him "One can't change history, but at least one can one's best to promote peace." John Plummer, who had been one of those co-ordinating the bombing, was one of those present. She opened her arms to him. She said, "As for me, I have chosen the path of reconciliation and it changed my life. I stopped being a victim." (*UNESCO web site.*)

Reconciliation with one's parents; a therapist's account.

"Conflict between parent and child is not only inevitable, it is also necessary and fundamental in building a dynamic and living relationship. The fear of losing love is often even stronger when there is little love. (...) So-called respect for one's parents has, over the ages, often been nothing more than fear and submission. (...)

It is possible to start to express anger towards one's parents by writing to them. You can weigh your words, take time to choose the right words. Writing also allows you to develop your train of thought without being interrupted. As the cause of the emotion is not present, you do not need to compose your expression or disguise your emotions. (..) Write all you need to say without censoring it, and burn the letters in the fire-place as long as they are still full of suffering and hatred. Leave the 'baggage' in your psychotherapist's consulting rooms and express your emotions to your parents with care so that they can respond to them. (...)

Simply having a non-judgemental third party present facilitates mutual listening. The rules are simple: what we say to each other is said in professional confidence, without judgement being passed. Each person listens to the other and is invited to repeat in their own words what they have just heard. (...) I've seen some fantastic parents in my consulting rooms. They came in terrified, uptight, nervous, distant. They left emotionally touched, ready to listen, affectionate and loving. I can count on the fingers of one hand those parents who refused to hear what their child was saying, who remained insensitive, focussed only on themselves." (*Isabelle Filliozat, Psychotherapist*)

Reconciliation and forgiveness in a case of contaminated blood.

In 1993, Bénédicte Delbrel died of Creutzfeld-Jacob disease, along with 116 other children who had been treated with contaminated growth hormone in childhood. After 17 years of investigation, four month's trial, 8 month's deliberation, the 6 people accused of being responsible were pardoned in January 2009. Her parents, Francine and Jean-Guy Delbrel, felt completely let down by the legal system and completely unable to forgive.

Only one of the six accused had shown any humanity, visiting the suffering children and their families: Henri Cerceau, Director of the Paris Central Hospital Pharmacy from 1981-1991, even though he had committed no crime in this tragedy. The Delbrel couple met him during 4 days spent at the Abbey of Sénanque. (*The film "All will be forgiven" by Marie Villoin will be shown at Willersley.*)

2 – Communal experience in the political arena

Franco-German reconciliation.

The drawing together of the French and the Germans can be seen as a model of the transformation of the relationship between two erstwhile enemies. Political leaders have attempted to recreate the memory of the past by playing down the origins of the conflict (confrontation between historical enemies) and giving it a new meaning (the tearing apart of brothers). In 1962, Charles de Gaulle described the Germans as a "great nation", reminded the French people that they too, "under certain circumstances" had done great harm to the Germans and, in Munich, paused in front of a monument to the fallen of 1870 and 1914-18. For him, both nations needed to promote "the communal good", "beauty, justice and good everywhere" and to overcome "hunger, misery and ignorance across the whole world".

For Francois Mitterrand, it is "because both nations have caused the other great suffering" that these two nations "are under a particular obligation to spread the word to others, how to build a new world, however costly." Because "they have both impacted significantly on history" that these two nations were considered particularly appropriate to breathe "a bit of wisdom" into the world. (*Valérie Rosoux, Cahiers d'histoire*)

Rites of reconciliation in Africa.

Even though they were separated in two distinct lands, the *Luluwa* and *Baluba* people hated each other with a deep hatred. Faced with this situation, those in authority resorted to a traditional ritual to try to achieve reconciliation. This idea was taken from the *bujilanga*, an inter-ethnic alliance built on a foundation of brotherliness and reciprocal non-aggression.

The relevant parties gathered at a cross-roads, each behind their chosen representatives. Each group brought a ram, a male dog, some banana leaves and other objects such as their traditional brooms. The fires were lit and the animals roasted. The leader of each group spoke in turn, talking about the significance of the encounter and the importance of the ceremony they were about to celebrate. The meat from the roasted animals was eaten. The two representatives ate the sheep and the dog meat together, and drank maize beer from the same container at the same time, while repeating together the words of the oath that was to unite them. The pact was made. To violate it was to invite bad luck. All present spent the night in that place. As they were journeying home they were forbidden from looking behind them.

The rituals are based on the idea that certain actions are prohibited. It is forbidden to rake over a past characterised by conflict. It is forbidden to be indifferent to the lot of

a person or people with whom you have made this pact. It is forbidden to act aggressively against a person or ethnic group with whom you are united by this pact.

The symbolism seen here suggests a uniting of the victim and the aggressor, a secret and disturbing intimacy between good and evil. Now, the important thing is to live together, leaving the past behind and not over-dramatizing those previous conflicts which are as incomprehensible as they are unbearable. These ritualistic acts represent a fantastic symbolism of the underlying reconciliation. (*Philippe Kabongo-Mbaya*)

These rituals show that it is essential that reconciliation happens not only in the mind, in words, in feelings, but is also translated into acts, gestures, symbols and rituals. (*E.G.*)

Reconciliation amongst the Kanaks tribes in New Caledonia.

In May 1989 the Kanak Djubelli Wéa killed the president of the Independence Party Jean-Marie Djibaou and his vice-president Yiewéné Yiewéné, before being in turn killed by the Kanak policeman Daniel Fisdiépas.

Two years after this tragedy, it was Manaki Wéa, widow of Djubelli who expressed a wish to work towards reconciliation and forgiveness. The widows accepted this move to reconciliation as long as all their children were in agreement with the steps necessary to achieve it. Their pastors and religious leaders organized a meeting between them all: 300 people from one tribe took boat and train to go and meet the other tribe who welcomed them and provided food for 600 people.

After 14 years, with the passage of time and meetings between individuals, regular ceremonies, gifts, and words of forgiveness, the old wounds healed. In June 2005 on the Larzac Plains, the widows of the two assassinated leaders, many of their children, the widow of the assassin and the policeman who killed him came together as friends of New Caledonia, witnesses to that reconciliation. (*Jean-Baptiste Libouban*)

Reconciliation between Albanians in Kosovo in 1990-2.

When the Albanians of Kosovo set out to gain their independence, they disobeyed an ancient and venerated law, the '*Kanun*'. This imposed a spirit of vengeance, nagged at them, weighed heavily on their family lives, and made victims of a great many of them.

Anton Cetta, a Kosovan ethnologist, a man of great wisdom and insight, was the instigator of a process of reconciliation between families and between clans. The first phase was separate discussions with the 'families' in conflict. The second phase, the official reconciliation was in front of witnesses. On 1st May 1990, 500,000 Albanians from Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and South Serbia came together in a place to be known thereafter as the 'Valley of Reconciliation' near Deçani. The roughest of men cried with joy; they finally felt free to do and act as they wished.

That huge movement of reconciliation was instrumental in restoring the morale and dynamism of Kosovo Albanians (9/10 of the 2 million inhabitants) oppressed by Serbian might and victims of a very real apartheid. It led to offers of help between private businessmen, and made it possible for people to forgive policemen who had made unjust demands. Finally, it also gave people the spring-board to participate in enterprise with each other in the fields of education, health and social care. (*Pierre Dufour*)

Reconciliation between Blacks and Whites in South Africa.

The *Commission for Truth and Reconciliation* was created in 1993, that is to say between the release from prison of Nelson Mandela 1990 and his election as President of South Africa in 1994. It was charged with reviewing all the human rights violations committed since the Sharpeville massacres in 1960 (then at the height of the *apartheid* introduced in 1948 by the South African government), to promote national reconciliation between victims and perpetrators of the crimes against them.

While he was promoting the reconciliation movement Nelson Mandela met the widow of Hendrik Verwoerd. Mandela encouraged the black South Africans to support the *Springboks* rugby team as it played in the World Cup, held in South Africa in 1995. They were victorious, and Nelson Mandela presented the trophy to the team captain, Francois Pienaar, an Afrikaner. Mandela was wearing the rugby top with Pienaar's number on it and the event was viewed as a huge milestone in the reconciliation process between blacks and whites in South Africa.

The aim of the *Commission for Truth and Reconciliation* was to examine the crimes and extortions committed in the name of the South African government, but equally the crimes and extortions committed by the African Liberation Movements. An amnesty for those participating was subject to two conditions; their deposition must not omit any part of their crime or actions; and they must have acted under the orders of seniors believing they were serving a "higher political objective" (for instance, defending the white race). The South African Commission was not there to judge; it offered amnesty (or not) for the act not for the individual and, indeed, with relative parsimony. Of 7,116 requests for amnesty, it granted 1,312 and rejected 5,143. A lot of the victims are still awaiting reparation which has been long promised. The *Commission for Truth and Reconciliation* had recommended payment of 120,000 Rand per victim, as well as priority access to public services, but the government delayed making these payments, and over many years, the amount payable has been significantly reduced. (*Wikipedia*)

According to *Paul Ricoeur*, this *restorative* justice favours neither the law, nor the victim nor the perpetrator, but "the organic chains that hold together a community". The whole construction rests on a tripod : truth (admission of crimes), reconciliation (amnesty) and reparation (State indemnity for the wrongs caused). Alas, that third leg of the tripod has not been put into effect, jeopardising the whole arrangement. Nonetheless the whole South African experience opens up the opportunity of a new model of justice.

Reconciliation between those of different religions in Nigeria.

In May 1992, because of a land dispute, trouble erupted between the Christians and Muslims in Sango-Kataf. Pastor James Wuye lost his right hand. Imam Muhammead Ashafa saw two of his cousins and his spiritual father die. Each one emerged with one obsession - revenge. "I looked for James everywhere for many months" remembers Mr Ashafa. "I wanted to kill him."

Three years later, they were introduced to each other by a mutual acquaintance. They talked together. Each one had an 'inner revolution'. Bit by bit, hatred was succeeded by tolerance and then by co-operation. Today they are engaged in another battle; to diffuse the violence between Christians and Muslims which blazes up regularly in the North of the country.

On the 6th November 2009, in Paris, Jacques Chirac awarded them his Foundation's prize for the prevention of conflict. (*Young Africa journal*)

3 – Thoughts on forgiveness and reconciliation.

Forgiveness is something very personal between people, happening from the heart in a very short space of time, according to Paul Ricoeur. It is up to us to offer forgiveness rather than to ask for it.

The one who is able to grant forgiveness is the victim, who acquiesces to a request he could refuse. The act of forgiveness is to “*break apart the obligation, but not to break apart the memory*” (Olivier Abel). It’s a sort of healing of memories by working through a process of grieving; the memory is relieved of the weight of the debt and can be freed to undertake other projects. Ricoeur maintains that “*Forgiveness gives memory a future.*” Forgiveness is the lynch pin of rehabilitation and reconciliation. “*Forgiveness is not a right, it is a gift*” (P. Ricoeur). That gift comes overwhelmingly from the assumption of equality that underpins the law.

The verb ‘*to reconcile*’ comes from the greek, ‘*the capacity to change one’s attitude to another*’; The aim of reconciliation is this change of attitude, not to erase the memory, even when reconciliation is institutional as in amnesty, for example. To decide to erase historical fact is hypocritical and acts contrary to the ethos of forgiveness and reconciliation, both of which require one to remember. The authenticity of forgiveness and reconciliation are cancelled out by institutional amnesty.

According to Ricoeur, forgiveness is the only path capable of re-awakening memories without also precipitating resentment and the desire for revenge. It deals both with the debt owed and the forgotten memory. Far from erasing the past, forgiveness intervenes in the past. It attempts to change it by giving it a different meaning. It does not do this by pretending, as if by magic, that the event never happened, but it makes possible other outcomes. This is how, for the author of ‘*Time and Story*’ forgiveness ‘*transforms*’ the past. It is one of few possible responses to the irrevocableness of human actions. While revenge attaches man to the consequences of his actions and imprisons him in the chains of his past, forgiveness liberates him and allows him to continue his life. The man who forgives is not unaware of his desire for vengeance, he succeeds in overcoming it. Unlike revenge, which makes you react automatically to a wrong, forgiveness is an act of choice; it acts in a completely new and unexpected way, not conditioned by the act which caused it. It frees both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven, from the consequences of the action which prompted forgiveness.

Forgiving is part of the process of taking a step backwards in order to work through one’s grief. It has healing properties both for the guilty and his victims. In the same way that a course of psycho-analysis allows the patient to reconstitute a memory in a more acceptable and understandable form, forgiveness “*gives a future to one’s memory*”. Through it, the memory of the hurt loses its sting. Once healed, the memory is freed and rather than being pre-occupied with remembering the hurt, it can move on to more positive outcomes. It doesn’t therefore impact on the acts themselves (indeed, their influence must be protected), but on the debt that threatens to paralyse memory and the person’s ability to plan for the future. In this respect, forgiveness is radically different from amnesty, which is defined as a wiping out of both the debt and the events that prompted it. (V.-b.r., “*Forgiveness as it occurs in politics*”, *Political Liberty Journal*)

To forgive on behalf of the victims?

When talking to the German parliament, Ezer Weizman, Israeli head of state, refused to forgive on behalf of the victims of the Nazis: “*As president of Israel, I can grieve with them and keep alive their memory, but I cannot forgive for them. The only thing that I can do, is to demand that the Germans look to the future, taking notice of any signs of racism, destroying any evidence of the neo-nazi movement, having the courage to recognise them and cut them off at the roots.*”

This impossibility of ‘forgiving in another’s name’ is the reason that Hans Jonas refuses to acknowledge any philosophy based on the idea of reconciliation. For this author, the light that children who disappeared in the camps were destined to shine on the world, will never shine. Their hands will never again seek to hold our hands. We must therefore live and think with the certainty that evil is ever near, & constantly strive to prevent it, but not ‘try to look as though we are putting it right’.

The main argument he uses, to counter the idea of collective forgiveness, is that it is ‘*representatives*’ who on the one hand ask forgiveness for acts they never committed, and on the other hand, offer forgiveness to victims who will never have a voice of their own. It would therefore seem difficult to argue in favour of collective forgiveness. Neither the State, nor a race, nor history can presume to forgive. But this argument does not detract from the often positive impact of various official announcements. The symbolic gestures (declarations of repentance, official presentation of reasons or excuses, etc.), are not important at the individual level (where only forgiveness can happen) but at the communal level.

This does not mean that such actions are not desirable. From the testimony of numerous South African witnesses, the public acknowledgement of crimes of apartheid has contributed hugely to the assuaging of their wounds. Simone Weil reminds us of this too, when she wrote about the French State taking responsibility for the raids of 1942 as a gesture of ‘relief for our suffering’. This contrasts with the absence of official recognition (for example the Armenian genocide by the Turks in 1915) which impedes the grief process. (V.-b.r., *“Forgiveness as it occurs in politics”*, *Political Liberty Journal*)

Non-violent struggle and reconciliation.

The non-violent resolution of conflict leaves open the eventual option of reconciliation between people. At least it does not exclude it, and is a better way of managing the future. But what it seeks is justice, complete and total justice and nothing but. A struggle for justice may allow reconciliation to occur but it cannot result in reconciliation. That is a long process of healing of scars and suffering received in the course of the struggle.

(Jean-Marie Muller, *Dictionary of non-violence.*)

At the end of the fight for justice, the oppressed find themselves at the negotiating table, and in the end, for the most part, they will have to continue to live with those who have oppressed them. It is here that forgiveness is often essential, not to forget the past but to be able to have a future.

But forgiveness only confers freedom if the other accepts that they are forgiven, and if they have asked for it. Forgiveness directed towards a guilty party without remorse (as in Jesus on the cross: ‘Father, forgive them, they do not know what they do!’) does not have the same significance or the same therapeutic effect as forgiveness

directed towards the person who is repenting of their sins (which means they are starting out on the correct path).

Without forgiveness, hatred can rear its head again. To create the situation where forgiveness can flourish, justice needs first to be restored, and the guilty parties need to receive judgement. To understand, to make excuses for, to say "Don't mention it", is not true forgiveness. Forgiveness says; "Right, let's talk about it, so that we can move on!"
Etienne Godinot. Medicine of the Person. Willersley Castle, Derbyshire, UK, 2010.