

**Life Review: National History
Truth and Reconciliation: A Diplomacy of forgiveness and Renewal¹**

By

**Robert N. Butler, MD
President and CEO
International Longevity Center**

**Presented at
Institute of Reminiscence and Life Review
San Francisco, California
November 16, 2007**

Arthur Schlesinger has said, “History is to a nation as memory is to the individual.”

Can the process of life review that happens when an individual endeavors to come to terms with the life he/she has led, and the resulting contrition, atonement, forgiveness and reconciliation it often engenders be replicated in the larger human family; that is, in societies at large?

Historic events, usually recorded by the victors, tend to be biased and sidestep a nuanced study of the actual roots of the hostility, planting the seeds of future animosity. Because nations avoid acknowledging their part in conflicts that might result in reconciliation and forgiveness of their enemies and opt instead for “justice”, harsh punishment is often meted out to the losers. Tragically, we have seen this incite counter reactions even centuries later. For example, the Balkans were stable under the unifying dictatorial power of Tito, until Slobodan Milosevic came to power and exploited the ancient historic memories of Kosovo and the nationalist aspirations of Greater Serbia. So we read that a Serb in 1998 kills a Muslim in revenge for ancestors who fought in the Battle of Kosovo in 1389!

And there was no reconciliation for Germany at end of WWI. Instead, the Treaty of Versailles punished that country severely. The response was the rise of Hitler and National Socialism.

¹ This presentation is dedicated to Nelson Mandela and Amartya Sen.

On the other side, rather than meting out punishment to the losers in WWII, the United States established the Marshall Plan, giving Germany and all of Western Europe a chance to recover, prosper, and return to a state of peaceful coexistence. Might it have been possible to extend the plan to the Soviet Union, and possibly avoid the Cold War?

When there's a conflict between nations and ethnic groups, it would be wise to convene a special commission that has a mandate to focus first on the truth and then on reconciliation, with an understanding that limits must be placed on vengeance and retribution. For as we have seen time and time again, justice can be "overdone" if it only lays the groundwork for later conflict, and if in the future innocents are punished because of the pent-up anger left in the wake of previous justice "met."

Of course, I am not speaking here of leaders and groups responsible for crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide, against whom justice must be swiftly brought. But this begs the question: Is it possible to have both justice and reconciliation? Does rendering justice with punishment, however justified, simply perpetuate cycles of vengeance? What of justice rendered and vengeance unpunished? How do we disrupt the cycles? Which is better – retributive justice or a conciliatory future?

Reason alone cannot assure forgiveness and reconciliation among hostile forces. We need to be willing to acknowledge the irrational forces at play – and, painfully to acknowledge the unforgiving nature of man himself. But we need not fully understand everything in order to be willing to seek forgiveness and reconciliation.

A supreme leap of faith is required – a decision to overcome our deepest self-assured "certainties," our "principles," our "histories," our personal and national "myths," and especially our "righteous anger." It requires an act of courage and commitment to do that which we may

not want to do – but do so nonetheless – to set aside our prejudice for a larger purpose beyond ourselves in order to advance the human condition.

Of course, the idea of reconciliation is not new and is found in many religions. Reconciliation is a Roman Catholic sacrament in which a priest proclaims forgiveness of confessed sin. Yom Kippur is a solemn Jewish holiday whose central theme is atonement and reconciliation. The crucifixion of Jesus was meant to atone for man’s sins.

In this century we have seen some welcome movement away from old hatreds. Two examples are the humanitarian – that is, “forgiving” response of the Greek people toward the Turks after the Turkish earthquake in 2001 and the response of the Turks when an Armenian editor was assassinated in 2006. In another move toward reconciliation, in 2005 Turkey opened its archives to Armenian and Turkish historians to study the history of the alleged slaughter of Armenians at the hands of Turks in 1915.² But time will tell if these conciliatory gestures between the old enemies will last – however, we must appreciate the overtures toward peaceful coexistence.

Truth and Reconciliation

Archbishop Desmond Tutu was chairman of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* created by the *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act*, No 34 of 1995. The Commission was crucial in the transition to democracy in South Africa. Its work was accomplished through three committees:

- The Human Rights Violations Committee,
- Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee charged with restoring victims' dignity and formulating proposals to assist with rehabilitation.
- The Amnesty Committee

² See Taner Akcam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility*, 2007. He also writes of Turks who risked their lives to protect Armenians.

Amnesty was granted to those who committed abuses during the apartheid era, *if crimes were politically motivated, proportionate, and there was full disclosure by the person seeking amnesty*. Anyone could appear before the Commission. 849 individuals were granted amnesty and 5392 were denied.

The Commission helped South Africans come to terms with their pasts and advance reconciliation. Of course, not everyone agreed with the results. A 1998 study which surveyed several hundred victims of human rights abuses during Apartheid, found that most felt the Commission failed to achieve reconciliation between the black and white communities. *Most felt that justice was a prerequisite for reconciliation rather than an alternative to it*, and that the Commission had favored the perpetrators of abuse. But the mandate of the Commission was to uncover the truth about past abuse, and use amnesty to move forward rather than punish past crimes. Significantly, the predictions of a blood bath never materialized.

Other nations have made attempts at truth and reconciliation similar to South Africa.³

For example:

- The Soviet policy of *glasnost* was created to deal with past atrocities.
- The German policy of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the history of Nazism) is commonly compared to South Africa's *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*.
- A *Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation* was established in East Timor.
- Australia implemented a process to heal cultural divisions between non-indigenous and indigenous populations.
- *Southern Truth and Reconciliation* was created in Atlanta, Georgia, to help local communities in the South address their issues of de facto segregation.

³ History and Reconciliation is an online resource on reconciliation in societies divided by historical conflicts and human rights abuses. (<http://www.salzburgseminar.org/ihjr/blog/index.cfm>). Released on 21 March 2003.

The New Paradigm: People's Wars

Suppose General Rupert Smith is right and his book *The Utility of Force. The Art of War in the Modern World* (2007) describes reality? He sees the wars since Napoleon as “industrial wars” between nation states, illustrated by the two great wars of the 20th century; today he sees “war amongst the people.” He refers to guerrillas, who operated in Spain’s civil war, Vietnam, the Balkans, Africa, Iraq, Israel and in the Palestinian Intifada. Such combatants do not wear uniforms and the conflicts are largely more political and ideological and continuous, a conflict without end. Clans, sects, gangs and individuals are themselves powerful weapons.

Will traditional diplomacy work under these conditions? Or do we need new strategies to deal with this new form of conflict? At both the individual and collective level? Strategies that might include – this is the most intense idealism and hope – roads to knowledge, *perspective*, reconciliation and forgiveness? To forgive is not to forget but to *set aside* the past, to forgive is not to love, but to decide not to exploit hatred and not to kill. It is a forgiveness that might, just might, entail practical steps for the survival of both sides. To forgive is to liberate, not to condone but to move on. We need not love our enemies. To remember is not to forgive. They are separate actions. Those who chose only to remember may not chose to forgive. A curse of excessive nostalgia. Those who choose to forgive may still long remember. But the act of contrition marks the beginning of renewal. This could constitute a well-centered means of redemption, the kind that matters to the living. All of this, all the more necessary, in this nuclear age.

Carne Ross gave up a promising career in the British Foreign and Commonwealth office to found Independent Diplomat, a nonprofit agency that engages in diplomacy according to morality and not national self-interest. A visionary, he is supported by the Joseph Rowntree

Charitable Trust, George Soros and the Oak Foundation. He represents marginalized groups, seeking access to the United Nations and the European Union. Ross believes that “The best way to a safer and more beneficial world is through alleviating suffering”.

Repentance and Apology

Repentance for atrocities and crimes against humanity are not common and denial is powerful. The United States has not fully acknowledged the genocide of the continent’s natives⁴ nor has it made full reparations for its enslavement of Africans that Americans ruthlessly imported. Only recently have we come around to support a limited affirmative action. Yet by mid-century America will depend upon the productivity of the minorities who will become the majority for which the nation has invested little support and provided few special opportunities.

Nor has the U.S. looked deeply into its behavior in World War II, at the fire bombings of Dresden and Tokyo. One of our most heinous offenses was our use of the Atomic bomb. Why did Truman bomb two cities heavy with civilians? Why not the Sea of Japan or some empty land space and then why a second city, Nagasaki, after Hiroshima, when the Japanese had already sent emissaries to Europe to bring the war to an end?

A Personal Note:

We left New Orleans and passed through the Panama Canal. Our ship, the Robert Lowry was carrying ammunition, and we were destined to participate in the invasion of Japan. I believe we were part of what was named “operation Coronet.” Weevils got into the flour and for reasons I never understood we nearly ran out of food. For a time we only had peanut butter and orange marmalade. I have hated marmalade ever since.

⁴ See the historian Dee Brown’s book *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*, 1971.

About mid-Pacific, closing in on Eniwetok, I was in the mess of our ship when an announcement came over the loudspeaker: Americans had dropped powerful bombs on two cities in Japan and it was said the end of the war might be near at hand. Curiously, I suddenly thought of the Pupin Hall Physics Building and of Harold Urey, the Nobelist at Columbia, who had created heavy water. I say curiously because I knew no secrets. But there had been rumors at Columbia about a special secret war effort. Or is this a trick of my memory?

We arrived at Batangas, the Philippines and awaited orders. After several days we were directed to return to the U.S., to “bury” the ammunition at sea and to proceed to anchor at Algiers, opposite the port of New Orleans. From there, after several weeks, we were discharged. The War was over.

Crimes

In 2007, Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe chose to deny the well-established sex slavery of Korean and Chinese women during World War II created by the military. Yasukuni Shrine, The Shinto Memorial to Japan’s War Dead including war criminals, has taken on a painful symbolism, unacceptable to China and Korea.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) was established in 2002 as a permanent tribunal to prosecute individuals for genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression, although it cannot currently exercise its jurisdiction over the last. The court can only prosecute crimes committed on or after July 1, 2002, the date its founding treaty, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, entered into force. 104 states are currently members of the Court, and a further 41 countries have signed but not ratified the Rome Statute.

The official seat of the ICC is in The Hague, the Netherlands, but its proceedings may take place anywhere. The Court is separate from, and should not be confused with, the International Court of Justice (often referred to as the “World Court”), which is the United Nations organ that settles disputes between nations. Unlike the International Court of Justice, the ICC is legally and functionally independent from the United Nations.

Human Rights Watch argues that “the ICC has one of the most extensive lists of due process guarantees ever written”, including “presumption of innocence; right to counsel; right to present evidence and to confront witnesses; right to remain silent; right to be present at trial; right to have charges proved beyond a reasonable doubt; and protection against double jeopardy.”

In the past, governments have granted amnesty to human rights abusers as part of agreements to end conflicts. It is sometimes argued that these amnesties are necessary to allow the peaceful transfer of power from abusive regimes.

Germany has accepted culpability for the Holocaust, released documents attesting to its guilt and paid compensation to victims.

In Sum

Is there unique transferability of individual experience to the behavior of nations bound by powerful forces – sovereignty, “power politics,” “national interests” – sword-rattling and fear-mongering as well as jingoistic patriotism? Modest efforts to change from the past include international courts, the human rights movement, conventions with respect to the sea and its treasures, global culture, arbitration, mediation, collective bargaining and many activities accomplished by the UN despite its limitations.

The U.N. is subject to so much criticism, some justified, but it has nonetheless done so much in the fields of population, environment, agriculture, development, education, medicine, refugee care and human rights. Consider the value of the WHO and CDC tracking flu viruses each year. Global aging suggests the need for a concert of nations to address it and a strong summoning role by the U.N.

Is the idea that history is progressive, leading to better things, an illusion? Is there a spirit of enlarging human possibilities against historic realities? What of the idea that nations might clarify, moderate and balance their official histories in a search for some semblance of the truth and even possibly to forgive enemies? It does happen. In World War II, the US fought Germany and Japan, now basically allies.

Are there really parallels between individual and national dramas and traumas? Or has this presentation only been a romantic exercise? Are there connections between the character and vicissitudes of life review having some relevance to the historical reviews of nations? Is idealism simply unrealistic? To put it simply, should we let bygones be bygones? Is this why at times you must remember and why at times you must forget? Bearing witness to human suffering, bereavement and enlightenment may not be in any way close to the intimacy of the memoir but just might open new doors.

Nations, groups and individuals are haunted by the past, but the question remains how to break the past cycles of vengeance and find a doorway to peaceful coexistence. I believe it requires a departure from contemporary rigid concepts of sovereignty and national identity. It is necessary to demystify and discredit ideology, and rewrite history based on scholarship, remembrance and reconstruction, by carefully balanced committees of historians known for their non-ideological, non-fanatic objectivity. It requires the collective memory of all people. Only

then can civilization reach its full potential, free of smug self-justification. The goal, then, is national reconciliation – “without rancor but with memory.”

Arthur Schlesinger has the last word. He said that, “The great strength of history in a free society is its capacity for self-correction.”

References

- Brzezinski, Zbigniew *Second Chance: Three Presidents and the Crises of American Superpower*, New York, Basic Books, 2007.
- Burnell, K. J., Coleman, P., & Hunt, N. Falklands War veterans' perceptions of social support and the reconciliation of traumatic memories. *Aging & Mental Health*, 10:282-289, 2006.
- Butler, R.N., The Life Review: An Interpretation of Reminiscence in the Aged. *Psychiatry*. 26:65-76, 1963.
- Conway, B. Active remembering, selective forgetting, and collective identity: The case of Bloody Sunday. *Identity*, 3:305-323, 2003.
- Dongen, E. Remembering in times of misery: can older people in South Africa 'get through'?. *Ageing & Society*, 25:525-541, 2005.
- Gibson, James L., Truth, reconciliation, and the creation of a human rights culture in South Africa. *Law & Society Review*, 38:5-40, 2004.
- Kyoko, Murakami and Middleton, David. Grave matters: Emergent networks and summation in remembering and reconciliation. *Ethos*, 34:273-296, 2006.
- McKnight, Andrew N., Historical trauma, the persistence of memory and the pedagogical problems of forgiveness, justice, and peace. Educational Studies: *Journal of the American Education Studies Association*, 36:140-158, 2004.
- Ross, Carne *Independent Diplomat: Dispatches from an Unaccountable Elite*, 2007.
- Shriver, Jr., Donald W., *An Ethic for Enemies. Forgiveness in Politics*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1995.