

The Future of Memory: Reconciling Past Hurts and Present Conflicts

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TWO-HUNDRED-YEAR PRESENT: When our lives are not interrupted by war, premature death, or state-sponsored and genocidal violence, we live in a “two-hundred-year present.” This is a presence measured by touch, and I mean physical touch: those who have touched us when we were born and those who we may touch before we die. I have been touched by my grandparents who were born in 1902. With some luck, I may be able to touch the yet-to-be-born children of my daughters, that is, I should be able to touch my future grandchildren who, God willing, may have auspicious lives that take them into the decade of the 2090s. From 1900s to the 2090s, this is the two-hundred-year present of my life, if I am lucky.

Once we become aware of the people we are connected to by touch, we realize that we are not just autonomous, independent beings floating outside of history. History neither begins with me, nor does it end with me. We live in a continuum of relationships, and we do so through our families and through the communities we inhabit and which we inherit to our children and children's children. Aware of how far we stretch backward in time and forward in time we recognize the responsibility that comes with a two-hundred-year present: we are called to account for the past and we are called to imagine the future.

Those who have touched us have done so with all the love and caring they bring to their families: whether Muslim, Christian, Jewish or secular. Who, after all, can resist the smile of a newborn? But the touch we have received from the generations before us can also be burdened by the hurts our extended families have experienced in the past or by the wrongdoings that have been done in the name of the communities we belong to. The touch we received may have marked us with hurt and shame, anger or mistrust.

Sometimes, these marks stem from purely personal tragedies (a fatal accident, a terminal illness), but they can also be part of transindividual traumata and collective culpability. We need to cherish the moments of touch that we received in loving care but we must also become cognizant of the fact that a touch from previous generations can be poisonous, and that we may spend a lifetime in convalescence. Then we do not have a choice but to find ways to repair the damage done by those who have touched us, so that we do not pass on the poison to our children and grandchildren.

My grandparents are of German origin. My Protestant German grandfather joined the *Wehrmacht*, the German army, as an officer and became part of the military conquest of Poland at the onset of the Second World War. He died of stomach cancer early in 1941. My mother still cries when she speaks of him: she was 13 when she lost him. Because my grandfather succumbed to cancer before the Nazi leadership decided to annihilate all European Jews he, at least, could not be drawn into this genocidal madness. My mother grew up near Königsberg in East Prussia (today Kaliningrad) and she recalls trains passing near her farmhouse: from behind the barbed wire windows of cattle cars, Soviet prisoners-of-war begged her, a child, to bring them water.

My paternal grandfather, a devout Catholic, belonged to the German minority of the so called "Sudentendeutsche" in the Czech Republic after the First World War. He was a school janitor who, as a city employee, became a Nazi party member. He fought at the Russian front, spent years in Soviet prisoner-of-war camps, and returned into a new Germany with his conservative leanings intact. My father, hence, also grew up in the Czech Republic, was drafted at the age of 16 into the German army, and spent one year in an anti-aircraft battalion three miles away from a Jewish slave labor camp in Poland. His one-year stay near the camp of Blechhammer, which in 1944 was put under the administration of Auschwitz, has been one of the family stories I discovered only by accident in the mid 1990s, a good 45 years after the end of the Second World War and the Holocaust.

Part of my two-hundred-year present that was handed to me wasn't my choice, but it was up to me to acknowledge the past. Eventually I began a journey to account for my family's and country's complicity during this cruel period of time, and I now study and teach the effects of history, the dynamics of memory, and the practice of reconciliation.

It is not only Germans who have skeletons in their closets, although—I must say—we do have many of them because of the racial and völkisch ideology with which Nazi Germany had justified and conducted a brutal warfare and genocidal program. Every family, every community, every nation has skeletons in their closets. These hidden bones might be of minor or major social importance, but if left silenced and denied, they will impact future relations. I learned this from studying the transmission of unresolved emotions in the generational chain of families of perpetrators and victimized families. On a smaller scale, a skeleton in the closet could be a secret about a child out of wedlock, or the clandestine sexual orientation of an uncle, or the racial bigotry of a grandmother. In Germany, it is the Holocaust that exudes such a strong presence on families and communities that it has long overshadowed the smaller tragedies of life. In the United States, where I have been living for more than twenty years now, the awareness of living in a two-hundred-year present makes slavery not a remote event but reveals a presence to which black and white Americans are still connected.

I will refrain here from naming the skeletons in the closets of other religious and national communities, but I want to encourage you to open the closets of your own communities with honesty and forthrightness, with candor and courage, before you start digging out the bones of other communities—especially of those groups with whom you think you are in conflict. Pointing fingers at others is hardly helpful in reconciliatory efforts, and it does not do justice to your own two-hundred year present.

CONTEXT OF MY WORK: When communities find themselves in violent political conflicts, the human capacity for empathy and compassion fades away quickly. Civil discourse is

replaced by ideological entrenchment, by moral self-righteousness, and by political justifications for the use of violence. At the same time, alternative strategies that envision a place where today's enemies are transformed into tomorrow's neighbors are belittled as wishful thinking of unrealistic dreamers. But should we content ourselves with such a dim view as we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century?

I don't. And hence I have worked as religious studies scholar and intercultural facilitator on the long-lasting effects of history gone awry, on the collective hurt and traumata that haunt us as well as on culpability and guilt that burden us.

When I moved to the United States at the age of 24, I took my cultural and national heritage of shame and culpability to the communities who had suffered under Nazi Germany. You need to know that before I came to the United States, I had not met Jews—at least not knowingly. When I started to meet them, I stumbled through blunders and embarrassments and got a taste of the power of shame by which I had been touched. I entered into conversations with Holocaust survivors; I worked with German clergy and American Jewish rabbis near and on the site of the notorious Buchenwald concentration camp; I started a program that brings the children and grandchildren of Jewish families together with those of German families for a month to talk about the Holocaust and the war, and together travel to sites of atrocity and renewal. Later, we started trilateral programs to which we invited Polish students whose national past is torn between memories of the merciless Nazi occupation and those of Polish betrayals of their fellow Jewish citizens.

In 1995, when I published my first major book on this topic—*Remembrance and Reconciliation*—I already expressed the hope that my intense reconciliatory work with Jews and Germans might have paradigmatic value. I hoped that it could be applied to other contexts as well. To my joy, I am now finding out—often accidentally—that other scholars and practitioners are referring to this work and apply it to different historical and political situations. For example, a white South African theologian of the Afrikaans Reformed church has used my current research on the Holocaust and postwar German

theologians to wrestle with the effects of the legacy of apartheid in his community. More recently, I discovered that a scholar/peace activist from Turkey has applied the insights of my Jewish-German reconciliation work to understanding the attitudes of Cambodian youth relating to the auto-genocidal slaughter of the Khmer Rouge regime. I, too, have expanded and am now offering “racial reconciliation seminars” with an African-American colleague. We take our students on weekend retreats to look at the immobilizing effects of hurt and shame, fear and mistrust within the racial context of the United States. I also got involved in facilitating dialogue between Muslim Palestinians, Jewish Israelis, and secular Germans who are willing to serve as adult mentors for a peace education program. Given the fragile political situation in the Mideast, I am learning that the power of historical experiences can overshadow the intention for peace work. Repeated retellings of historical experiences do not so much diminish fear and shame but can reconstitute the psychic barriers that prevent intercultural dialogue to be genuine, direct and productive. Whereas before I have always argued that history and memory are indispensable in reconciliation, I am now realizing that merely holding on to memory can be an obstacle to reconciliation.

INTERPERSONAL RECONCILIATION AND EMPATHY: How does interpersonal reconciliation in intercultural and interreligious situations work? I want to list seven essential elements that we need to consider:

1. Interpersonal reconciliation in intercultural settings is open-ended. It aims at improving relationships in crisis but does not predetermine the outcome. Forcing an outcome on a group for the sake of harmony and conflict avoidance does not establish any lasting trust.
2. Reconciliation, on a most basic level, is the overcoming of mistrust. It brings together groups with antagonistic histories in the attempt to reestablish trusting relationships.

3. Interpersonal reconciliation is memory work. Memory work assumes that we need to work through our communal and collective memories, not simply reaffirm them.
4. Reconciliation in light of memory work requires a willingness to address the affective dimension of memory, that is, those powerful emotions that get passed on from generation to generation in overt or subconscious and nonverbal manners. Among the primary communal emotions are fear, shame, mistrust, anger, sadness, guilt, and the concomitant secondary coping mechanisms.
5. Interpersonal reconciliation requires participants to take risks in the presence of the “other.” It requires participants to become vulnerable and honest. It does not exclude political discussion, but can never be limited to exchanges of political point-of-views.
6. Reconciliatory work requires group-centered, creative processes to break through the stalemate of political self-righteousness. Creative approaches help to break through the paralysis of identity politics, of “us” against “them.” In creative work, we reveal to each other levels of our being-in-the-world beyond intellectual, political, or polemical posturing.
7. Reconciliation work requires empathy. We can talk, for example, about compassionate remembrance (*Trauerarbeit*-Habermas) or empathetic unsettlement (Dominique La Capra). Fostering empathy toward the other may unsettle one’s own assumptions about the world, about history, about one’s own community and family. Compassionate remembrance and empathetic unsettlement means to acknowledge the history and the presence of the Other as well as to acknowledge one’s one moral failures and complicity.

Before getting to my example, let me expand briefly on the last point, on the relationship of memory to empathy. More important than holding on to one’s memories of hurt and shame that maintain and sustain our social identities through our two-hundred year present, I suggest that we shift our focus to strengthening our moral and imaginative muscles of empathy and compassion. The power of the human ability to empathize with each other is such that we, as humans, have the capacity to transcend the social

location into which we are born. I, for example, was born into the legacy of a perpetrator society, but instead of defending the wrongs of my country's past, I began to understand the power of shame. From a perpetrator's point of view, shame is the realization that one has profoundly failed one's human capacity to care for one's neighbor—and such failure comes with a vicarious responsibility for the next generation. Whatever my grandparents' shortcomings had been and whatever my parents were unable to resolve, it has now become my responsibility to work toward improved relationships for the sake of the future. Yet, I am not a prisoner of the past. I am not limited to the emotional memories of my own family's and nation's history. Through the ability of the empathetic imagination, I can catch glimpses of the overwhelming power of fear and trauma that Holocaust survivors and their children have felt or, for that matter, that other people feel who are unjustly treated in the past and present. From a victim's perspective, fear and trauma rupture lives and leave them fragmented and in ruins. Any encounter between descendents of victimized communities and descendents of culpable societies is informed by the affective side of memory: shame, guilt and apologetic self-defensiveness on one side--fear, mistrust and defensive security needs on the other.

If no reconciliation occurs between communities that are (or have been) in conflict with each other, unresolved business will result in emotional and moral paralysis, which, in turn, stalls the willingness to seek political change. For this reason, I believe that the efforts that are demanded for engaging in interpersonal reconciliation intersect with political reconciliation.

CREATIVE, INTERPERSONAL RECONCILIATION WORK--AN EXAMPLE: I like to talk about my recent experience with Palestinians and Israelis. This area is not where I have accumulated most of my expertise, but since reconciliatory efforts always demand of us to take some risk and to make ourselves vulnerable in the presence of others, I use this example. If I were to stay in my comfort zone, I would tell you about the successes of my intercultural Holocaust work. By choosing the Palestinian-Israeli example, I make

myself a little vulnerable to your expertise and to your criticism—so that you and I can learn from each other.

Last year, I met with Muslim Palestinian, Jewish Israeli and German educators in Jerusalem, all of them taking the risk of talking to each other directly in order to start a peace-training program for students. I had last visited the “Holy City” in 1981 and now was taken aback by how crowded and populated it has become. I stayed at a place across the Old City with views of contested religious sites, such as the Wailing Wall and the Haram Ash-Sharif; I also had time to visit Bethlehem and Hebron. The organization that invited me to facilitate a dialogue process is called *Friendship Across Borders*. Founded by Germans, the goal of this organization is to initiate a trilateral peace project for Israeli, Palestinian and German students, training them in active empathy in light of difficult histories and a politically volatile present. Among the unique features of this educational project are its length (two years), its emphasis on facilitated interpersonal encounters, and the steady mentoring of the students by trained adults.

So far my task has been to prepare the Palestinian, Israeli, and German adult mentors (who, in their professional lives are teachers, counselors, artists, administrators, educators). In the past, the three national groups had a hard time sustaining their efforts beyond initial enthusiasm. Despite good intentions, people did not follow through with their responsibilities, and the student program never got off the ground. It was hoped that an outside person like me might be able to help identify the road blocks and break through the stalemate of recurring politicized debates.

To do so, we relied on creative and nonverbal methods. Rather than engage in prolonged conversations about individual stories, which are always embedded in larger national narratives, I asked the participants to condense their experiences to a few key elements. I did not want the Palestinian, Israeli and German mentors to get lost in what today is known in the field of intercultural dialogue as “compassionate listening” (long sessions of listening to individual stories without active intervention). Instead, the participants were guided toward actively engaging each other in relation to the core

elements they themselves identified. My sense was that the participants – despite their almost compulsive need to retell stories from their national perspectives – had already heard of the grievances that each group brought to the table. What was needed, I felt, was not just to listen but to *work through* the differences of perspectives and (mis)perceptions.

Since one of the aims of *Friendship Across Borders* is to cultivate “active empathy,” it is necessary to acknowledge the uncomfortable truth that groups in conflict perceive reality very differently. In my experience, it is shortsighted to assume that people would be able to find common ground if only they were allowed to share their respective experiences of individual and collective suffering. As a matter of fact, the repeated retelling of memories of pain and injustice can easily become a stumbling block for reconciliation. Such retellings confirm and cement national or religious master narratives; they provide little room to reveal one’s own uncertainties, failures, ambiguities, and internal strife.

To counteract the compulsion of cementing one’s point of view by rehashing the painful memories of one’s own community, I injected nonverbal exercises. Doing so takes people by surprise and off the well-trodden path of verbal disputes. It also counteracts the Palestinian and Israeli proclivity to politicize the conversation and to become defensive about their collective identities. Never mind that most of the adult mentors at the meeting in Jerusalem were not trained in nonverbal communication! Particularly, I worried at first whether the participating imam would join in the movement exercises. But once we clarified that women were not to touch him, accidentally or otherwise, he became, like everyone else, enthralled by the creative process.

For example, I asked the three national groups to create separate “living sculptures” about their national history. In a “living sculpture” people use their own bodies to represent a still image without the use of words to communicate. After a short preparation time, each group presents their national monument to the rest of the participants. We pretended that each monument was displayed at a public square, thus

inviting comments and reactions. We walked around each “monument”—first the Israeli, then the German, then the Palestinian. We articulated in words what we saw and eventually engaged the “living sculptures” in conversation. Switching back and forth between self-perception and perception through the eyes of others helped to move our intercultural dialogue to a deeper level. The initial anxiety that people felt when asked to enter the realm of nonverbal communication eventually gave way to a sense of shared vulnerability and new layers of trust. Creative reconciliatory processes enable people to envision and implement alternative realities—beyond the confines of dominant national politics. In August of 2010, I will return to Beit Jallah in the West Banks, this time working with both the student group and the adult mentors for a full 8 days.

RELIGIOUS MEMORY AND THE CALL TO BECOMING NEIGHBORS: I began my talk with our individual two-hundred-year-present and I have moved you to a place where we need to consider the past presence of larger social bodies that inform our collective identities. Especially religious communities trace their roots far back in time and make claims on our identities as spiritual beings. Reaching beyond our individual two-hundred-year present, religions have accumulated a wealth of wisdom, but also moments of culpable wrongdoing. At times, religions have transgressed their own precepts and good intentions. I should say that I do not believe in the innocence of any religious tradition. In reconciliatory work, no religious tradition or social group can claim absolute innocence, nor should all the blame be shouldered onto one party. At the same time, we have to be able to name with historical accuracy levels of guilt, complicity and culpability. No one comes to the table freed from the weight of history, but neither are we historically or ontologically condemned to one particular characteristic.

In the Abrahamic traditions, the past presence has always been important. For Jews, Muslims and Christians, memory is not just an accumulation of historical facts but a pillar of our spirituality, a source of revelation, and a mechanism by which we can take account of our moral selves. When Christians, for example, celebrate the communion

(or Eucharist), they celebrate the remembrance of the presentness of Jesus Christ in the midst of their community. “This is my body Do this in remembrance of me.” When Muslims pray five times a day, or fast during the annual Ramadhan, or do the *hajj* once in their lifetime, they engage in acts of remembrance. Theologically, this is the concept of *dhikr*--a remembrance, a reminder, an evocation. The opposite of *dhikr* is forgetfulness, and forgetfulness leads Muslim believers astray from the path with and to God. When Jews remember the Exodus during their annual Passover Seder or the first attempted mass killing of Jews during Purim, or when they remember the destruction of the Temple at Tisha b’Av and God’s power to be merciful during Yom Kippur, they too emphasize that memory makes spiritual demands on the believer in the present.

Through acts of remembrance, all three traditions call upon individuals and the community to take account of themselves. This comes with the possibility of renewal and of rectifying our past life, called *tawbah* in Islam, *teshuvah* in Judaism, and *metanoia* in Christianity. All three theological concepts refer to the ability to turn back, that is, to return to God and to a virtuous path of justice. Hence, to repeat, the religious act of remembrance is more than a mere commemoration of a historical event. It is the acknowledgment of a past whose presence must be actualized now and in the future.

Our forefather and foremothers, like Miriam and Abraham/Ibrahim, like Sarah and Hagar, like Isaac and Ishmael, as well as our teachers, messengers and prophets, like Moses/Mussa, Jesus/Issah, Rabbi Akivah, and the Prophet Muhammed, they have all touched people they came in contact with in their life time. And because of the extraordinary power of their witness, of their sense of justice and compassion, they have touched people beyond their own two-hundred-year present. As their “touch” is passed on through the generational chain of memory, we sometimes forget the challenge that they have put out for us.

Let me tell you a story from the Christian tradition—not because I think the Christian tradition is better than others but simply because I know this tradition best. Once, when asked by a man to clarify who one’s neighbor is, Jesus replied with a story about a man

beaten and robbed and left half dead on the side of the road. Those who seemed to be the neighbor of this robbed and injured man ignored him when they passed by. But eventually a person with no shared family ties and no ethnic kinship stopped, bent over and took care of the victim. As the Gospel of Luke tells us, “he had compassion with him” (Lk 10, 29-37). “Which of those proved neighbor to him?” Jesus asks at the conclusion of the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The answer seems obvious: the person who showed compassion. But less obvious is the deeper challenge that the question of Jesus implies. The key to the parable does not lie in the condemnation of the Jewish priest or the Levite who, in the story, ignored the injured man. Unfortunately, Christian supersessionist, anti-Jewish interpretations have too often used this parable as a proof text for an alleged heartlessness of Jews. But this is not at all the point of this story. Rather, it calls us to rethink what it means to become a neighbor. A neighbor is not someone we simply *have* because of his or her proximity to us-- be that proximity based on kinship, location, ethnicity, religion or nationality. We do not *have* neighbors, we *become* neighbors. We become neighbors by choosing to act compassionately. What the story tells me is that it is through compassionate choices that we become neighbors to each other: we make a stranger into our neighbor through acts of compassion and care. And it is at this juncture we so often fail.

My grandparents and parents, who were neither Nazi ideologues nor leaders, had failed in their own small ways to make the Other into their neighbor. Nazi ideology wanted them to *have* neighbors who were just like them: of non-Jewish descent, not physically or mentally handicapped, not gay, not communist, not Gypsy. Appealing to the German common good, they were supposed to care only for their German-Aryan neighbor while encouraged to undo their relationship to others. I know it saddened my Catholic grandmother's heart when she saw the Jews of her hometown deported, but she did not protest. My family of origin fell short of what our religious teachers and prophets challenged us to do: to extend our compassion to a stranger in need, and thus--and only thus!--to become neighbors. When a whole nation fails to do so, it opens the doors to

large-scale discrimination and, in the worst case, to genocide, as it happened in Germany, and later in Cambodia and Rwanda and Darfur.

We remember because we have been touched by the past and because we want to touch others today and tomorrow within a community of the living. When I grew up, I had to start with images of dead Jews, of piles of corpses from the camps, before I finally met living Jews at the age of 24. My daughters, on the other hand, are able to start with the living: Every year now we celebrate Passover in our home with our Jewish and non-Jewish friends and our daughters' Jewish Godmother. Recently, my younger daughter befriended a Turkish-Muslim girl in Berlin, and I am now facilitating racial reconciliation groups and Palestinian-Israeli educators. We cannot predict who our neighbor will be—because it takes the risk to act compassionately toward the one we do not know yet. If nourished and nurtured rightly, the empathetic imagination and the unsettling compassion are indispensable elements for reconciliation and peace work. Empathy feeds the human capacity to transcend the limitations of merely self-interested action and, instead, moves toward an other-directed care. When we see the face of the other, we might see a troubled past, but we must also look into the present face of the other in order to see possibilities for becoming neighbors in the future.