

“The duty to remember”, “The work of remembrance”

Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, “Consider not what was done to you, but what you have done with what was done to you.”

For more than twenty years I have spoken to students in educational settings to make them aware of the art of ‘living together’. Since then, I have come to the conclusion that as a survivor what I must pass on is more than a description of life in the camps, beyond an historic timeline. Instead our insights become a plan for the future.

So, I clearly differentiate between the factual ‘duty to remember’ which describes the simple but horrifying past. The past is history, written in stone or in books. This is different to ‘the work of remembrance’ which is to look to the future, based on what was. As Paul Ricoeur said, “The ‘work of remembrance’ looks to the future because remembrance is an ongoing task. If the ‘duty to remember’ is talking about what was, the ‘work of remembrance’ is about what should never be again.

Of course the account of what we went through loses no importance in this, as it can put a description of the facts in a chronological context. However, please leave writing history in the hands of the historians. We, whose blood was spilled on this page of history, we do not have the perspective necessary to be objective.

We must also leave it in the hands of the sociologists to explain why and under what conditions, the savage beast described by Brecht, can awaken and attack, indeed devour all it lays open to public condemnation.

We witnessed one of the cruellest and most barbarous acts in the history of humankind. A barbarity where industrialised murder used its victims like a primary product – human hair to make fabric, and ingots made from gold teeth and wedding rings are most certainly still resting in the vault of some banks.

There is however some urgency for us to record our testimony because the great wheel of life will soon erase all the witnesses to this tragic story. Tomorrow there will be no one left to tell, to explain, to detail in their own words, with their own feelings, the inexplicable, unspeakable and indescribable they lived through.

The time will come when there will be no eye witnesses to what happened. There will be no one left to stand up to the deniers and the fraudsters, to those who would sugarcoat history.

The time will come when there will be no one to describe the smell of death that lurked around us, ruthlessly selecting who it would take on the journey to an everlasting oblivion.

The time will come when there will be no one left to say, “I lived through that. I saw the extremes of human abomination. All that has been written about the concentration camps, about the genocide of the Jews and the Romani people, about wanting to erase them from the face of the earth, and to destroy all trace of their culture. All that has been said and written about men who became monsters, indifferent to the death of a fellow human being ... it is all the truth, and nothing but the truth.”

With the departure of the last eyewitness the time will finally come that descriptions of the very worst of human behaviour will be heard, not with attention but with sceptical ears. There will be more doubts than belief, more indifference than compassion. This will happen if we do not find a way to prepare those who will tomorrow be responsible for conveying the facts.

Indeed, the time will come when our children will hold us to account and by our tombstones they will ask us this crucial question, "You lived through all that. You suffered hell on earth. Every second, in the indescribable hell of the concentration camp, you were so close to death that you called it your friend. You saw hundreds, indeed thousands of people suffer and die, not for what they had done, but for who they were. They died for the crime of just being alive. The simple crime of existing. You said, "Never again", but what have you done to open the eyes of those who desperately do not want to see? What have you done to improve the condition of humankind? What have you done to make people love each other just a little more? What have you done to ensure respect for the 'other' no matter their religion, culture or origins? What have you done so that we can live, finally be free?" Our children may ask these questions if we cannot pass on the legacy of remembrance, so tomorrow may be better than yesterday.

So, what should be done?

Should we, as some have done when they returned, go over and over their lives in the camps to the point of overwhelming those who hear the horrific stories? So that in the end the stories risk becoming mundane and encourage indifference?

Should we relive, with those with whom we speak, details of the nightmare as if we have lived through an adventure, as if it was the only glorious time of our lives?

Should we make ourselves heroes when we were merely victims?

Instead, should we not repeat, every day, the ideas of Sartre, when he wrote the statement that I have already quoted to you, "Consider not what was done to you, but what you did with what was done to you." This can also be explained as, "You should not limit yourself to telling us about your life in the camps, but you should use that daily experience to help people to live better lives. To teach them to live together, as living together is their common destiny." Allow me, SS and FF to consider that the first part of what Sartre wrote is about the 'duty to remember'. Whilst the second part of his statement is precisely about the 'work of remembrance' as I understand it. Teaching about the Holocaust should have this as its goal if it is to not fail in its purpose.

The big question now remains to define what it is we must pass on.

So how is Remembrance a legacy for humanity? Although Auschwitz was primarily a place of extermination for Jews and Romani people, I agree with Paul Ricoeur when he says, "the victims of Auschwitz are delegates par excellence for remembrance of all victims of history." It is thus in the name of all those who died wrongfully, in the name of all those who were

victims of genocide throughout the history of the world, that we, the witnesses and those who will follow us, must speak out, now and in the future,

We speak in the name of the millions of victims of the slave trade, the hundreds and thousands of Armenians massacred at the beginning of the last century, the six million victims of the Holocaust, but also victims of all genocides since the end of the second world war... in Cambodia, North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, where the horror of Rwanda rivalled Auschwitz. We Holocaust survivors must do this crucial 'work of remembrance' in the name of all these victims of genocide.

Our mission, because it is indeed a mission, is not to endlessly dwell on what we went through, but what is it?

Firstly it is to avoid being victims which would actually be counter-productive. We must not ask young people to mourn because we have mourned, or to suffer as we have suffered. We are not responsible for the past we carry with us. We must not take it on or feel responsible for what happened. On the other hand, we must implore the young to be vigilant and take care when they speak, as rejection of the 'other' starts with just one word.

We must also point out that the perpetrators of these horrific acts are just ordinary people like you and me, they are not genetically programmed to do what they do.

Any ordinary person can become a tormentor if they allow themselves to be led, to be indoctrinated by ideologies of exclusion and rejection of the 'other'. If those who formulate these kinds of ideologies can flatter the egos of ordinary folk, then those who feel small can feel powerful. They thus become killers who do their best at what they regard as their 'job'. For the SS, the archetypes of brutal monsters, it was just their job to kill every day. Without any qualms or regrets, just like one kills an insect or vermin. So hundreds of them murdered whole families in cold blood, unmoved by the screaming of children, impassive to the devastation of loved ones. Most of them did not carry this out with any particularly sadistic pleasure. They were just doing a job, to do what they had been trained to do. And in the evening, like all family men, they would play with their children and be good husbands, loving their life. Yet during the day they eliminated the lives of hundreds of others with such indifference. For me such indifference is more abhorrent than hatred.

As the Buddhists say, everyone carries darkness and light within them. To counter inhumanity we must begin by looking at ourselves, every day, without fail. We must nourish the radiance of the light within us, and soothe the darkness which inhabits us. Becoming a tormentor is not always the prerogative of another, as we are always 'the other' for someone else.

To enhance the light is to value others as we value ourselves. It is to have respect for the dignity of others, even our enemies. That is what we learned in the camp.

In the camp we also learned to fight against hatred, no matter its source or form. Hatred, sometimes insidious and perverse, which can creep into us like the most bitter bile. Such hatred can haunt the lives of survivors, making them forever victims and their tormentors forever victors. Let us reject the hatred we may have within ourselves, even towards those

who caused us such suffering. Reject it so we can remain, as Edgar Morin says, complete members of the human community. Because without hatred we can become victors over our torturers. Let us try to make the thoughts of the Dalai Lama ours, “the fire of hatred is extinguished only by love”.

Reject the hatred that may be born within us. Do not seek vengeance. That is the first step towards forgiveness, which is quite simply, ‘to be at peace with oneself’. Forgiveness is not mystical or granted in order to reach some kind of paradise in the afterlife. We do not forgive for the perpetrator. It is a purely personal thing, almost a gift that one gives to oneself, something a perpetrator never gives his victims.

When I speak of forgiveness, I am not talking about forgetting. To forget the victims would be to make them die a second time. Forgiveness is vehemently opposed by some people, and I totally respect their attitude, even if it is not my own response. It has also been the subject of numerous philosophical interpretations. I will not go in to great detail now, but I would simply like to put a few key questions to you. These include elements that may be specific to my own personal journey. I will mention four thinkers, the final one of which remains by far my favourite:

- For Jankélévitch, forgiveness is unthinkable for two key reasons. Firstly, the perpetrator does not apologise and is not seeking our forgiveness, so why give it to them? Secondly, it is only the victims themselves who could grant forgiveness. And as the victims are no longer with us to grant it, for Jankélévitch, forgiveness is in the realms of the impossible.
- Jacques Derrida, to put it simply, thinks this – there are unforgivable acts, and because they are unforgivable they are actually the only acts that merit forgiveness. What is forgiveness if it only forgives the forgivable? He even says, in an excellent piece he wrote in the no-longer-published journal called “The World of Debate”, if we expect acknowledgement and gratitude from the perpetrator to whom we grant forgiveness, that is no longer true forgiveness, as true forgiveness expects nothing in return. The real meaning of forgiveness is to have no meaning, he writes. In this article he also develops a basic tenet to this philosophical notion, “it is not incompatible to forgive a perpetrator whilst at the same time bringing them to justice, to be punished for the crimes they have committed.”
- For Edgar Morin forgiveness is crucial because we must stop the endless cycle of ‘revenge and punishment’. “To forgive,” he says and I quote, “... is to resist the cruelty of the world and to hope for the rehabilitation of those who have failed. It is to hope for a change for the good in those who have committed evil. Most especially, to forgive is to remain human.”

- So although I have not talked about forgiveness in depth, let me remind you of the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi that I try to make my own: “If you take an eye for an eye, the world will be blind.” The Masons, recognised as such by their Brothers, do they not instead want human beings to stop being blind to the evil in the world?
- Finally, allow me to share my personal belief, “To be at peace in one’s heart, to have no hatred towards one’s torturer, that is when the victim defeats their torturer.”

However, to not be inhabited by hatred and to be calm within oneself does not mean to just passively stand by, without responding to all forms of violence and exclusion. The fight for liberty is also and especially to eliminate bigotry wherever it arises, especially when it is just lying in wait, ready to strike. Bigotry is the child of hatred which causes such suffering to all its victims. It must be relentlessly opposed in all its forms.

Let us also be vigilant for the entrenched ideas which lead to bigotry. Amin Maalouf wrote, “When faith becomes hatred, blessed are those who question it.” Let us be suspicious of such certainties that can generate excesses like those of February 1942, in Wansee, a suburb of Berlin, which formed the basis for the ‘final solution’. The plan which was clinically and efficiently developed for the systematic murder of twelve million Jews. The murder of twelve million men, women, children, the elderly – to be murdered for the crime of simply being alive, simply existing. Intelligence of this amoral kind can drive men to construct gas chambers and crematorium ovens. It can lead them to commit barbarous acts such as in Oradour-sur-Glane, and all crimes of genocide that have occurred in the world.

To young people we should pass on a kind of principle for the world they will inherit, that people can be united with others and be concerned about all injustice, against anyone. That is what life in the concentration camps taught us, and it is the purpose of our ‘work of remembrance’. As Franz Fanon, a teacher in Sub-Saharan Africa, told his African students, “When people say evil things about Jews, cover your ears children, they are talking about you.” And when in 1968 in Paris, students were fighting the far right who had condemned the German origins of some of their Jewish leaders. The students responded by shouting in the streets, “We are all German Jews!” Was this not the same message as the African teacher gave to his students?

The poet, René-Louis Laforgue, also thought that solidarity with others is crucial for us to live together, when he sang something like this in the Grand Manitou:

“In a world of racist anti-blacks, I am a humble black person,
 In a world of anti-Arabs, I am a humble Arab,
 In a world of anti-Semites, I am a humble Jew.”

Such solidarity is crucial to being able to live together, we learned that in the camps. We must pass this on to others, so they realise we are always responsible for what we fail to prevent.

If you will allow me to mention something positive we also learned in the camps, it was that we learned about hope and a love for life. It was hope that allowed us to survive the nightmare. The hope to stay alive, just one more hour, to see the sun rise the next day. Hoping

to live for the day when the Allied forces brought with them our liberation, to conquer Nazi barbarity.

And then, once liberated from that servitude, all our hopes were pinned on our vision of a better world in which people might stop being the tormentors of others. Sure, at present, as communitarianism is rising again, when for some the lives of others have no value, bigotry seems to be winning. However, I want to believe that if we do all we can, if we fight as we fought to survive in that place, and especially if we can pass on our faith for a better world to the young, the world can be different to what we have known.

Despite the enormity of such a task, hope brings with it fertility, as it is a feminine concept in French and it brings about the future. We have to believe in an idyllic future, even if it can appear to be an impossible and dark future. Even if it seems in theory to be irredeemably lost, and for some it is just a Utopia. Mahatma Gandhi said “Everything is difficult, but it is possible to do everything.”

The Nazis wanted to rule the world. They thought they could eliminate us and take our life. They thought they could completely annihilate anyone who did not meet their criteria. Well, despite the millions they murdered, they failed.

They had profound contempt for our lives and were convinced they could dispose of us as they wanted. Well, they lost, just as all the torturers will ultimately lose one day.

With hope and our love for life, with our enthusiasm, our emotion when faced with the laughter or tears of children, with our refusal to see others suffer, our response to injustice, our struggle against all forms of violence and intolerance, we try to turn all the evil done to us into a benefit for humanity. What is most important is to demonstrate that life is the most precious gift, and life is, and will be forever more, stronger than death.

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