

Reconciliation and Hope  
Kitsap UU Fellowship, September 23, 2007

**Chalice Lighting**

The International Association of Religious Freedom's "Salutation of the Light"

From the darkness through which we have come  
We approach a light which reveals our faces  
That we may read in each other's eyes  
The anguish and the hunger,  
The sorrow and the pain.

More warmth, more understanding and compassion  
shall there be  
In me, in you, in all of us  
Who come to this light  
Which reveals in us  
Our power to love and to hope.

**Story** The Nuremberg Trials

It may be that human beings are a lost cause. It may be that, in the words of Rob Woutat in Friday's Kitsap Sun, "Our capacity for good" will always be "counterbalanced by our capacity for evil and cruelty, and our eagerness for power and domination."

It may be that the next three thousand years will be as bloody as the last three thousand. It may even be that, having unlocked the secrets of the atom bomb, we don't have three thousand years left.

But I do not believe it.

In 1943 the United Nations War Crimes Commission, two years prior to the official birth of the United Nations itself, began to gather evidence for the eventual trial of Nazi war criminals.

The trial took place in Nuremberg in 1945. In his opening statement at the trial, Chief Prosecutor Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson stated "That four great nations," Britain, France, Russia and the United States, "flushed with victory and stung with injury, stay the hand of vengeance and voluntarily submit their captive enemies to the judgment of law is one of the most significant tributes that power has ever paid to reason," and indeed, it was a monumental step forward.

A first step on a long and complicated journey away from "might makes right" and toward a mutually agreed upon, international standard of human rights...unalienable human rights so sacred that even the most egregious criminals are awarded a fair trial.

Senator Chris Dodd has recently published a collection of letters written by his father, Thomas Dodd, executive council for the prosecution in the Nuremberg trials. In it, we hear first hand about some of the challenges the allies faced. No one had ever committed such horrific crimes before. Walter Cronkite put it this way: "The law had not kept up with the realities of 20<sup>th</sup> century conflict. Mechanized war and systematic genocide had invented systems of violence no legal system had ever imagined."

That the Nazis needed to be held accountable was clear. The best way to do it...was not. Individuals from each of the different countries brought their individual personalities, gifts, and flaws. Tension between representatives of the military tribunal and civilian consultants such as Thomas Dodd almost led to complete chaos.

In the end, of the twenty two men tried, three were found 'not guilty,' six were found guilty and sent to prison, and twelve were sentenced to death. Hermann Goring, Hitler's right-hand man, committed suicide. The remaining eleven men were hung on October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1946.

It made for an anti-climactic end to a war that saw the extermination of millions in Nazi Death camps, that killed soldiers and civilians alike all around the globe, and demonstrated to the world what happens when racism is combined with unchecked power.

Of the critiques aimed at Nuremberg, however, one in particular was and is the most convincing. Hannah Arendt calls it the *tu-quoque* argument, from the Latin for "you, also."

Tom Dodd, writing in the midst of the trial admitted "As I listened to the arguments...I was thinking of the Russians and it was ever in my mind that all of the crimes which the Nazis have committed have been committed by the Russians, and from what I hear—may still be committed by the Russians. The Russian participation in this prosecution is the Achilles heel of the great trial. Some day we may have to explain it." (Dodd, Letters from Nuremberg, p. 341)

It was known that, in the course of the war, Russians had murdered in cold blood 15,000 Polish officers in the Katyn Forest, and rumors of Stalin's purges, which turned out to be fact, were beginning to filter into the West. Over a million people were killed between 1936 and 1938 in Stalin's rise to uncontested power.

Nor was Britain able to claim the moral high ground. Dodd continues, "...of course I thought of what happened in Ireland not too many years ago, of what happened in other British colonies, and what is probably still happening in India."

Dodd asserts that though "our own skirts are not completely clean..." at least U.S. skirts are "cleaner than those of any other great nation on earth." Hannah Arendt disagrees, pointing out that "the saturation bombing of open cities and, above all, the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki clearly constituted war crimes in the sense of the Hague Convention," (Eichmann in Jerusalem, p. 256).

Nonetheless, despite these flaws, despite the challenges and the felt sense of inadequacy, Nuremberg stands as a watershed moment in human history...a moment when power bowed to reason, when the capacity for cruelty and the desire for revenge were tempered by human goodness.

### **Story: Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa**

On April 27, 1994, Black South Africans voted for the first time in a democratic election. 72-year-old Nelson Mandela won in a landslide, and was inaugurated on May 10<sup>th</sup> as the long and violent struggle to end Apartheid came to a surprisingly peaceful end.

The new South Africa united under what is widely agreed to be one of the most human-rights oriented constitutions in the world. But the question of how to address the horrors of the past reared its head early on.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes,

the debate was not on *whether* but on *how* we might deal with this...past. There were those who wanted to follow the Nuremberg trial paradigm, by bringing to trial all perpetrators of gross violations of human rights

and letting them run the gauntlet of the normal judicial process. This...was really not a viable option at all...in World War II the Allies defeated the Nazis...comprehensively and were thus able to impose what has been described as "victor's justice." {In South Africa} Neither side could impose victor's justice because neither side won the decisive victory that would have enabled it to do so, since we had a military stalemate. (No Future Without Forgiveness, p. 20.)

Nor was automatic, blanket amnesty an option. Too many people were still hurting, still wondering what had happened to their vanished loved ones, still wanting to hear their tormentors confess and accept responsibility.

The South Africans found a third path, embodied in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Chaired by Archbishop Tutu, the commission consisted of three committees. The Human Rights Violations committee investigated crimes committed between 1960 and 1994, bearing witness to the atrocities committed on all sides. The Reparation and Rehabilitation committee allocated small grants to survivors of violence to restore dignity and effect healing. For example, a widow could apply for funds to send her children to school, or a mother could apply for funds to place a gravestone for her son. Lastly, the Amnesty committee heard applications from perpetrators and, in some but not all cases, granted amnesty from criminal or civil prosecution.

I'll focus on this last committee, because their work was the most controversial, and perhaps the most difficult. The conditions for amnesty were fairly stringent:

- The act had to occur between 1960, the year of the Sharpeville massacre, and 1994, when Mandela was elected and the New South Africa came into existence
- The crime had to have been politically motivated. Anger, greed, or other personal causes of violence were not valid motivation—only acts on the order of or on behalf of the former government or any of the liberation movements.
- The perpetrator had to make a full and honest confession of all the facts.
- The crime had to be proportional: the means had to be proportional to the ends.

If the conditions were met, however, amnesty would be granted. Victims could argue that the conditions were not met, but they could not block the giving of amnesty. Interestingly, there was no requirement that the perpetrator express remorse. Most of them did, and many even specifically asked for forgiveness from their victims or the relatives of their victims. Because it was not a requirement, however, there would be no question that the remorse was genuine rather than a self-serving gesture.

The commission gathered evidence of crimes committed by all sides of the conflict, up to and including bringing to trial Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, the ex-wife of Nelson Mandela. Stories of her "football club" beating and even killing people on her order kept coming to the commission, and in November of 1997, they subpoenaed her to testify. She never admitted her guilt, and the case against her, though complex and wide ranging, had problems. Nonetheless, in one of the most dramatic moments in the years of heart-wrenching testimony heard by the commission, Archbishop Tutu begged her to apologize. And she did, saying, "Things went horribly wrong and we were aware that there were factors that led to that. For that I am deeply sorry."

Though a few people have accused the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of going easy on Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and other leaders of the African National Congress, most of the world simply looks on in awe, at this new way of approaching the unthinkable, this new way of healing individuals, and healing a country, of building a foundation of peace and hope. The courage it has taken...The courage of the perpetrators, to accept responsibility for their actions, the courage of South Africa's leaders, of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu and others, who model for the people of their country and for the whole world the courage of the victims, to tell their story, to face their tormentors, and to forgive them...it's stunning.

In South Africa, power did not only bow to reason, it gave way to love.

**Singing Together:** We forgive ourselves and each other...we begin again in love. #637

## **Reflections** The Spiritual Practice of Forgiveness

I watched an amazing documentary the other day. It's called "Forgiving Dr. Mengele," and it's the story of a woman named Eva Kor, a Hungarian Jew whose family was taken to Auschwitz toward the end of World War II. Her parents and her older siblings died in the gas chambers, but Eva and her twin sister Mariam were used as human guinea pigs by Dr. Josef Mengele and rescued by the allies when they liberated the death camp.

Eva and Mariam escaped to Israel, and there Eva met and married another holocaust survivor. They moved to Terra Haute, Indiana and she became a realtor. In the mid-eighties, she started on a journey...a quest for healing that has taken her to some very challenging places.

A trip to Auschwitz and then the untimely death of her sister due to lingering damage done by Mengele spurred Eva to form an organization called "Mengele's Twins" in an attempt to find out as much as possible about the experiments done on them at Auschwitz. She wound up visiting a former SS doctor who confessed that he lived in a nightmare, soul-sick because he had witnessed the mass murders in the gas chambers without doing anything to stop it.

Eva says in the documentary, "Nazis have nightmares about Auschwitz? I was flabbergasted!"

He asks her for forgiveness, and she gives it, and then, she begins to see that forgiveness is a way out for her. In Eva's words, "Everybody wants to get rid of their pain. Everybody wants to feel that they are somebody worthwhile in this world. Just to be free from the Nazis that did not remove the pain they have inflicted upon me. There might be another way that survivors can heal themselves. I have found one way: forgive your worst enemy. It will heal your soul and it will set you free."

In the end, she forgives even Dr. Mengele, offering amnesty to all the Nazis on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. She begins to travel around the United States, telling her story, and preaching the power of forgiveness.

But what makes her story really interesting is that the limits of her forgiveness get tested constantly. She is confronted and even ostracized by the other Mengele twins, who question her right to forgive Mengele on behalf of all the people who died. Over and over again, in their pain, they lash out at her for forgiving the unforgivable. Though she asserts over and over again that forgiving is not forgetting, she is accused of awarding "cheap grace" and of betraying her people.

In the course of her forgiveness ministry, she meets an Israeli peace activist who convinces her to travel to Palestine. Though she tries, she cannot quite forgive the Palestinians, asserting that "There must be no more killing before you can have forgiveness."

She starts a holocaust museum in Terra Haute, a true labor of love, and when it is firebombed by white supremacists she can say only "I am working on forgiveness. I'm not quite there yet."

What is clear in her story is that for her forgiveness is about liberation. She doesn't want to deny her history, but she doesn't want to be defined by it, either. She forgives for her own sake, in order to free herself, and heal her soul.

Her story raises questions about the limits of forgiveness, and about the role of remorse...does someone need to ask for forgiveness in order for you to grant it? Does there need to be accountability, an acceptance of responsibility?

Her story, and the stories from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa seem to show that for the victim to heal, they need to be able to tell their story, to have it witnessed, and to have it affirmed that yes, what happened was horrible.

They show that one road to healing is to forgive.

Forgiveness, then, is a gift one gives oneself...rather than a gift one offers to the perpetrator. To forgive is to refuse to be poisoned any longer by hatred or resentment.

However, for the perpetrator to heal, that is another matter. When a person commits a crime against humanity, their soul is damaged. Healing may not be possible, but any chance, ANY slight chance absolutely depends on being held accountable, on accepting responsibility for the crime, on feeling remorse. Perpetrators need to recognize that in hurting the other, they have hurt themselves...need to open themselves up, again, to the reality that we are all connected, and that what affects one, affects us all.

Most of us are not directly victims or perpetrators of crimes of the magnitude seen during the holocaust, or in South Africa under Apartheid. However, all of us have been hurt, been made to feel less than fully human, less than completely loved. All of us have caused hurt, whether deliberately or by accident, or even by omission.

All of us live in a country that consumes far more than its share of resources, a country that currently refuses to abide by the Geneva convention, that is not willing to be held accountable in the international court of law, a country that went to war, preemptively, and that is still at war.

All of us live in a world that has been shaped by violence, injustice, and racism for thousands of years.

Until this world has been re-shaped into a world of universal justice, of universal human rights, of unconditional love, we need both sides of the spiritual practice of forgiveness.

We need to learn to forgive those who hurt us so that we can be free, and we need to learn to accept responsibility for ourselves, to hold ourselves accountable, so that we can be whole.

## **Gift of Music**

### **Conclusions** Reconciliation and Hope

There is no denying that reconciliation is hard work.

Forgiving those who have wronged us is not an easy process. Pain, anger, resentment, they're toxic...knowing that and letting go of them are two different matters. All we can do is practice, and then practice some more.

Accepting responsibility for having hurt someone, that's not easy either. Feelings of guilt and shame are also toxic, and defensiveness and avoidance are natural human strategies for avoiding pain. Again...all we can do is practice, and then practice some more.

With practice, it does get easier. Both forgiving others and forgiving ourselves spring naturally out of a deep faith in the fundamental goodness of human beings, out of our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of all people.

Imagine if you were able to approach minor conflicts not as something bad or dangerous, but as a chance to practice this essential peace-making, compassion-building, humanity-preserving skill?

Yes, reconciliation is hard work, and the deeper the wounds, the harder the work will be. If we are to free ourselves from the destructive patterns of the past, we must take on that hard, holy work.

Progress may be slow, but I promise you: the day will come when all people will find the strength and the courage to lay down their weapons and live in peace.

In the meantime, let's practice forgiveness, and reconciliation, and keep hope alive.\