

Miracles of Grace - Philosophy and Praxis of Reconciliation

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'We cannot begin building a bridge from the middle of the river'

Introduction:

Today the world is one big broken family. There is not one single culture, society or nation that is not suffering from the wounds of pain and suffering that lie deep into our history, which will not begin to heal till we begin to confront it and acknowledge how profoundly we have hurt one another. It only affirms the fact that time does not heal wounds, only healing can heal wounds and healing takes a long time. It therefore becomes essential for us to confront that history that has caused the wounds. We can no longer follow a paradigm that only seeks to find solutions to symptoms; we need to address the deeper root causes of conflicts that are responsible for so much of today's human sufferings. History has shown us that war has never been the way to peace and yet time and time again we look and turn to war in our quest for the illusive peace.

Existing world systems and paradigms have to transcend the militarized polity of evolving 'national security' based on the concept of fears. This has resulted in a negative trend of human association because 'collective memories' that lie deep in history have often influenced polities of nation-states. It thus becomes very difficult for them to break away from the rigidity of their positions and their unwillingness to accommodate the different paradigms. As a result, it relies too much on 'force' to resolve differences and conflicts with others and does not provide the space for healing and reconciliation to take place. It has only succeeded in widening the division amongst humankind.

Reconciliation – A journey:

The concept of reconciliation has become an inevitable process in contemporary 'real politik.' There has finally been a realization that conflicts would continue to re-emerge unless reconciliation becomes a part of the peace process. The sheer use of power and force and the easy accessibility to nuclear weapons may have to a great extent helped in understanding the prophetic utility of reconciliation in world politics. Recent incidents and experiences of the horrors and brutality of war have only stressed on the paramount need to take steps towards this journey of reconciliation.

The journey of reconciliation has to be understood and viewed from the broader perspective of peace processes. The emerging trend of peace is that it is no longer viewed as a revolutionary process that transforms conflict to non-violent relationship based on mutual respect and dignity. Rather most often it is interpreted and perceived as a moment of temporary truce or a period of passive activity. I like Gandhi's perception that peace is dependent on a real change of heart and in my opinion the transformation that takes place in this change of heart is what is called 'reconciliation.' Reconciliation is a process that is often begun at the risk of further injury, but it invariably ends in creating something new.

When people say they are struggling for peace – they actually mean they are struggling for justice. There can be no peace unless it is a JUSTPEACE and further for transformation to take place it is fundamental that the decision making power must be located within the society in

question. Thus the hope of peoples lies in their culture and only when they realize that they are makers of their own culture can they bring about social, political, cultural, economic and religious transformation!!! The power of culture is that it humanizes, while the culture of global hegemony dehumanizes through creation of a manageable, predictable and 'oppressible' culture. It is difficult to initiate the process of reconciliation in a society and culture that propounds the theory that 'the bad guys must always bite the dust.' This attitude erases all hopes and space for reconciliation.

To understand the reconciliation process of a people it is imperative to understand the underpinning cultural and social values of a peoples. It is often the cultural factors that influence and sustains a people's search for truth, justice, reconciliation and peace. In the present world, peace has lost most of its significant values and principles to the rapid growth of 'liberal democracy' of globalization. This has had a great impact on the process of reconciliation too. It has now become a confused concept where people are beginning to find difficulties grasping what it stands for, and too often reconciliation is now being narrowly interpreted as 'forgiveness.' Understanding of 'justice' too has undergone severe changes. It no longer is interpreted as right relationship; rather it is now often interpreted for ones convenience meaning vengeance and retributive justice. It has therefore undermined the healing aspect of 'justice' in its truest form. The approach of states and institutions in seeking retributive justice rather than restorative justice has greatly reduced the space for reconciliation not only between individuals but also between individuals and the structures that will be a contributing factor in fulfilling the aspirations of the peoples. History has told us that we have too often pursued justice in a way that does not facilitate peace and in the process we destroy what we are hoping to build. It therefore becomes essential to define justice in a way that would transcend its definition into amore holistic perception that would contribute in evolving amore equal pattern of human interaction and human association.

Ingredients of Reconciliation:

To initiate the process of Reconciliation, I think it is important to understand the principles and values of fear, ignorance, hate, prejudice, power and self-righteousness that drive peoples lives in the real world. For reconciliation to take place it becomes imperative to recognize and acknowledge the permanency of those you are divided from. It is critical to understand that the opponent will not just vanish even if you have won the victory. Nelson Mandela and the leaders of the new South Africa had the wisdom to realize and acknowledge this crucial fact and had the will to make their enemy their friend and are examples on how to learn to live along with their opponents.

Before we even initiate the process of reconciliation, we must recognize the enemy within us. Reconciliation cannot take place unless we recognize that we too are capable of doing the same things that our opponents or oppressors have committed. Thus we must make the space for God to change the lives of people and the need for us to reconcile within our self. If people change just in order to gain forgiveness, then it becomes a weak and cheap process. Reconciliation can take place only when there is a genuine sense of repentance. Without justice, there can never be reconciliation and real peace. Therefore, reconciliation and justice must always be together. One cannot talk of reconciliation when there is the 'foot on the neck' – the historical foot on the neck of oppression and injustice. Is that not the weakness of many processes where the 'powers that

be' want to talk of reconciliation when they still have their foot on the necks of those they are suppressing? It is imperative to understand that reconciliation takes place at the cost of a new way of life.

In any reconciliation process there has to be a prime mover to initiate the process. Most often it should be the oppressor who should make the first step. However, I think the greatest moment in history are those times when the people who have been wronged and suppressed have with amazing grace and generosity taken the first step to initiate the restoration of human relationship. It takes immense strength and courage to take the first step.

Reconciliation cannot take place at a distance, it can only take place when the parties meet and engage with one another. The engagement must take place no matter how uncomfortable the parties may be with one another. Engagement breaks down barriers and boundaries and helps the parties to seek common ground. In the process truth must be told and acknowledged. The process of reconciliation cannot take place on one perspective of history – one common honest history must be told and shared. For truth to be told and shared it is important that the democratic space is provided for people to share without fear. Truth is essential in building trust and confidence amongst the parties and it helps in restoring a basic for procedural justice to be reinstated because evil cannot be confronted and prevented by substantial concepts of justice. It therefore becomes essential that the power of decision-making should be located within the society that is seeking reconciliation.

Repentance must be genuine for reconciliation to take place. Thus forgiveness and admission of crimes committed does not necessary imply that it would open the road to reconciliation. Repentance is a must in order to restore human relationship, thereby ensuring to the victim that same acts of crime will not be repeated again. Confession and forgiveness thus opens the path for reconciliation to take place.

One must be willing to admit and recognize ones own mistakes for reconciliation. It is realizing the suffering that helps us take steps towards reconciliation so that similar mistakes are not committed. Reconciliation must take place in a multi-level negotiation process that gives legitimacy to the claims of both parties where the conflict is settled and transformed through dialogue based on mutual respect and dignity. It must expose the hypocrisy of the state system that is intolerant to the richness of the human cultures and is unable to provide the space for healing and restoration of human relationships.

People working for reconciliation must have the strength and courage to face danger and death in the process. The path to reconciliation is not an easy one because in essence it is asking you to change your way of life. It is a revolutionary concept that seeks human nature to defy the feelings of hate, prejudice and vengeance. Through reconciliation you are confronting and challenging the status quo for a more just and peaceful co-existence that is detrimental to the interests and positions of 'the powers that be.' One must be ready to die to work and struggle for reconciliation.

Politics of Forgiveness:

Very often many people wish to confuse reconciliation with forgiveness. Yes it is true to state that reconciliation cannot take place without at least a shred of forgiveness. Similarly one cannot forgive unless you reconcile with yourself. Forgiveness is thus a process of letting go of oneself, thereby creating the space for healing to take place. However forgiveness can only take place if the perpetrator confesses and acknowledges the crimes and acts of violation that he/she has committed against the victim. Truth therefore must be established and acknowledgement of historical wrongs must take place. The process of confession and forgiveness is to expose the guilt of perpetrators and to restore their humanness. It provides opportunity for reconciliation to take place and to dismantle the institutions and systems that played a role in oppression and injustice. This aspect of reconciliation is so fundamental and critical. Unless this holistic transformation takes place – reconciliation is not complete.

Another individual has no right to forgive on behalf of the victims. This is where the whole question of collective guilt or individual guilt and victim-hood comes into play. These are difficult issues because in a conflict situation or in a situation of oppression, who is innocent? This reactive mechanism only increases the sense of victim-hood. It is imperative to understand that the process of forgiveness is not the same as granting pardon or amnesty, neither can it be a substitute for justice. The power of forgiveness helps a person free from the burden of past guilt so that they can act boldly in the present and the future. The acknowledgement of guilt is an important factor to have the power of forgiveness. Guilt is often a very strong motivating factor in one's behavior, it is not only about the feelings that we should have done or not done, but it also encompasses the negative beliefs we hold. The slightest feeling of guilt often makes us uncomfortable that we will do anything to avoid facing it. Forgiveness should not be justified on the grounds that it is wrong and harmful to have retributive emotions.

Forgiveness cannot take place unless we have acknowledged our anger and fears. Human feelings of revenge as a result of injustice and oppression too should not be misunderstood. Social injustice foments revenge. Revenge is often interpreted by the oppressed as a form of spiritual power meant to equalize social and political injustice. It often begins with repressed anger because of the hurt that one has experienced. However, revenge becomes destructive when it begins to be expressed in violent forms, rather than becoming a source of constructive social change. Further the anger that is used to cover up our feelings of guilt needs to be overcome towards creating a positive outlook for change. In the process we begin to re-examine and rethink the existing relationship with other human beings and the nature that surrounds us. It is critical to examine our feelings of guilt, anger and fear because without doing so we cannot recognize the enemy within us and neither can we restore the right relationship with other human beings and the super-natural. Forgiveness cannot be an exclusive process; it is imperative that it is an inclusive process. It can only happen when the parties engage with one another and acknowledge what happened. When perpetrators repent, undergoes the humiliation and has in turn suffered then can we begin the process of reconciliation – for without repentance and humiliation the crime may be repeated again.

The question of forgiveness must be defined in individual and collective terms, just as guilt must be defined in individual or collective terms. The atrocities committed during conflicts must have a sense of collective guilt, collective responsibility, collective acknowledgement and collective

forgiveness; otherwise it may not lead to genuine reconciliation. However, it is important that the collective sense of victimization should not outweigh the individual hurts and suffering. The issue surrounding forgiveness and not forgiving has two aspects – a psychological and a political factor. Very often we have the tendency to only view forgiveness from a psychological perspective. We have failed to integrate a holistic approach of forgiveness; as a result of which we continue to experience the fact that politics are often translated and determined by the historical collective fear and suffering of a peoples. The failure of confronting the political forgiveness has only helped legitimize injustice and suppression. Is it possible for forgiveness to become apolitical virtue? The passivity of political forgiveness has enabled the power relationship to remain unchanged. Only when one starts confronting this aspect of forgiveness can the existing power relations change – it needs a clear mind and memory.

Forgiveness cannot be interchanged with forgetting. It is often the powers that be that advocate for ‘forgive and forget.’ It is a contradiction in its terms. Forgetting the atrocities and crimes would be worse than forgiving the criminal who seeks forgiveness, because forgetting the crimes devalues the humanity that perished and suffered in those atrocities. Further if one forgets, the act of forgiveness no longer remains a conscious action of intention – it becomes cheap. It is important not to forget the past; otherwise forgiveness would be meaningless but it is important that one does not get trapped in the memory of that past otherwise one will not be able to find their place in the changed future. Forgiving is not to convert wrong into right. It is not to justify the wrong done and therefore it is imperative not to confuse forgiveness with forgetting for it may be interpreted as ‘mercy.’ Forgiveness is appropriate only when it is consistent with self-respect and dignity of the victim and the perpetrator.

Conclusion:

Reconciliation is truly a revolutionary process. It goes beyond solving problems, resolving issues and reaching agreements. It is a process of encounter and healing where the encounter must expose the hypocrisy of the systems towards a renewed community. I like the idea of JP Lederach that reconciliation takes place when truth, mercy, justice and peace have met. It helps open many options, but the limitation I see in it is that it is from a very emotional and individualistic perspective. For it to translate into a collective nature one must recognize the interconnection, interdependency and interrelation not only amongst the people but also between the person and the surrounding nature and system. It is imperative to realize that ones humanity is tied to the humanity of the other.

I do not really think that history can be healed. We have witnessed that history has not healed with time, because when ones identity and basic human needs are threatened, time collapses and conflict re-emerge. The way to deal with historical pain and resentment is to remember and change. It is imperative that we look into history for reconciliation to take place, only those who do not wish to look into history become easy victims of fatal lies and suspicion about other people in the present. Right now we are victims of those lies because we do not want to confront that history. Therefore, it is imperative that we must tell our own version of the story, if we don't, someone else may say it for us and it may be far from the truth!

I believe that there is no future without reconciliation! Reconciliation is a must for the future, if there is to be one. The journey to reconciliation is not an easy one. Reconciliation cannot take

place when violations of human rights and oppression and injustice still continue to exist. Reconciliation can only take place once the decision making power is restored to the people and there is cessation of violation of rights and oppression; and social, political and economic justice has been restored to the people. The journey to reconciliation cannot take place in a vacuum. Therefore reconciliation is often seen as a process of rebuilding a society in a post-conflict situation. As a result reconciliation has not been given its due place and respect in world politics. We must realize that peace processes and reconciliation cannot be separated – they are in essence part of the same body. Reconciliation cannot take place when there is the ‘foot on the neck.’

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