

Forgiveness, not revenge

ATLE HETLAND

EN ROUTE

Some of the old animosities and conflicts have lasted for so long, sometimes generations and more, so that we don't always quite remember why they are there. Can we not forgive and think anew rather than focus on revenge and retaliation? Why can we not broaden the basic principle of forgiveness, which is fundamental in all human relations, to include all social and political situations, too?

When I was a young student and later staff member at university in Norway, more than a generation ago, it was a politicized time and we had many academic differences and disagreements. Sometimes we went so far as not to associate with those that we disagreed with. When new students came, they sometimes asked us why we didn't talk to certain groups and individuals, noting that some were highly respected and famous. Sometimes we who were older had to say that we didn't quite know, but that it was a 'tradition'; some belonged to different schools of thought that we thought were wrong. They were our academic enemies, and there was little time for forgiveness and dialogue.

Of course, people can disagree, but shouldn't we also have an obligation to hold discussions and dialogue, especially as students of the social and behavioral sciences? That time, we didn't use the theories of our own disciplines to analyze our own little pond. There wasn't only a divide between theory and practice, but also between ignorance and common sense – and we were among the most highly educated people studying subjects that should have helped us to understand ourselves and the world around us better.

Professor Evelin Gerda Lindner of the Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies Network in Oslo has described many of these relevant issues in further detail, especially in political situations, with data from the crises in Rwanda and Somalia. She says that in many cases, old conflicts become the 'new normal', especially conflicts that begun with humiliation of honour and dignity. Unless we think anew and actively look for solutions, we stay stuck in the outdated and irrational ways that are not in our own interest, nor in the interest of those who were our enemies. We have to forgive, or be forgiven, to be able to find alternatives and enter into a better future for all. As we do that, we will probably be surprised that the differences are much smaller than we had ever thought.

I have been coming to Pakistan since the end of 2000. It is some time, but I do not know the country's history as well as those who were born and bred here. I don't understand many issues, such as the hostility between Pakistan and India. I have tried to find the real causes, but I can't. True, there may be many things to sort out after two-three generations of hostility, even wars. But to find a peaceful future is in both countries' interest. People on both sides of the border belong to the same culture and many share the same religion of Islam; yes, almost half of the people of the subcontinent are Muslims.

Today is Kashmir Day and I wish to congratulate the Kashmiri people on this day, wherever they live. I pray that they themselves can find lasting solutions, with the support of their neighbours, the great powers in the region and the world. It is a shame on all of us that the 'Kashmir issue' hasn't been solved. It was also wrong that the matter was left unresolved by the Brits at independence, as it was, too, that Afghanistan's situation and that of the tribal areas in Pakistan, was left unresolved by the colonial powers. But now it is our turn to solve them, with forgiveness and new ideas that can benefit all men and women.

We live in a world with all kinds of modern communication technologies. Yet, we cannot communicate face-to-face to solve those problems that I have mentioned, and many other problems. Isn't it time that we forgive and forget; that we find solutions to problems that have become a habit rather than being rational, distracting attention from other essential issues?

I believe that we must even try to find space in our hearts to forgive even the terrorists. It may be a tall order, especially if we have suffered directly from attacks. Yet, I believe that forgiveness is the strongest weapon we have to end terrorism and evil. "Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong", said Mahatma Gandhi. We must try to understand and include everyone instead of seeking revenge and retaliation. Is it naïve? Maybe, but nothing else gives the results we need so that we can live in secure societies built on inclusion and trust, not in our region, in France, in America or anywhere else.

The basic principles for how human beings should live as individuals and in communities can be found in our religions and moral frameworks. Islam and Christianity emphasize the importance of forgiveness. Islam speaks of two aspects of forgiveness: God's forgiveness of humans, and our forgiveness of each other. When Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had visited Taif and the people there did not want to listen to him, but instead insulted him and forced him to leave, he prayed, "O Allah, guide these people because they did know what they were doing". Jesus, too, prayed the same prayer when he was sentenced to death and some ridiculed him. "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do", he prayed. (Luke 23:34). The traditions of the two religions are similar.

Islam says that, "Kind words and forgiveness are better than charity followed by injury." (Quran 2:236). "No crime is too big and no crimes are too many." (Hadith Quds) Yet, we should admit our wrongs and not repeat them; we should ask for God's forgiveness.

The story in the Bible about the woman who was caught in the act of adultery is well known, and the lessons invaluable. The religious leaders, the Pharisees, asked Jesus what should happen to the woman. He said that the one who had never sinned should throw the first stone. Everyone slipped away, one by one. Then Jesus stood up and said to the woman, "Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?" "No", she said. "Neither do I. Go and sin no more", Jesus said. (John 8:1-11)

This is the Christianity and Islam we want to believe in. This is the message of God in all religions that we should follow and preach in the mosques and churches, in temples and on open yards, in the shade of trees and on the top of hills, in the stillness of house prayers among laypeople, and in everyone's hearts. This is the message that can lead us on the right path. But if we sin, and we all do, we must ask for forgiveness. And when a society needs to punish antisocial behavior and crime, it must always be just and mild – to correct and lead back on the right path. Repentance and forgiveness go together. I believe that all human beings want to be good and do good; it is our duty towards God and each other to help everyone live their lives right.

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from university, diplomacy and development aid