

Why do we dwell in the past?

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Often, we have opinions and attitudes which we have not questioned, scrutinized and reflected deeply upon. We just follow old ways and dwell in the past. We do things and have opinions that are built on what parents, friends, teachers and others have thought us – and whole countries. Yet, we are mostly happy with it all, and don't actively search for too many new ways.

This isn't wrong either. It is the result of socialization into our own culture, at the particular time and place in question. And young people are conforming more than we think. As a matter of fact, it is probably when we have lived for a while, when we have seen and heard about alternative ways of doing things, that we begin to ask questions beyond conventional wisdom and values.

Sometimes, too, even if we know about alternatives and other ways, we don't have to change everything. But it is useful to compare notes with people from elsewhere, keep an open mind and reflect on own values and ways. Sometimes, what we do is entirely illogical! In our multicultural and global world, it has become more important than before, to find new ways to live better lives together.

I have lived on several continents. My roots are in Norway. I studied in three other European countries, and worked for a stint in America. I worked in international organizations and carried out research in Africa for some fifteen years, although with a few periods at home, too. Finally, I have spent almost as long in Pakistan, dealing with Afghan refugee issues, university cooperation and other things. I have benefitted from all this, and I have a different world outlook than most Norwegians at home. True, I will always be a Norwegian. But after a generation abroad, one would finally also have begun to internalize many positive influences and values from elsewhere, and be more critical to certain things at home, and still positive to other things.

Being a social scientist, who has focused attention on a few countries, I believe I have some unique comparative knowledge – and I have come to learn to look for new things, not dwell in the past. Some friends at home in Norway, though, may suggest that people like me are not quite up-to-date as regards the latest 'dialects' at home. I don't think it is very true. I would rather argue the opposite; that I would be able to point out topics in critical and constructive ways at home as well as in the couple of countries abroad I have lived for long. I believe in the importance of comparative studies in order to avoid that we dwell alone on the past in. It is essential that a 'stranger within' feels free and welcome to criticize in friendly ways in his adopted homelands.

One of my favorite peace and development specialists, Professor Evelin Gerda Lindner, was born in Germany of refugee parents who had come from Poland after World War II. She studied in Germany and France and settled in Norway, well, as much as an 'academic nomad' can settle. Much of the time she travels to collect data and lecture, in lands such as Rwanda, Somalia, South Africa, and elsewhere. She founded and coordinates the Network for Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies, which holds meetings and conferences in New York, including offering virtual university programmes.

I mention her because she stresses that we must not dwell in the past; we must build and live for the future. As a psychologist and trans-disciplinary social scientist she has studied how we can overcome conflicts. She says that sometimes we get stuck in conflicts and antagonism with our neighbours, yes, friends, too, for so long that the new generations don't really know what the causes for the misunderstandings were. Besides, the new

times have new people and new issues, and everyone would win from putting the rusty swords back into the holsters.

But can we do it? Will we do it? Sometimes, we can and will, but in many parts of the world, there are frozen and rusty relationships, which are allowed to drag on, even be worsened. Take the West's relationship with Russia. It is sad that such an irrational relationship has developed over the recent decades. If it had not been allowed to develop, and the West is mainly to be blamed, then the Ukraine and other conflicts in the former Soviet Union would probably have been solved before they became as serious as they are now. Also, the situations in the Arab world should have been handled differently, indeed, in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is beyond simple comprehension to understand how the world leaders – and the United Nations, EU, NATO, and others – could allow it to happen in a time when we have more knowledge and instruments to analyze issues and find solutions than ever before.

Also, how could Europe, the oldest, richest and most bookish continent in the world blunder as much as they have in the migration and refugee fields? Were they all dwelling in the past, not letting go of images of a different world order, dreaming of everlasting, selfish privileges for some? Or, were they just dead ignorant?

I think it is easy to dwell in the past if we are rich and have lived sheltered lives. That goes for individuals, families, classes, countries and continents. Somebody must wake and shake them up.

The no-resolve situation in relations between Pakistan and India remains among the Gordian Knots, those conflicts that we somehow almost seem to want to stay in, perhaps because military or other forces maintain importance if they are not solved. Of course, they can be solved and must be solved for humanitarian reasons, for the sake of development, and because we all become better human beings if we work for what is positive. Then the young will become better human beings than the old. The young Pakistanis and Indians should refuse to dwell in the past, and instead embrace the future in a positive spirit. Similarly, also other countries in South and South-East Asia with age-old disagreements must solve them.

In Afghanistan, too, there is need for internal dialogue among various groups, including neighbours across the borders. We have dwelt in the past since the 1970s; nothing good has come out of it. The last 13 years, too, were negative and futile, with the whole world being involved without finding solutions. Why? Again, with all the knowledge and instruments in our time, we must be able to find new solutions to old conflicts, and that mostly if not always, means non-military ways?

Yesterday, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair was on TV, saying that there is only a political solution to the Syria tragedy – and 'political' means that people must talk together and find solutions that are acceptable for all. Of course, if we thought anything else was a way out of it, we must again have dwelt in the past, in some kind of illogical thinking about how to solve disagreements between groups and regions. It was belated of Tony Blair to discover the obvious. But at least he did, and he also said it.

Let me end today's article by saying that we should not dwell in the past. More than that; we should not dwell on and think about what we did wrong in our life and time, what we could have done differently. Instead, let us focus on *what we can and should do* – for ourselves, our neighbours, yes, even our enemies and those we disagree with. Then we will do God's will and achieve good results together. Isn't this the basic concept and principle of all religions and philosophies? Yes, it is, and we all know it. So let us get on with it then.

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