

Questions as answers

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Judith Vidal-Hall, in a speech marked by often-brilliant prose, shows again how, in an examined life, the questions may prove more important than the answers.

Asked to speak on reconciliation, the 63-year-old editor of Index on Censorship instead poses a series of rapid questions many of which set off more inquiry, all of which challenge reconciliation as the world perceives and pursues it today.

She asks: When is reconciliation rendered complete? When does a transaction between victim and villain become equal? At what point is the wronged satisfied? At what point does the villain "pay adequately for the gift of forgiveness"? How to measure recompense? Where to find repentance?

Having clued her audience in on how reconciliation unravels, she then trains her inquiry on communication as an instrument of reconciliation.

Too many assumptions are made about communication, she says with the certainty of her 30 years in journalism. Yet communication has been an instrument for sowing friendship and peace as much as for sowing deceit and injustice. So that, even as communicators have gathered in the Netherlands to seek answers to reconciliation, communicators in Rwanda have used their skills to rain death and destruction. "Radio Mille Collines in Kigali," she writes, "told Hutus where the cockroaches could be found and urged them to stamp on them."

In so doing, the media whose right of space whole constitutions have been known to guard have themselves now threatened that space. "For those of us," she says for all communicators, "who deal with free expression and for whom the word has an almost sacred function, it was a testing time."

The very concept of reconciliation has itself come under examination, she states. For it asks that we reconcile "a dangerous word," she warns ourselves to something that was revolting once and remains so now. What it should ask instead is that we accept the enemy only "after a process of confession, repentance, punishment, restitution and then, finally, forgiveness."

For only then, she believes, can reconciliation finally become "a transaction among equals."

But the largest questions, Hall reserves for the roads the world has taken in the journey to reconciliation.

First, the road of international criminal courts and tribunals. These courts, she argues, aim to bring to justice those leaders found guilty of "crimes against humanity." But these courts are often slow and, to this day, unsuccessful at showing the connection between international justice and domestic peace.

Why so? Because, Hall argues further, their efforts at getting justice are often isolated from the countries' own internal efforts at getting justice.

For Yugoslavia, a war crimes tribunal made "the convenient appeal of suggesting action without, for the immediate future, requiring it." For Serbia, the deportation of Milosevic to the

Hague has split the government and set back a fledgling democracy. For Rwanda, the international tribunal has been cause for resentment among the locals. Index reports: "It is an anomaly, at the least, that middle level genocidaires tried in Rwanda will face the death penalty, while those whose seniority and guilt is sufficient to attract the interest of the tribunal will only face life imprisonment."

These international criminal courts, she rues, have failed to address the reality that in many countries those who executed the crimes are still in circles of power there. Thus, the international courts cannot make the claim that their brand of justice has a bearing on local peace.

Second, the road of truth commissions. Hall argues that these commissions assume that truth-telling is another equal transaction. That if the two parties, somehow made "equal" by coming together before one commission, tell the truth, this should naturally lead to accountability, forgiveness, pardon, and reconciliation.

Not so, Hall counters. "Few who have gone through this process are today satisfied with the results, most notably those who suffered?and by their account still do."

For laudable as the aim of truth commissions may be?indeed, the truth has been known to set people free?even they cannot make personal pain disappear. Moreover, she points out, in the end forgiveness belongs only to the victims, all of whom know that once their forgiveness is given, their persecutors walk free.

What then?

Hall says Stanley Cohen, Hebrew University in Jerusalem professor, is right when he says: "The other thesis is that it doesn't matter what goes on in people's heads, hearts, or souls. A structure of political and legal compulsion has to be implemented which gives people no choice but to conform."

Finally, the road of reparations. Hall believes there is no question that reparations, the most "hotly contested" of all roads to reconciliation, must be won. But even this, she riddles with inquiry. In only a few of the cases are battles being waged; why? In many more cases the fight hasn't even begun; when then? The world has been living with these sins of omission; how so?

She acknowledges that this vision is Utopian. But, she says, even those unwilling to respond to it must recognise that the roads to reconciliation are rough and the journey dangerous. If people do not, Hall concludes, we may never "reach the moment of lasting reconciliation."

And in that state, any questions we manage to ask may lead, not to the high road, but to a dead end.