

What Then Shall We Do?

The deaths and losses which shall accrue from this are your fault ...

~ The *Requerimiento* (1510)

On October 22, a troupe from the **N a Sonje Foundation** performed in the **W-O Library** a historical drama and mime, depicting 700 years of Haitian history. The troupe, whose name means “We will Remember” in Haitian Creole, gave a powerful presentation, evoking from its history a number of disturbing events: colonial rule, abuses, slavery and genocide of Amerindian and African peoples. For those who saw the production, despite its message of forgiveness, it would be difficult not to have felt a sense of shame and sadness. Shame for being on the side of the oppressors and sadness for being reminded the brutality of what one group of humans can inflict on another.

For a nation -- any nation -- it is difficult to deal with past transgressions. Atoning for a nation’s historical wrongs usually requires acknowledgment, apology and compensation. Sadly, the reality is, in too many instances, attempts at reconciliation between the victims and oppressors have largely failed, as demonstrated between the Serbs and the Albanians, the Chinese and the Tibetans, the Israelis and the Palestinians, and the Turks and the Armenians.

Closer to home, Canada has not fared any better in resolving our tremulous dealings with the First Nations. Two examples of the outstanding issues are land claims and abuses in residential schools. After many, many years of negotiations, hardly any settlements have been made. The sad truth is that the absence of resolution is neither because of lack of interest nor refusal to negotiate. There has been the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as well as Committees and Legal Hearings on Land claims issues.

Unfortunately, atoning for past sins is just simply a very complicated endeavour.

In his book *What Went Wrong?*, the eminent historian Bernard Lewis argues that the phrase ‘*It’s history*’ carries a very different meaning for the people in the West as compared to the people in the East.

In the West, when someone says ‘*It’s history*’, it usually means it is time to let go of the past and let by-gones be by-gones. However, in the East, when someone says ‘*It’s history*’, it usually means one must not forget the past. So, in the West, the tendency is to look forward: seeing opportunities, a better future, and finding ways to get there. In the East, the inclination is to look back: into memory, the glorious past and finding ways to remember how we got here. This East-West opposite can easily be applied to the historical oppressors – victims dichotomy. One side cannot wait to be rid of its history while the other side cannot let go of the same past.

In the novel *The Bastard of Istanbul*, the author Elif Shafak explores the same issue: How does a nation deal with its past wrongdoings? The descendants of the oppressors –

in this case, the Turks -- often invoke the notion that it wasn't even them; so, why should they be responsible for the crimes committed by their ancestors? Whatever terrible things happened 'way back' were the unfortunate consequences of the events of the day. They'll concede that such oppression is truly tragic, but then they would ask, haven't they repaid their debts? In fact, they'd do so far as to suggest that the victims take some responsibility for their own wellbeing, and that it is time to move on.

On the other side, the descendants of the victims – the Armenians -- would often decry: how *could* they move on when *their* people were murdered, *their* land stolen and *their* culture destroyed? All the terrible things that happened were not random, but were a systemic scheme by the other side. In fact, it is insulting for them to be told, in a condescending way, that it is time for *them* to take some responsibility and forget the past.

Chris Hedges' discourse, in *War is the Force that Gives Us Meaning*, applies to the issue of dealing with past atrocities. The winners in war – the oppressors – are very good at erasing the anxiety of individual conscience and morality. Instead, a shared, unquestioned communal response is created to deal with the guilt. Even though it may be morally dubious, the oppressors are quite ready to create a myth using selective memory, and shift responsibility onto the victims. On the other side, the victims too create a parallel myth that paints the oppressors as monsters and themselves as holy innocents.

Clearly, for a nation to deal with its past sins is not easy. It is complex, time consuming and, quite often, troubling because it brings up the ugly past. So, in the famous words of Leo Tolstoy: "What then shall we do?"

According to Hedges: until there is a common vocabulary and a shared historical memory, there is no peace in any society. We need to learn to break the parallel myths that are created by both sides in order to fit their own narratives, and therefore interests.

To this end, it means confronting the past by not practicing collective amnesia, it means being vigilant in guarding the historical facts, it means challenging accepted prejudices, it means confronting injustice, and it means committing to atone for past transgressions regardless of the amount of effort required.

The descendants of the oppressors need to remember that their inheritance includes both riches and ills. It is irresponsible to embrace the riches and ignore the ills. There can be no reconciliation without an honest acknowledgement. There can be no justice until there is due compensation. There can be no peace until there is a sincere and meaningful apology.

References:

Requerimiento (1510) (Document written by [jurist Palacios Rubios](#), of the [Council of Castile](#)): <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Requerimiento>>

The N a Sonje Foundation's website: <<http://nasonje.blogspot.com/>>

What Went Wrong?: The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East by Bernard Lewis is an excellent book about the Islamic Civilization.

The Bastard of Istanbul by the Turkish author Elif Shafak is a novel that tackles the 'Armenian question' in Turkey.

War is the Force that Gives Us Meaning by Chris Hedges is one of the best books that deals with the psychology and mythology of war.