

## Forgivingness and reconciliation: The path to a world culture of peace and lightness

Conflict, terror and love from a transpersonal point of view

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In September this year the international conference on “Forgiving and Reconciliation” will be held in Freiburg im Breisgau. It is sponsored by the European Association of Transpersonal Psychology (EUROTAS).

Well-known experts from Europe, Russia and the United States will explore the meaning of forgivingness and reconciliation on different levels: politically, socially, economically, psychologically and spiritually.

### 1. Forgivenness and reconciliation – taking the so-called enemy’s interests seriously

Forgiveness and reconciliation could be seen as alternatives to the globally growing polarisation of interests and ideologies which we are facing today. War and violence are widespread, individually as well as collectively. It is known that these strategies fail when it comes to problem solving. And even though they threaten our existential foundations it still seems impossible to find different solutions for global problems.

Strange enough: While mankind makes itself guilty of destroying its existential foundations, the problem of debt and guilt is mainly discussed in a financial context today. The importance of non-violent conflict solving, forgiveness and reconciliation is most evident.

Social taboos express themselves in poetry and wit as we know from the nazi dictatorship. Truth makes its way through codes. In Germany forgiveness and reconciliation still refer to the Holocaust and to the consequences of the violence committed during World War II.

Of course there is the right to refuse forgiveness and reconciliation. All too soon the Germans wanted to impose forgiveness on the Jews by saying “enough now with all this accusation”. In this case, forgiveness comes up to a derision of the victims.

There are only few people in the world who are as undisputed and as much respected as the Dalai Lama. Maybe the Dalai Lama is one of the world’s greatest peace-bringers today. He says: ‘Why should I value my enemy’s interests lower than my own?’ He says that knowing that we all depend on each other. Surviving of mankind depends on clean air and clean water. The destiny of our (rich) western world depends on what is happening in Darfur, in Ruanda, in Chechenia, in Iraq and in Afghanistan. It also depends on whether or not we are forgiven by our brothers and sisters killed in the past.

The Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield says ‘There is nothing that cannot be forgiven’. Forgiveness and reconciliation are attitudes towards life, a permanent process. A process on a collective and on an individual level. It includes social, economical, psychological and spiritual areas of life. The common base of these processes is a general “Yes” towards life and towards other people. In the process of forgiveness and reconciliation “against” is replaced by “together”. The result is a globalisation where nobody has to starve. Isn’t that what so many of us are missing in so many different ways?

### 2. Political peace and economical prosperity in middle Europe

People in middle Europe have been living in peace for more than 60 years now. This is unique in the history of mankind so far. We live relatively safe without fear of being shot or robbed. There are no curfews, no blackouts because of nocturnal bomb attacks. Most people's economical situation is satisfying even though it might have been perceived differently over the last few years.

A great number of people live in prosperity – if people complain they do so on a very “high level”. There is nothing similar here to the slums in Asia, Africa or South America where millions of people have to live in cardboard cities.

Political peace and economical prosperity in big parts of Europe are very precious and unique in the history of mankind. I don't know how many people in Germany really appreciate it.

Prosperity and political peace in middle Europe don't seem to create happiness or a peaceful being with each other among the people living here. You just have to look at the faces of the people in the supermarkets at the beginning of the weekend: Tired, suffering faces, many unhappy people and a profusion of food and goods of all kind.

### 3. Unhappy in paradise – is there a life before death?

We are living in a kind of paradise. Most of us are unaware of it because they feel different. Almost nobody in our country really feels nourished.

In a survey of the Emnid-Institute (2003) 97 % of the 10-11 year-old children state that they feel loved by their parents. At the same time they say that they have to deal with excessive demands and that their parents are mainly interested in how good they are at school. More than one third of the children have experienced violence by other students. Fear seems to be omnipresent at school. Are these children really loved?

Permanent overwork, full schedules, busy lifestyles, incapacity to feel oneself, feelings of guilt and shame, absence of meaning in one's life and an endless amount of relationship problems are some of the most common symptoms we have to deal with in psychotherapy today. Living in Cockaigne, many of us are alone, without being able to relate to themselves. A while ago I saw a graffiti on a tower block asking: Is there a life before death?

### 4. Dead in oblivion in Germany

Some time ago, an acquaintance of mine picked up a Tibetan friend at the airport in Frankfurt. It was the Lama's first visit to the western world. They took the ICE to the south of Germany. One of the first remarks of the Tibetan was: 'So many flash trains here and so many dead people.'

He could “see” all the dead people in Germany who are no longer perceived, who are neither mourned over nor reconciled. He saw the killed Jews of Germany whose souls are still waiting to be taken home, acknowledged as our dead brothers and sisters.

Do you know what a bagel is? No? In many countries of the world this Jewish bread is part of daily life, a common food, just like bread. It seems that only in Germany you will hardly find a bakery selling bagels. Even today the Jewish is still something exotic, particular in Germany. Politicians who are critical of Israeli politics have to be very careful. Things like that can easily turn into a scandal – a scandal where the politician would be stigmatised as an anti-Semite. Of course most Germans would reject being involved with anti-Semitism in any form.

Being able to buy bagels in German bakeries would be a sign of the Germans acknowledging that they killed their brothers and sisters. It could be seen as a way of taking the Jewish out of

the gourmet shops and integrating it into our identity. As a part of us difficult to reconcile with. It takes an acknowledgement of this kind to wipe out the guilt.

#### 5. Unperceived guilt creates emotional coldness

There is a subliminal archaic feeling of guilt in Germany, something we paradoxically don't feel. This feeling of guilt seems to nurture a lot of symptoms. To me social narcissism is the most obvious symptom: a culture of living single, a more or less open confession to be incapable of living in relationship. Coolness, being untouchable in every respect seems to be en vogue in the western world. Along with it comes a permanent questioning of our self-esteem and a search for sense in our lives. Another aspect is the under- and overestimation of the self.

In my psychotherapeutic practice I often work with couples who, despite all resistance, try to relate to each other. In case of conflict, mutual accusation is a common way of trying to re-establish harmony. Of course this doesn't work. Guilt and feelings of guilt remain unresolved.

Hardly anyone is able to deal with guilt. Most of us tend to believe they are not guilty or that guilt as a value doesn't really exist. This way of thinking only works if you stop relating to and meeting with people who are important to you. The culture of being single seems to offer a place where you can avoid feelings of guilt and shame. It appears to be a construct which allows you to avoid the people you feel most connected with.

#### 6. Distraction from what is essential – fear and self-hate

'I'd rather just sit in front of the television and have a booze' is how a woman describes her pangs of love in the internet forum 'separation'. We are in permanent search for distraction – distraction is also what we call leisure time, relaxation or even happiness.

At some point in our life these distractions may fail though. Reasons can vary but I suggest the strategies of distraction mainly fail because we are sick of them. Distraction consumes a lot of energy and a life based on distraction is empty, isn't actually life.

When the strategies fail we generally experience a crisis and coming along with it painful separations of long-term relationships, unemployment, unexpected changes of work or residence. I don't believe these external changes cause the crisis even if it may seem so. In my opinion it is just the other way round. When the strategies of distraction fail all the things which are known to cause painful crisis get started.

When distraction no longer works quite often archaic difficult emotions emerge. Self-hate spreads out and like a cancerous ulcer displaces self-love. Hate can express itself by difficulties in taking care of oneself and one's needs. It can feel like a refusal to be alive. Self-hate is often related to an archaic feeling of guilt and a feeling of shame to perceive guilt. Acknowledging the feeling of guilt makes us vulnerable. And we are afraid to feel ashamed.

#### 7. The Germans' mark of Cain – free, outcast, homeless

In fact everyone is free today to do whatever he or she wants to. This is unique in the history of evolution. In middle Europe almost everyone has got enormous possibilities called individual freedom. But being unaware of political peace and economic prosperity most of us don't appreciate this freedom as a gift.

We often perceive freedom as homelessness, as lack of belonging to something, maybe even as being outcast. Freedom comes with a mark of Cain on the forehead. According to the Old

Testament Cain murdered his brother Abel. God punished him with a mark on the forehead as a reminder of his guilt. Thus Cain was outlawed, outcast.

In Germany millions of people live with a mark of Cain on their foreheads. Jewish people who refuse buying German cars or other German products are evidence of the existence of these marks. A Jewish professor from Columbia University New York who gives classes with me on that topic was accused of betrayal by her students. How could she co-operate with me on that issue!

The Germans aren't the only ones wearing marks of Cain on their foreheads. Everywhere in western countries we can find people whose killed brothers and sisters are forgotten. They represent the "delicate issues" of their countries' politics. In the United States it is about Native Americans, in Turkey about Armenians, it is about Serbs and Croats, about Palestinians and about thousands of killed Iraqis. But our killed brothers and sisters are still alive in the hearts of the survivors.

#### 8. Unprocessed guilt creates polarisation and more violence

We need to stop destruction of life and we need reconciliation between the living and the dead in order to stop the circle. In politics as well as in human relationships we can observe the phenomenon over and over again: polarisation into "good" and "bad", friend and enemy, separation and violent rapprochement, war. Whether we deal with a divorce or with war, in the end it all comes down to economic factors. But we have to consider that the distribution of money and economic resources depends on whether it is sharing with a friend or with an enemy.

Our killed brothers and sisters want to be acknowledged by those alive. Non-acknowledging leads to frustration, aggression and violence. It can even produce terror.

Since September 11 –if not earlier- we are all threatened by global terror. For many people it was the starting point to believe there is no alternative to violent reactions. In their opinion peace has to be forced by militant actions. But more and more people understand how delusive it is to think like that. Maybe there is one thing the brutality of the war in Iraq and in other parts of the world can teach us (even if this may seem terrible considering the huge amount of victims): We are forced to admit that violence just produces more violence.

In the presence of the worldwide globalisation this insight has an existential meaning for all of us. It is about terror and war, about starvation, climate catastrophes, and last not least the emotional alienation and isolation of human beings. An alienation and isolation considered to be a (life-)catastrophe in itself.

#### 9. Reconciliation with the irreconcilable

There is an alternative to the individually as well as collectively cancer-like expanding friend-enemy-polarisation and to violence: Its name is non-violent conflict solving, forgiving and reconciliation with the seemingly irreconcilable, maybe even with the irreconcilable.

I believe there may be a connection between the reluctance to give oneself to love and the fear of losing authenticity, honesty and freedom once you start taking love seriously. Thus love is something for leisure, to pass the time.

One of the most basic conditions precedent to real forgiving is the willingness to stop getting distracted from what is essential. Being authentic and saying what needs to be said - these are the foundations of a process of forgiving and reconciliation. Instead of covering oneself in

fear of being attacked by the enemy we should start listening to each other. We should learn how to acknowledge the point of view and even the interests of our so-called enemies.

It is difficult for us because our hearts have already given up taking themselves seriously. Our hearts need to start taking themselves seriously. Instead of just being empty advertising titles, love and trust need to be considered essential for the process of coping with existential dread. Only if we practice these qualities it will be possible for us to listen to the ones who hurt and injured us.

We are often occupied with passing on the buck between each other. The process of forgiving and reconciliation can't get started if we just want to get rid of guilt. Being authentic includes taking responsibility for one's guilt, acknowledging it. It is then that walls between former "enemies" can be torn down. Suddenly we realize that we could have reacted just like the so-called enemy if we had been in a similar situation.

Maybe love is the most frequently used word in western media. It seems everyone is longing for love. But at the same time we don't take love very seriously. Apart from couples in their first moments of love almost nobody in the western world believes that the power of love is worth to be lived.