

“Mandela Dialogues: Building a Safe Space”

David Hernández Torres

2016 is over, a year of great tension in the world, seeing the further rise of nationalist and xenophobic discourses, deep political changes in the main world powers, a terrible humanitarian crisis in Syria and the signing of a historic peace agreement in Colombia. 2016 has shaken the world and left us with quite a few questions about the concepts of community and unity. The year that begins brings important challenges in terms of security, economics and politics. For those of us who work along the line of memory, human rights and peace construction, it will be an interesting year to evaluate processes of collective memory. We will also have the opportunity to continue trying to understand the complex human dynamics that perpetuate Segregation and generate conflicts at different levels.

Precisely the question about the role of memory work and the creation of safe, inclusive and integrating spaces was the main topic in the second Mandela Dialogues on Memory Work, a process held between June and November 2016, which convened 25 professionals from 10 different nationalities in two countries in post-conflict scenarios: South Africa and Sri Lanka.

The question of how to build a Safe Space requires recognition that in a context of conflict the social relationship dynamics are profoundly disrupted. The fracture of the social fabric results in a tense environment that suggests great challenges in reconciliation and post-conflict processes. How to bring victims and perpetrators together in the same scenario without this entailing a traumatic and re-victimizing process? Furthermore, how to generate processes of positive coexistence for both of them?

The lesson left by the Mandela Dialogues (and various processes of reconciliation in the world) is the need for recognition and responsibility by the various actors involved in the conflict, the existence of a process of moral and material reparation and support along the personal path of overcoming traumas, that aims at the transformation of discourses of hatred and revenge into ones of justice and not repetition. It is not a matter of modifying the narrative of hatred with one of justification, on the contrary, it is a matter of providing arguments that generate rejection of unjust or violent situations and promotion of a community sense, one where people understand the importance of thinking and developing themselves as part of a collective.

Placing the concept of safe space within reconciliation processes is essential. For the interaction and recognition of “the other”, the generation of dialogue, communication and encounter, however, it is necessary to understand the moment and the existing will to generate and promote these spaces. After the Mandela Dialogues experience I can think of three different levels of reconciliation that fit the purpose and function of a Safe Space: coexistence, “convivence” and communion.

Coexistence demands the resignation of a desire for revenge and promotes a coexistence that recognizes “the other” as equal. It is here that we can locate the politics of reconciliation, truth and justice, which prepares the contexts for a nation or society to begin on the path of reparation and recognition of an enemy. Here, a Safe Space will be one which invites the transformation of imaginaries and reckoning with the past from a perspective of non-repetition with an important component of justice.

At a second level, there is reconciliation for “convivence”, a level that requires interaction and joint daily work, as well as a higher levels of will and conscience. Here a Safe Space responds to the need for encounter and dialogue, and for the overcoming of pain and hatred.

Finally, we could highlight a Safe Space within a context of reconciliation by communion, a level at which a fundamental will to re-establish community relations is assumed (this does not mean generating a friendly relationship necessarily, but, closeness based on respect and cooperation).

These three levels of reconciliation are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they coexist and work hand in hand. Safe Spaces must be used to promote particular dialogues and actions that do not impose on others but which invite communities in a creative way to get involved.

The Mandela Dialogues experience left me with different questions about long-term responsibility in processes of ending a conflict; the importance of traditional and restorative justice; the construction of multiple memories; and the heroic values that may be negative in the future. The construction of a Safe Space is not an easy task. In macro terms, it requires will, clarity and less utopias, and it requires guided actions to strengthen the capacity for constructive responses to violent situations with a notion of responsibility and consensus.

The challenges are many: engage and sensitize communities, generate critical awareness and transformative will, promote change-generating memories and intergenerational dialogues that recognize history but avoid the inheritance of hatred and prejudice.

2017 for Colombia, my country, begins with the hope of ending a conflict of more than 50 years, with the possibility of having new discussions and strengthening existing ones, but it is also a year of learning and conscious reflection on what the memory that we are building today will mean in the future.

Safe Spaces demand creativity, will and courage.

About the author:

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