

The Reader

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tom Goldsmith
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March 1, 2009

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In the throes of one of the biggest economic crises faced by most of us for the first time, and the high level of distrust this has generated among Americans towards banks and executives and investment brokers and insurance companies and all who risked recklessly but bear little or no responsibility, our subject this morning may not seem particularly urgent. And yet, I think it is.

Quite frankly, I'm in a sort of quandary of how to even present the issue let alone reaching any conclusion on the matter which I know some of you will find quite uncharacteristic of me. My effort this morning is not to forward any persuasive argument but to simply put a complicated moral issue on the table that we...or President Obama or our government needs to deal with soon. I raise the issue as a matter of discussion, not as a call to action.

Even phrasing the issue appropriately is not easy without the help of the confounded German language which does not blink an eye in stringing ten words together to make one compound word a mile long. But at least it zeroes in on something close to precise meaning. The word in this case which would be helpful to us is: *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. There is no word for this in English, thank God, but it comes close to an English idiom meaning (more or less) "coming to terms with the past."

This concept, in essence, is the core theme of the popular movie, *The Reader*, based on the book with the same title by Bernhard Schlink. I was introduced to his short stories just last summer, by far the most powerful collection of stories assembled in one volume that I ever read. A quick summary of *The Reader* for those of you who have somehow missed it or are not Kate Winslet fans for some god-forsaken reason, opens with a torrid affair between a fifteen-year-old boy named Michael Berg and a woman more than twice his age named Hanna Schmitz. Part of the seduction ritual which has something in it for each of them includes Michael reading to Hanna during their encounters, and as he discover later while most of us conclude pretty early on, Hanna is illiterate. Hanna has plenty of intellectual curiosity but never had the good fortune of learning to read.

The affair ends after an intense summer and we next see Michael as a young law student in 1963 attending a postwar nazi trial. Quite unexpectedly Hanna is one of the defendants and he learns the horrible truth of what she did during the war. She was a prison guard at a concentration camp. In her role of moving Jewish women from one concentration camp to another, in this case from Auschwitz to Cracow, they had to stop and spend a night along the way. The prisoners were sheltered in a church which was locked overnight. The prison guards spent the night in the rectory next door. During the night when the bombs fell, the church caught fire and the Jewish mothers and daughters who were prisoners screamed in horror, screamed

for help, and threw themselves at the door. They burned to death as none of the guards opened the door during the fire. The human capacity for evil is not the point of the book alone. Although one cannot help but wonder the depth of our seemingly unlimited capacity to inflict brutality on another human being, the needless death of these women serve merely as an example of all the incomprehensible horror unleashed by an entire generation of Germans who were ostensibly rational people but still either participated in the horrors or permitted it to happen during the reign of the Third Reich.

Michael Berg, who represents the young generation of Germans with no complicit guilt for the atrocities other than by association with his parents' generation, must come to terms with the past himself. On a personal level, he reflects back on his romance with a woman whose past was directly tied to the unimaginable horrors of the Hitler years. He once made love to this woman, as he recalls later, with a passion as though nothing else mattered. Now suddenly what was beautiful is simply shattered in hindsight because it concealed dark truths.

In a macro-sense, the theme of *The Reader* asks more profoundly: What should we do with the knowledge of horror? In one sense it remains a question for an individual who must figure out (as in Michael's case) how you love somebody after you discover he or she has committed terrible deeds. Does that mean your love is invalidated? But more unnerving is the question posed by Germany's post-genocidal society: How do you live with the sins of the past? As a young German you feel entirely innocent of any transgressions, and yet the crimes of your family just a generation older consumes you with shame and even guilt.

Bernhard Schlink is in reality a law professor who also writes brilliantly on this sensitive topic. In *The Reader* his character Michael Berg ruminates: "Parental expectations, from which every generation must free itself, were nullified by the fact that these parents had failed to measure up during the Third Reich, or after it ended. How could those who committed nazi crimes or watched them happen or looked the other away while they were happening or tolerated the criminals among them after 1945 or even accepted them – how could they have anything to say to their children? But on the other hand, the nazi past was even an issue for children who couldn't accuse their parents of anything, or didn't want to. For them, coming to grips with the nazi past was not merely the form taken by a generational conflict, it was the issue itself...collective guilt was for my generation of students a lived reality...it filled us with shame even if we could point to the guilty parties. Coming to grips with our parents' guilt took a great deal of energy."

With that said, I now turn to the atrocities of our generation committed in the Bush administration. A week ago last Friday, Rep. John Conyers, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, announced he wanted to set up a commission to look into whether the Bush administration broke the law by taking the nation to war against Iraq and instituting aggressive anti-terror initiatives. House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi contends we do not have the right to ignore those who violated the law, and by that I

mean she assumes a violation against the laws of humanity. President Obama said he did not believe anyone is above the law but that we need to look forward as opposed to looking backwards.

Most Americans – and let’s be honest – this probably includes most of us here this morning, firmly believe there is nothing the United States or its political leadership could possibly do that could equate with crimes of the Third Reich. Author John Nolan once quipped, “The nazis are our “gold standard of evil.” But the truth is we can equate the crimes and they have been identified.

Benjamin Ferencz, a former chief prosecutor of the Nuremberg Trials, now 87 years of age and a leading expert on international law and war crimes, asserts that an unprovoked or aggressive war is the highest crime against humanity. It was the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 that made possible the horrors at Abu Ghraib, the destruction of Fallouja and Ramadi, the tens of thousands of Iraqi deaths, civilian massacres like Haditha, and on and on.

Furthermore, Justice Anthony Kennedy’s opinion for the Supreme Court suggests that Bush’s attempt to ignore the Geneva Convention in his approved treatment of terror suspects may leave him open to prosecution for war crimes. The Court rejected Bush’s attempt to ignore the ban on “cruel treatment and torture and outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment.”

There is much American sentiment, perhaps expressed most forcibly by our president, to just move on; we’re fighting two wars, we’re in so much economic distress, virtually drowning in debt...let’s just look forward. Michael Berg asks: “What should our second generation have done, what should it do with the knowledge of the horrors of the extermination of the Jews? We should not believe we can comprehend the incomprehensible, we may not compare the incomparable, we may not inquire because to inquire is to make the horrors an object of discussion, even if the horrors themselves are not questioned, instead of accepting them as something in the face of which we can only fall silent in revulsion, shame, and guilt. Should we only fall silent in revulsion, shame, and guilt? To what purpose? It was not that I had lost my eagerness to explore and cast light on things which had filled the seminar, once the trial got under way. But that some few would be convicted and punished while we of the second generation were silenced by revulsion, shame, and guilt – was that all there was to it now?”

In Obama’s first press conference he was asked about establishing a truth commission on torture. The reference was less a parallel with the Third Reich as it was reminiscent of the truth commissions established in South Africa dealing with the horrific era of Apartheid. But the same question permeates every atrocity, namely what is the proper role to be assumed by the next generation in the aftermath of such grotesque brutality? How do we live with the sins of the past?

What is the best moral response to the calls asking to study the Bush administration's campaign against terror? Interrogation techniques that the United States had long condemned as torture, secret prisons beyond the reach of American law, and eavesdropping on American soil without court warrants are among the charges on the top of the list.

"What is law?" asks Michael Berg. "Is it what is on the books, or what is actually enacted and obeyed in a society? Or is law what must be enacted and obeyed, whether or not it is on the books, if things are to go right?"

Thus far, our country has not taken any steps to investigate the torture of innocent Muslims, or even just to step back in an effort to see the complete picture of our extreme behavior and actions. Approximately 100 terrorism suspects have died in American custody. What concerns me is the sense of American exceptionalism, that once again we make the claim that international law and principles simply do not apply to the United States.

I am also concerned that should an investigation into the Bush policies take place, it will be viewed simply as the criminalization of policy differences. In this fragile time of trying to bring divergent political views under one umbrella for the greater good of the nation, would not a war crimes tribunal completely vanquish all good-faith efforts to work in a bipartisan fashion?

My real question this morning could not be more simply stated: what should we do with the knowledge of horror? We are that generation that either supported the use of torture or looked the other way. Every regime can rationalize its use of torture and the dehumanization of the victims. But at the same time, don't we know which laws need to be obeyed if things are to go right.

When our current fifteen year olds continue their education and learn of the abuses perpetrated in the name of fighting terrorism, will they feel shame and guilt for what we not only permitted but ignored in its aftermath?

One of the concluding messages in *The Reader* deals with the complexity of history, intertwining the past with the present. Ideally, history means building bridges between the past and present, observing both banks of the river, taking an active part on both sides. And so I am probably more inclined to investigate the sins of the Bush administration but not as a congressional investigation which will only exacerbate political differences. We have the model already of a bipartisan 9/11 commission which might work in this instance. And don't forget that in the South African Truth Tribunal, immunity was given to officials who testified truthfully. It's a matter that deals less with vengeance and vindictiveness than preventing atrocities from being swept away as though they never happened. The atrocities are real; we violated basic human decency. It is a part of our legacy. How do we proceed?

It's tricky to look back in time when our current president wants to carry the momentum of looking forward. But I am only one generation away from my parents who as Holocaust survivors have taught me that life must go on, we must always be forward looking, but to do so without acknowledging the devastating events of history is perilous and dishonest. We have to observe both banks of the river of time: The present and its history.

What should we as Americans in the year 2009 with a new administration and new zeal for acting in good faith with the global community...what should we do with the sins of the past? What do we tell our children?

We may not be able to just put the torture behind us, but columnist Nicholas Kristof has at least begun to suggest some positive ideas to restore our own dignity and status with the rest of the world. With Guantanamo closing and returning the base to Cuba not realistic, imagine turning the defunct prison and hell-hole into a research center for tropical diseases. In Latin America and the Caribbean, there are still more than half-a-million cases annually of dengue fever, 50,000 new cases of leprosy, and more than 700,000 cases of elephantiasis. An international center on Guantanamo could become a symbol of United States cooperation in the region.

History, guilt, shame, confession, responsibility...restoration, growth, humanity, love, forgiveness. These are such strong human emotions and powerful religious ideas. There is no American exceptionalism just as there was no German exceptionalism. There is no justification ever for crimes against humanity. The guilt will always follow and the judgments deservedly harsh.

What should we do with the knowledge of horror? Rather than forget the history which we are warned destined us to repeat it, we can confront the past without distracting us from the urgent issues of today. Perhaps we must confront the past, and deal with the sins of our generation, for the sake of our ourselves and to lighten the burden for the generations to follow.