



**Sehdev
Kumar**



Dr. Sehdev Kumar, Professor Emeritus, lectures in the School of Continuing Studies at the University of Toronto. Author of recently published, 'Matters of Life & Death: Reflections on Bioethics, Law and the Human Destiny', his forthcoming book is entitled '7000 Million Degrees of Freedom'.

**Email: sehdev.kumar@utoronto.ca
www.sehdevkumar.com**

“

November 11 is celebrated as The Remembrance Day; it is the day in 1918 on which the most brutal war in the human history, had finally come to end after four years of barbaric savagery that had killed millions of men, including more than 173,000 soldiers from India, who had been enlisted to fight for the British Empire.

I think, sometimes far more importantly than remembering is to forget; for the sake of life to go on, there should be a Day to Forget and Forgive.

What good is history? I wonder. I sometimes think that history teaches us the importance of forgetting. It tells us what may be remembered; but more importantly, what must be forgotten.

Garcia Lorca was a legendary poet; in 1936, during the Spanish Civil War, he was summarily executed by anti-communist death squads. His books were burnt, and no one knew where his body was

buried. Over the decades, however, Lorca's poems have found an abiding place in the hearts of millions of people all over the world.

In the brutal Spanish Civil War, an estimated 500,000 people died, with both sides committing gruesome brutalities. In 2008, a Spanish judge, Baltasar Garzón, opened the first formal probe into murder and repression during country's fascist era by ordering the immediate exhumation of 19 mass graves, including one that was believed to contain the remains of poet Lorca.

Stirring the past - revisiting it, remembering it, acknowledging it, re-creating it - is never easy, whether the past relates to a family, or a community, or a nation? With each body that is exhumed there are a million slithering worms waiting; with each pyre that is turned over, there are a thousand sparks threatening to blaze yet once again.

For the sake of justice, or truth or sheer revenge, or to 'set the record straight', we keep on exhuming the bodies, or turning the ashes over. One day it is the body of the Chilean

WHAT GOOD IS HISTORY?

president Salvador Allende exhumed to determine whether he committed suicide on September 11, 1973 as the military coup raged on, or if he was murdered. On another day it is another body deep in some forest far off.

In our globalized world, lies, half-lies or half-truths, historical evasions and national grand-standing are now increasingly coming under public gaze. For over fifty years, for instance, all successive governments in Poland had persistently echoed the lies of their masters in Moscow about the 1940 massacre at Katyn in Poland where over 26,000 Polish officers were executed by the Soviets. The truth was finally established only in 1992, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when secret documents were delivered to former president Lech Walesa by the Russians that proved conclusively that Stalin had ordered the execution.

The impact of this acknowledgement on Poland was enormous. Since the perpetrators had denied their guilt for so long and so persistently, a fierce bitterness had lain like a sword on Polish consciousness. Now, its public confirmation by the perpetrators had somehow made this agony, if not entirely vanish, at least bearable.

Could this be the great healing, or even redemptive, power of acknowledgement?

Yet, even as it was discovering one truth unequivocally, Poland itself was hiding another. In the summer of 1941, in a small town of Jedwabne, 1600 Jews were huddled together in a barn and set on fire. For decades, it was said to have been done by the Nazis. But then it was revealed that the heinous act was



committed not by strangers but by the anti-Semitic townspeople themselves. In a remarkable play, *Our Class*, by Tadeusz Slobodzianek, one sees how a group of men and women, who had grown up together and had studied together in a school, stoop to betrayal and barbarism.

For so long the truth was hidden and distorted, and now, as one character in the play says it, "you can never bury the truth".

Memory is a double-edged sword: nations and individuals can suffer from amnesia, from remembering only little of the past, or even denying it altogether. Or sometimes wallowing in the past, like a corroding addiction, and seeking revenge, passionately fueling the fire of vengeance. Simon Wiesenthal, a survivor of Hitler's death camps, became

the most dogged of Nazi hunters. He insisted that he was seeking 'justice not vengeance'. Yet it was said about Wiesenthal that the sight of SS officers in shackles filled him "with an elation akin to that evoked by divine worship."

And then there are times, when for some the memory of the past is so bitter, that they yearn to forget it and obliterate any reference to it. Those who survived the agony of the Holocaust were, for years, numbed into silence. The victims of the Partition of India, on both sides of the divide, found nothing redeeming in remembering and retelling its horrors.

In recent memory, one country after another - Ireland, Rwanda, Argentine, Chile, South Africa - had to face the meaning of vengeance and justice. "Without memory, there is no healing," Archbishop

Tutu, the Chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, observed. "We remember so we can forgive. Without forgiveness, there is no future."

Through this process, for the first time in human history, South Africa said 'No' to the reprisals and counter-reprisals that have been typical of all human conflicts down to our own times, in Rwanda, former Yugoslavia and Afghanistan. "Forgiveness is not nebulous, unpractical and idealistic," Tutu insisted. "It is thoroughly realistic. It is realpolitik in the long run."

However, the real theatre of war for most of us is the family. A brother is slighted and he walks away from his brother, not to turn back for years, and sometimes ever. Estranged cousins and uncles, spouses and lovers, meet each other at funerals in cold silence. Out of our shallow pride we pretend that we don't need each other, and are self-sufficient unto ourselves.

"What is so special about being a brother?" asks a man in anger. "Just because we came out of the same womb?"

One can find a million reasons for trivializing the human destiny and shatter the fragile bonds that hold us together. But it is only through the courage of embracing each other again, and yet again, that we can hope to discover who we are and what we might become.

Those who exhume the dead bodies, or turn the ashes over in a funeral pyre, may find some evidence of a tormented history. But ultimately one must turn to the living, with all their frailties and one's own, for any solace of the soul.