

Lessons Learned

By Norman “Nourollah” Gabay

English Translation by Payman Akhlaghi

نسخه فارسی این مقاله را در فایل همراه ملاحظه کنید.

The greatest misery is to know not the cause of the misery.

Human beings have a fundamental problem—that we don’t always learn from the past, and we don’t act in time to understand and remove the cause of an issue so that it won’t happen again. Thus, we perpetuate our mistakes in various forms, and we put ourselves, generation after generation, through past and tried failures. As a poet wrote,

**One who missed the lessons of Time,
He can learn from no other teacher.**

Sadly, family elders have seldom shared their experience and the reasons behind past troubles with the following generations. Thence, failures have continued to recur until the day when people may be alarmed by “the death of the other”, like the miners who learn of air contamination when the little canary which they’ve taken along passes out in its cage. Let’s hope that such people will find a chance to escape; otherwise, they may perish like the many miners who’re lost tragically every year.

Take a look around the world. Think of the countless innocent lives, who are murdered, captured or turned into refugees on a daily basis. They resemble those poor little birds who’re forced into the poisonous mines. Their lives are sacrificed to let the world know that “the air is polluted!”—with the deadly poison of religious and sectarian hatred. No individual or group is exempt from this fate, for we all must breathe of the same air.

Those nations and governments who one way or another approve of oppressions and cruelties do not realize that themselves are next to be sacrificed; because the cancer of religious hatred can’t tell between the friend and the foe as it spreads throughout the body of the society. Look at Syria, Iraq, Libya or Yemen. See their poor oppressed people. Not long ago, their governments ruled supreme and stirred sedition, unaware of the poet **Sa’eb Tabrizi**, who wrote,

**Smoke’s atop the fire, but it won’t disgrace the flame, as
The brow won’t replace the eye, though it sits on the top.
Steel and iron both emerge from the crucible:
One’s the king’s sword, the other’s the shoe of an ass.
The thumb and forefinger race for grandeur,
Yet it’s the little finger who earns to bear the ring.
Be patient if the wicked have sat on the top, for
The foam rests on the ocean, the pearl on the floor.**

Gaddafi was evidently an insane man who supported the forces of sedition. Suffice it to say that among his many peculiarities, he carried along on his plane not only his team of beautiful female bodyguards, but also his female camel to drink fresh milk at every whim! Back then, the world watched and laughed at such madness. Today, his poor homeless people are crying tears and burning in the fires set aflame by those very forces of sedition. Yet, those who need it the

most haven't learned the lesson; they haven't understood that arrogance and self-grandeur lead to self-deception—and **self-deception is the key to all miseries**. As a wise man said, "Man's greatest enemy is his ignorance."

**I saw a fire once, aflame at night,
Lain depressed in the ashes, come morning.
I asked, "Oh, fire! What veils and covers you?"
"Alas, it's the ash of grief," sighed he,
"Which my own hands poured upon me."**

Not long ago, such ills as Nazism, Fascism, Anarchism, or Communism, were scattered all around the world. But today, these germs have all emerged at once in the guise of religious and sectarian hatred, amid the baffling scene of a world that snores in a slumber of tolerance! As **Kasravi Tabrizi** said, "People sitting quietly in the dark need no lantern."

Alas, humankind invented religion, but religion didn't make them true humans. As the late poet **Fereydoun Moshiri** wrote in the following excerpt,

**Ever since Cain's hands
Were covered in Abel's blood,
Ever since hatred's bitter poison
Boiled in Adam's children's blood,
Humanity died, even though humans remained.[...]
Among a people patient with such calamity,
They talk of the death of kindness, the death of love;
They speak of the death of humanity.**

They speak of the death of humanity. Where do such enmities stem from? How have they been sustained for so long? And why humankind hasn't learned their lesson yet? Even as the honorable people around the world are trying to assist the misfortunate homeless and refugees, why no one is able to **remove the causes behind the lingering crisis of the homeless refugees?** Why do the oppressed homeless continue to carry with them around the world the contagious virus of hatred, whereas today's compassionate people remain tomorrow's oppressed innocents? Because there has been a terrible power joined with domineering writings called Religion, which has preserved those ills and their causes, and which has gone on preaching that same mentality with no end in sight. Alas, the pain that compels us into silence is far graver than the pain which makes us cry aloud. Take a look around the world.

**The sly wolf pilfers one sheep a day,
While the flock stares him mute.**

Listen to the latest news. Don't be surprised by the rapid growth of the regressors. Because it's as easy to become an extremist as it's tough to give up the dreaded habit. Once religious and sectarian bigotry has entered the stage, reason flees, and everyone rushes to cross the metaphorical river to reach the sea! As the poet **Iraj Mirza** wrote,

**I wonder who taught the town's cleric the secrets
Of hypnosis, that he's been putting everyone to sleep?!**

The great American author **Mark Twain** (1835-1910) famously said, "It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me; it is the parts that I do understand."

We may dare claim that the absolute majority of the followers of religions don't understand the meaning of their scripture and only reiterate the words as if they were chewing some useless gum. Religious opportunists take advantage of such ignorance in the guise of advocating the

religion, as they set eyes on religious profit instead of the religious spirit. Then there's another indifferent group who sings in unison with **Hafez**,

**Drink the wine, my friend, for if you look up close,
The Sheikh, the Mufti, the Guard, and Hafez,
They're all a bunch of sly cheats.**

My friends: Humankind's happiness may be summed up in three terms: to learn from past experiences, to take the most out of today, and to hope for a better tomorrow. Alas, most often we neglect life on three other terms: wasting today, fearing tomorrow, and hating the others. **The only event that no one can learn from is one's own death.** Let us not miss yet another opportunity. Happiness is the distance between one misery to another which is bound to come. Opportunities are not patient with us. If we don't fulfill our duty, if we fail to inform the future generations of the truth, the opportunities will be lost. And if nothing's left of humankind, it'll be as if we never existed.

We'd better speak to our children of the bitter reality and make them sad, than to try and keep them happy by telling them some useless words.

As human beings, we're privileged to be able to learn from the past. That is, if they won't turn into some overdue lessons, like the proverbial panacea that arrived only after the death of Sohrab, the hero of **Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh***—for, the desired outcome of such lessons is to prevent the miseries from happening ever again. To practice “close-kin marriage” is to ignore lessons learned from its often tragic consequences, namely, children with birth-defects: yet another Sohrab dead. Let's remember that the elders of the immigrant Iranian community lived a considerable portion of their lives in the Third World. They should not underestimate their precious, decades-long, twofold experience. They ought to take every chance to inform the coming generation; because a generation unaware of the past cannot build a better future.

To call a country or a people as “third world” or “backward”, that's not a matter of geography. Rather, it's the people and the cultures of those areas that have kept them far and behind from modern science and civilization. **Backward is about the mentality of their regressive classes, not their soil and climate.** Look at the regressors of the world. Their bodies may exist in the 21st century, but their thoughts, judging from their own words, have been frozen in the Stone Age—and yet they still prefer imitation over understanding and being understood. It's the mission of the current generation, parents in particular, to learn the lessons and to draw conclusions from the bitter experiences. They should wipe away the culture of imitation off of their minds and the minds of the next generation, so that the despicable culture of imitation will vanish, and the future generation won't have to suffer the recurrent pains of a poor history. As **Rumi** wrote,

**From a scholar to a follower there's a vast difference;
For one sings like David, while the latter's merely an echo.
The scholar says what stems from a life lived;
The copycat preaches the same old things.
The heretic and the believer speak of God,
But with a fine difference between the two:
That beggar says God for the bread;
The pious mentions God from the soul.**

People come and go. Their worth depends on the marks which they leave behind. Especially today, some unprecedented technological conveniences have become available to us. The elderly can and should record speeches and interviews to communicate with their children,

grandchildren, and even the later generations. They may opt to speak about a variety of topics, from familial or social issues, to economical, political, religious, etc. They may also choose, as this author has done, to preserve their voice and image on a “family YouTube” permanently for future generations. As the modern poetess, **Jaleh Esfahani** wrote in this excerpt,

**Life is the sole stage whereon to display our art.
Everyone sings their song and leaves the scene.
The stage though shall remain.
Happy the tune that people will remember afterwards.**

Having repeated for thousands of years some ambiguous writings, in whatever language they may have been offered, has proved to be of no use. Coming generations should know that “the depression of the minority”, a sad effect of anti-Semitism, **was considered such a typical trait of Jews as if it had come with captions!** They used to punish a Jew if his hands smelled of flowers, accusing him of having picked some flowers. But his hands smelled well because he had been *planting* the flowers.

For instance, early on in the reign of the Great Reza Shah Pahlavi, the king was informed of the poor economic conditions of the country and the high unemployment rate. The king advised that the best way to improve the economy was **construction**, which would benefit many other jobs, as well. Therefore, he ordered to persuade people in every town and city to construct buildings. Among them, he specifically required those who owned land on either side of the former Shah-Reza Avenue, between the 24th of Esfand Square and the Ferdowsi Square, to build on their properties.

The Jews of Tehran seized upon this opportunity, and joined others to build numerous buildings in this area. But a single branch in your hand could appear a large bouquet in the eyes of a jealous competitor. A few blind-hearted bigots caused much trouble for them, then they complained to the king that “the Jews are building the city, and soon enough, they’ll own the whole place!” The wise king became infuriated and replied, “Do you think that they’ll someday put the buildings on their shoulders and leave the town?!” Thus, he acted against their wish and ordered instead to further encourage the Jews in their endeavors.

The Jews were planting trees, while the jealous minds were accusing them of picking flowers. Alas, over the years, those buildings were confiscated, due to the inevitable change and progress of the coming generations. The landowners of the time had not learned their lesson well. A Jew, despite his 2700-year old Persian birth-certificate, was still a stranger among the religious groups—though an Iranian among the foreigners. Because in a regressive culture, a person’s religion comes before their humanness, and their beliefs are placed before their humanity; whereas the 3300-year old Jewish culture has stood on a foundation of justice, freedom, brotherhood, and the love of all humankind.

For the most part, it’s been practically forbidden for Jews to proselytize, while some prejudiced bigots on every corner have continued their one-sided promulgations against us. Whereas, the proof for any claim made by the followers of the three dominant religions, i.e. their holy books, are available to everyone. As such, in every case, we may compare these texts to make objective judgments about any such claims, and let each group freely choose its social affiliations, as the members of any club would choose theirs. Let the future generations deem *humanity* as the identification card of human beings, and not their religion. No human being can approach perfection unless they love their own kind first. The world shall see the calmness of peace only when religious advocates see their own identity only in their humane identity, in what they have in common with other human beings, and teach that understanding to the others.

The ancestors of the minorities, even if they had learned their lessons, even if they knew that whether in joy or grief, they could be blamed on the oppressors' whims, they still didn't have the means, knowledge, or chance to pass that experience on to the coming generations. If the late **Dr. Habib Levy (Lavi)** had not authored his pioneering volume on the history of the Jews of Iran, we would have remained largely ignorant of our own past. Altogether, I am certain that the many troubles rooted in religion will lead us to found an organization akin to the United Nations, say, **The Religions of the United Nations Organization**, aimed at bringing about world peace through resolving inherited animosities and removing inciting texts. As they say, people flourish in times of crises. People of the world will see documented historical crises and catastrophes, and gradually, by the rule of Time, their minds will bear fruit. Once they learn from the hitherto experience of Religion, the currently divisive sermons of the advocates of conflict will yield the opposite of their malicious intent. The world will come to understand that it's not the governments that are in conflict with their own peoples or with other governments; rather, it's the sum of contradicting religions and sects that has made the world unsafe, even within families.

Thus, we may learn from the past and present and conclude that **world peace depends on peace between religions and not only between governments**. As we may see, even within the United Nations it's not the governments but practically the representatives of various religions that are facing one another. The road ahead and out of this quagmire is long and dangerous; and to be traveled safely, humankind needs to cleanse their eyes and see the world as it is, not as the ignorant delusion that's been portrayed in a multitude of languages. Then, we may achieve a realistic interpretation of religion, as well, and understand what the poet **Maleko-Sho'ara Bahar** meant, when he wrote,

“What's this quarrel for between homeland and religion?”

“It's the hustle of the many around a table over a loaf.”

Then, why the world has remained silent to date in the face of displacements, homelessness, and other miseries? Because humankind has yet to learn its lessons from the religious catastrophes of the past. Inherited religious and sectarian enmities have blinded the eyes and deafened the ears, while countless innocent people continue to be stumped and crushed every day by such religious and sectarian hatred and oppression. And no help is in sight to cry out aloud, “Why?!”

As **Mirza Mahmoud Ghani-Zadeh** wrote,

What a feverish bustle is before us!

Or is it the sight of the monster of the night? [...]

Why the world over is silent, as if

It's all ears, pricked, head to the toe?

*Norman “Nourollah” Gabay
September 2015, Los Angeles*

Please feel free to forward and share this essay with the others.

To download free copies of Norman Gabay's essays and other writings
in English and Persian, including his book *An Invitation to Reason*,
Please visit the following website: **www.BabaNouri.com**

Translator's Website: www.ComposerPA.com