

“The one who does not remember history is bound to live through it again”

These words by George Santayana (Jorge Agustín Nicolás Ruiz de Santayana y Borrás), the Spanish American writer, poet and philosopher, are written on a wall in Auschwitz.

Today we celebrate that Auschwitz Concentration Camp was liberated by the Russian Army, exactly 75 year ago. But today we also grieve as we remember the more than a million jews, roma and sinti who were killed, there in Auschwitz, during WWII. Today is International Holocaust Memorial day.

A few years ago, living in Hongkong, and invited to the yearly impressive and solemn act that is organised by the Hongkong Holocaust and Tolerance Centre on this day, I spoke with an old lady, family member of a holocaust survivor, who said: “We have to have this day of remembrance because we have so many reasons not to remember. So many reasons to forget what happened. It is too painful to talk about what happened. But also,” she continued, “many are too ashamed of what happened to talk about it. Because the basic questions on a day like today is: how is it possible that we, as human beings, are able to do this to one another. And how is it possible that this could happen right in front of the eyes of so many people. Who, consciously, decided to either participate themselves in the atrocities, or to look the other way. That is why it could happen. And that is why we have to remember. To look the monster right into its filthy mouth.”

I agree. Without a conscious culture of remembrance we will forget. That must not happen, because we cannot move forward if we have not really faced our past. Our common past. Without a thorough knowledge of the past, we will not understand the present, and without understanding our present we will not be able to imagine, nor create a future.

As you know the fundamental principal of UNESCO, contained in its constitution is: “Since war begins in the minds of men and women, it is in the minds of men and women that the defences of peace must be constructed.”

Therefore we must remember and preserve places that, as witnesses of painful events in the history of humanity, like Auschwitz, like the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Building, like Robben Island in South Africa and the [The Old Bridge Area of the old city of Mostar](#) serve as bulwarks against negationism and force us to draw lessons from the past in order to construct a more peaceful future. They also serve to build bridges between peoples and to help them surmount the traumas of the past. More than ever, and as we face a time of rising extremism, UNESCO is working so that World Heritage traces a new map for peace.

Also the so called Memory of the World, the documents, that help us to remember, like the diary of Anne Frank, are part of our work to build peace in the minds of men and women.

Remembering and facing the past is also important to become deeply aware, as human beings, that the atrocities were not only allowed to happen by people like us, but also committed by people like us.

And that is why it is so important that PM Rutte apologized on behalf of the Dutch Government yesterday during the National Remembrance Day.

The perpetrators do not differ very much, from you and me. That is why these atrocities happened and still happen. Because we , human beings are able to do this to each other. And we human beings, let it happen.

75 Years ago we said: never again, this will never happen again. But it did happen again, in Rwanda, in 1994. And it happens today, in Myanmar.

It happens right now and it happens every time we deny the basic right every human being has by birth, just because she or he is a human being.

The right to humanness, to human dignity.

It happens when we, for some reason, think that we have the power or the right to determine that other human beings do not have the same dignity we have.

That they are not human, or at least, less human than we are.

Taking away human dignity of others, is allowing yourself to do whatever you like with that person, because she or he is not human. Not the same as you.

It happened during the times of slavery, when it was generally accepted that black people were less human than white people.

It happened during the Second World War when Jews and Roma and Sinti and disabled or old people were considered to be less human than the so called Aryans as the Nazis wanted the world to believe.

It happened with the so called Comfort Women who, during the Second World War were used by the Japanese Imperial Army as utensils.

It happened in Rwanda when Hutu's determined Tutsi's are not real human beings, and called them cockroaches.

It happens today as Burmese people say that the Rohingya, the Muslim minority in Myanmar, are not human beings. It happens in refugee camps around the world.

And there are more examples to give.

For some reason it is often minorities, or minority groups, whose humanness is denied in the first place, ----and it will always have far reaching effects.

Facts like these were driving forces behind Eleanor Roosevelt's tireless endeavours to draw the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

She did this as one of the key persons behind the start of the United Nations. This year also 75 year ago.

The United Nations were formed as a response to the atrocity crimes of the Holocaust and the Second World War, with the aim of building a world that is just and peaceful.

The founding of the United Nations 75 years ago was based on the principle that World Peace, should be built on three pillars. Rights and Justice, Economic and Financial Reform to guarantee more equal chances for all people indifferent of the place where one happens to be born, and on the importance of culture, science and knowledge.

When it comes to the first pillar I mentioned, as a world community we created the International Criminal Court and the institutions for Peace, Justice and Rights, that are based in The Hague.

When it comes to Finance and Economics we have set up the Bretton Woods Institutions, like the World Bank and the IMF.

And even though these institutions are far from ideal, and there is a lot of room for improvement, they exist.

When it comes Science, Culture and Knowledge, to the third pillar, we have to recognize that it has been neglected. To a certain extend I can understand this, because it is a far more difficult concept to grasp, and it is much more complicated to set up institutions to value culture, science and knowledge and freedom of the press, than to set up institutions and organizations that organize justice and rights or that aim at guaranteeing economic and financial equality among people and nations.

It is more difficult because this is about values.

My conviction however, is, that as we enter the roaring twenties of our century, we will no longer be able to deny the specific importance of culture, -and broader all that the United Nations Educational , Scientific and Cultural Organisation, stands for, to achieve what we promised our world 75 year ago:

creating a world in which the atrocities of the Holocaust and World War II will never happen again. Therefore we at Unesco aim at creating peace in the minds of men and women by contributing to promote international collaboration in education, sciences, and culture in order to increase universal respect for justice, the rule of law, and human rights along with the fundamental freedom , proclaimed in the United Nations Charter.

My conviction that the third pillar is so essential right now, comes from my own experience, as I lived in Latin America for many years and as I have lived in Hong Kong until rather recently, apart from my personal involvement as the Chair of the national Unesco commission.

I will give you two arguments for my reasoning.

I started this lecture by saying that we often choose not to remember, because it is too painful or too shameful and too difficult to talk about what happened.

I was asked to open a very impressive exhibition in Hongkong in 2017 and that same exhibition again in The Hague in 2018. It consists of art made by Korean artists that gave the Comfort Women, of whom only a few are still alive, a voice. Art can express in images what cannot be said in words. Their art expresses what these women have gone through and, very impressively, has a strong message for the comfort women of our days. Women who are victim of sexual violence as an instrument of war, today. In Rwanda, Congo, Colombia, Bosnia and so many other places.

A message that is made visible, and clear, through art.

The other argument is based on how I experienced in Hongkong the growing power of an already very powerful China.

Living five years in an environment where I experienced the growing influence of China made me aware of how fast and fundamentally our world is changing.

And how little people here in the Netherlands and in Europe in general seem to be aware of that.

China is a country that is rightfully proud of a culture that goes back 5000 years. China is the second world economy and in some calculations it already is the first economy.

Times are changing very rapidly. The nation that was considered the 'leader of the free world' for many years has been the United States and that is why we, here in Europe, always look at the US and stand with our back towards Asia.

I plead for Europe to turn around just a little bit to see what is happening there, in Asia.

And to try to understand Asia, and certainly China, even if we will not agree with policies there. Try to understand, simply because we will have to learn to deal with this part of the world. Simply because the liberal democracies will not for ever be leading the world, even stronger: soon it might be the first time in many centuries, that the leader of the world will not be a so called 'western' nation.

Is that a reason to be scared? No, absolutely not!

But certainly, it is a reason to be prepared.

And how can we prepare ourselves? First and for all by understanding the culture and tradition we are dealing with when we deal with China.

And secondly by, as European countries, and broader, as countries that are based on liberal values, such as human rights, freedom of speech and transparent justice, to collaborate and to determine what the VALUES are, that we together, want to protect in the new era

that is definitely approaching, in which Western values might not be leading the world.

Not an era to be scared of, but to be prepared for.

For me, values that are worth protecting, are values that go with true democracy. True democracy, as was once described as “the measure in which the rights and dignity of minorities are respected.”

Whether they are Jews, Roma or Sinti, whether they are Tutsi's, ethnic or a religious minority, whether they are women or men, lgbti or straight, disabled or able.

All over the world we see people taking to the streets , people who have lost faith in democracy and express anger with their leaders, who do not seem to listen to them, to the challenges they face in their day to day lives. We see it in Hongkong, in Barcelona, Santiago de Chile, in Paris, in Khartoum and in Beirout.

Since war begins in the minds of men and women, it is also in the minds of men and women that peace must be constructed.

75 Years ago, as international community we promised: never again never again holocaust, never again a world war.

By never forgetting we will not let this ever happen again.

We promised.

For me, that means standing tall for values that stand for human dignity, values that are the backbone of true democracy.

But when I look at our Dutch society today, I see that our democracy, and the basic values that make our democracy, are under threat.

That we accept statements and proclamations that we would never accept just a few years ago. That we lift our shoulders indifferently at the most extreme expressions on social media. That we see anti-semitism and racism on the rise. And that we start accepting this as a part of life, as normal.

Therefore it so good that our Prime Minister on National Holocaust Remembrance Day made his apologies on behalf of the Dutch

government and it would be good for Dutch government to consider apologies, also for other dark periods of our common history as Dutch people, like the times of colonial wars and slavery and slavetrade.

On the global level, we are getting used to, and we become indifferent with regard to fake truths and fake news, to treating others, so often minorities, as inferior. Or not even as human beings. I see a world in which looking away is becoming so frighteningly easy again....

It is urgent, as we stand at the beginning of this third decade of our century to be aware that, to create peace in the minds of men and women, we need all the stories and all art and all the culture and all the knowledge, to bring us together as nations, as people and as individuals.

To help us to express the unspeakable.

To find and express what binds us.

Because what binds us most, is that what we all have in common, simply because we are all human beings: our human dignity and therefore our basic human rights.

Thank you.