

## Refusing to transmit the wounds: soul-work

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This past week I saw a programme about the terrible disaster that befell Aberfan virtually 50 years ago today. You may know about the catastrophic collapse of a colliery spoil tip in that Welsh village in October 1966, which rolled down the hillside in the form of slurry and engulfed a school and many houses, killing 116 children and 28 adults.

Part of the footage from the programme that struck me was a scene of desperate mothers forming a vast line passing bricks and rubble one from the other. They were trying to remove material in order to reach those who had been buried. It looked like an immediate, desperate response though apparently it turned out that these anguished efforts to clear the debris in fact hampered the work of the trained rescue teams.

In the way in which thoughts sometimes can, as I replayed the image in my mind of that human chain passing on the debris, what came to mind was a different kind of 'passing on', one to another. This time not as a way of dispersing material but as a way in which we – as often conflicted and sometimes hurting humans - *unhelpfully* pass on to one another things that are harmful when we should not.

I'd like to say more in a moment, after first these words which I have always prized, from Isaac Pennington in 1667: "Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another; but praying one for another, and helping one another up with a tender hand."

Isaac Pennington was one of the early members of the Religious Society of Friends, the Quakers, and these words of his remain prized by modern day Friends. I think you can see why.

The image of those women forming a long line in order to pass bricks and debris along, one from another, brought to my mind – as I say - another form of what we receive from one person and sometimes unconsciously pass on to others, and that is the hurt, the injuries, the bruises we receive in this short adventure of life.

Thoughtful people are likely at some stage to wonder – to wonder seriously - at the waves of hurt and horror which humans seem so often to pass on to one another, to transmit in some great, bleak linear process. Is there anyone here I wonder who has never known themselves to dump on to an innocent party some anger or annoyance or injury or wound that had its root somewhere else entirely?

Negative things, which it is in the nature of humans to pass on in the way I have described, sometimes make their way from one group or class to another: colonialists to the colonised; White to Black, men to women, adults to children, straight majorities to sexual minorities.

Cycles of violence and hurt. They are writ large in our human history. There is a chilling economy to these things, seemingly as unfathomable and uncontrollable as is the financial economy. The world suffers, as we know; and human relations appear too often to be the stage on which much of this suffering is passed on and played out - untransformed, unredeemed; handed on carelessly, thoughtlessly, sometimes in its extreme form, sadistically.

I'd be amazed if most of us here cannot remember being on the receiving end at some time or other of this kind of 'third party' violence. And there is little doubt we've done it to others, been the 'passer-on': it is an uncomfortable thing to face in oneself; no wonder we often edit it out.

Those who have sustained wounds in formative years run the risk by onward transmission of inflicting those hurts on others. To have been humiliated may lead us to humiliate others – blatantly or subtly.

Kicking the dog because of some annoyance belonging elsewhere can be the stuff of comic cartoon material (though not for the dog). It illustrates a formula of sorts – certainly a mechanism – which infects much of human society and waters the seeds of human violence. We may not all be gardeners but we all sow seeds in our engagement with others and the world, seeds that are life-bearing, seeds that are not.

I wonder if this rings any bells in your own personal biography. Perhaps you are aware – as I am in my make-up and life – of past injuries and hurts (we should call them traumas I think) which have not been addressed or tenderly healed and which remain in the shadows. We might think we have them sorted, or if not sorted safely corralled and managed – quarantined like some computer virus in a protected corner of our hard drive. We are, after all, grown-ups: sensible and mature. We have achieved things, been places. *We are sorted.*

Welcome then to the practice of our evasions and self-deceptions. Maybe that sounds just a little harsh, for it suggests something wilful and calculated. Better perhaps is to simply claim that we are hugely susceptible to what we experience – not only in those vulnerable and formative periods of childhood and adolescence *but throughout our lives.* And to an extent that would shock us were we to realise it, we play our part in transmitting the harmful, unredeemed, untended, unhealed aspects of these injuries to others. Without awareness and attention, we can easily become part of the cycle.

What this understanding takes us to is a new kind of work – that of refusing to be part of such a chain. As we begin to map these things it is possible to move into an awareness of the hurts and harms we have received from others and to tenderly address them. This is a kind of soul-work. It is hugely important.

It seems to me that many Christians and church people have no idea of this, and instead go down a maladaptive route in which their own hurt is spiritualised into some distorted piety and is unconsciously transmitted as something harmful to those around them. This partly explains why churches can sometimes be such unwell and harmful communities. To break these cycles is to practice non-violence. We begin to attend more deeply to our wounds, and by tending to them and exposing them to the light we can find our engagement with other wounded people becomes a beautiful thing, healing and helpful.

You may be wondering what any of this has anything to do with Bible Sunday. I'd better give you a straight answer: nothing. I can't see the point of 'celebrating'

in some general and undifferentiated way a collection of texts which are a stumbling block for so many people. We must of course acknowledge that it is what is called a foundational document. It gives Christians their identity. To be a Christian means we have to enter into some primary and continuing conversation with what's in the Bible. Yet, as you know, it is also a record of violence and horror; of people and peoples passing on to one another harms and hurts. As has been said here many times, the Bible is to be engaged with intelligently and critically, interrogated by our minds and our experiences, made sense of by reference to the circumstances and times and context of its writing – and interpreted by reference to our own day. The job is not to celebrate it, but to engage with it.

The Jesus of the Gospels gives clues about the nature of God. And in this morning's reading from Luke we find him in the synagogue reading from the prophet Isaiah: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

With that in mind let us return to the claim that so often in human relations the hurts of one are simply passed on to others, and passed on again. That may be in the form of overt violence but far more often it takes muted forms: ranging from put-downs, criticism, the many ways in which we can devalue or dehumanise those we engage with. We may sincerely lament the evil in the world and wonder what we can do about it. The answer is in our own hands: to pay serious attention to our own wounds and to attend to healing them; to examine the ways in which we may thoughtlessly pass on to others bad things and to stop doing so, by transforming those impulses; and to make our own the words of Isaac Pennington and countless women and men who have also reached the same insight: *"Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another; but praying one for another, and helping one another up with a tender hand."*

Hugh Valentine