Loss, Healing and Struggle

Ten years ago, the Indian writer Kiran Desai published a novel called The Inheritance of Loss, about the long-lived wounds and suffering connected with colonialism and globalization.

Such topics are normal territory for a novelist or poet. But what do they have to do with the World Rainforest Movement? What with never-ending pressures to respond to new outrages, the always-unique lived experience of loss is a topic that forest activists may not always dwell on very much.

Yet, as every activist knows, irrevocable pain is everywhere among those trying to defend their lives and commons from logging, extraction schemes, dam projects, toxic dumps and the like. Is it perhaps something to be concerned about when those of us who live personal lives largely outside that experience fail to give it its proper due?

The Dream of Automatic Progress

We know already, for example, the blindnesses that result when people succumb to a certain dream of automatic progress – a dream common among ruling elites the world over.

According to this dream, the future always takes care of the past. Colonial conquest and violence against living systems are eventually redeemed by capital accumulation. In the end, everybody will be OK. Sorrows will be mended by progress. What has been lost will be made good by development. People separated from their non-human fellows will someday be the better for it. Nature will find a way to recover. Even seemingly unbearable trauma will become bearable when its victims find out that the alternative would be still more horrendous. The climate crisis itself will turn out to be a mere blip smoothed out by intelligent management.

In this dream, the reality of loss, and of its causes, almost disappear. Even the losses of the future are, as it were, redeemed in advance. Ask any development expert or Minister of Industry, for example, what he or she thinks about the devastation wrought by industrial pulpwood plantations in countries such as Indonesia, South Africa and Brazil, as documented in WRM's 1996 book Pulping the South. The response will almost certainly be a show of puzzlement about why anyone would want to rake over that ancient history. After all, that was 20 years ago! Surely by now all sorts of new sustainable practices, corporate social responsibility programmes, “learning by doing” and the like will have set extraction of paper pulp on a secure course toward being more environmentally sensitive and socially benign.

In this way, the dream hides the reality that, two decades after Pulping the South, the plantation industry just goes on grabbing ever larger life spaces in Amazonia, equatorial Africa, the Mekong region, and the southeast Asian archipelagoes. According to the FAO, Asia and the Pacific are today occupied by 1.2 million square km of "planted forest" and Africa, the Caribbean, Central and South America by more than a quarter as much, with pine and eucalyptus making up the bulk of total plantation area.

The dream also conceals the persistence of another trend identified in Pulping the South: that, as the paper industry's land empire has kept expanding, so has its processing capacity, the size of its machines, the production/worker ratio, and global demand. Thus by the end of 2015, the capacity of the average new-built global pulp mill was two million tonnes, up from 750,000 tonnes in 1995. And with more frenetic production has come a near-doubling in market pulp demand since 1996. The 1990s vision of a paperless corporate world, once so widespread, is now forgotten. Yet lavish industry tax breaks and special state permits and licenses continue to roll in, just as they did in 1996, financing yet more toxic contamination and livelihood destruction: more and more unbearable loss.

Emptying out the Space of Loss

We social activists may think that we're immune from being taken in by the romance of automatic progress that plays such a big part in the development expert's incapacity for political analysis. We know that new pain and struggle always follows capital's efforts to solve its problems and consolidate its position – and also that creative resistance springs up in multiple forms, just as the notoriously devastated forests of the early years of European forays into Asia found ways to come back to life, although in altered configurations.

But are there perhaps other ways that we fail to grasp the significance of loss – ways that are undermining our work?

One gap in understanding opens up when we allow ourselves to treat stories of suffering or healing as "proto-political", or to bracket the space and time in which people experience loss as politically empty. Our job, we tell ourselves, is to get to work erasing pain and suffering, not to wallow in it. Surely we all know how bad things are. It's enough to understand suffering in the abstract. Why dwell on endless horror stories when we need to take comprehensive action on a higher, more political level? “Don't mourn, organize!” goes the well-known movement slogan.

So despite our best intentions, we end up putting in parentheses the concrete experiences of those who must find their own refuges, start their lives again from scratch, get incarcerated, tortured or assassinated, or otherwise withstand a series of developmentalist storms in a space and time seemingly separate from the privileged space and time of politics. We sketch out political maps of the situation, analyze life-threatening conditions, identify key institutions and other players, delineate legal circumstances and actions that need to be carried out. We deploy pet concepts like permaculture, organic food production, phyto-remediation, urban agriculture and re-commoning, despite a nagging feeling that such words may be wrongly taking possession of the life-experience of those we're talking to. Sometimes, we listen more to those accustomed to planning than those being made to suffer. And no doubt this is made easier when we find ourselves, biophysically speaking, located in the same teleconnected landscapes of death as do the planners, feeding on the same intoxicated food chain.

A Closer Kind of Attention

What if a different kind of attention to loss is needed? What if it is necessary to undertake a different kind of listening to the culturally-diverse idioms in which loss is expressed? Perhaps a more human-eye-level perspective is needed to avoid being lured into treating the experience of loss as an instrument for yet another imperial project.

Healing cannot happen in the abstract space of dreams, without confronting and working through particular senses of irrevocable loss. Nor can ordinary people's survival struggles be supported if they

are viewed from above or outside, downgraded as unorganized and introverted, and treated as somehow unworthy of the name of resistance. Nor can anyone understand the different rhythms and spaces of change in crisis that political organization requires without trying to learn from concrete experiences of suffering. Without these efforts, solidarity among the various “we”s and “I”s of social movements can come to nothing more than the proverbial togetherness of potatoes in a sack.

In reality, the political circumstances in which suffering or healing take place are both collective and intimately personal. A grasp of both aspects is needed for any circuitry of resistance and solidarity capable of contending with the influence of dominant institutions. This understanding has nothing to do with the fashionable histrionics of abstract “empathy”. What it is about, rather, is the recognition of what is too often not recognized – concrete experiences of irreparable loss – and its better incorporation into the rest of what we think of as politics.

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Further Reading

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