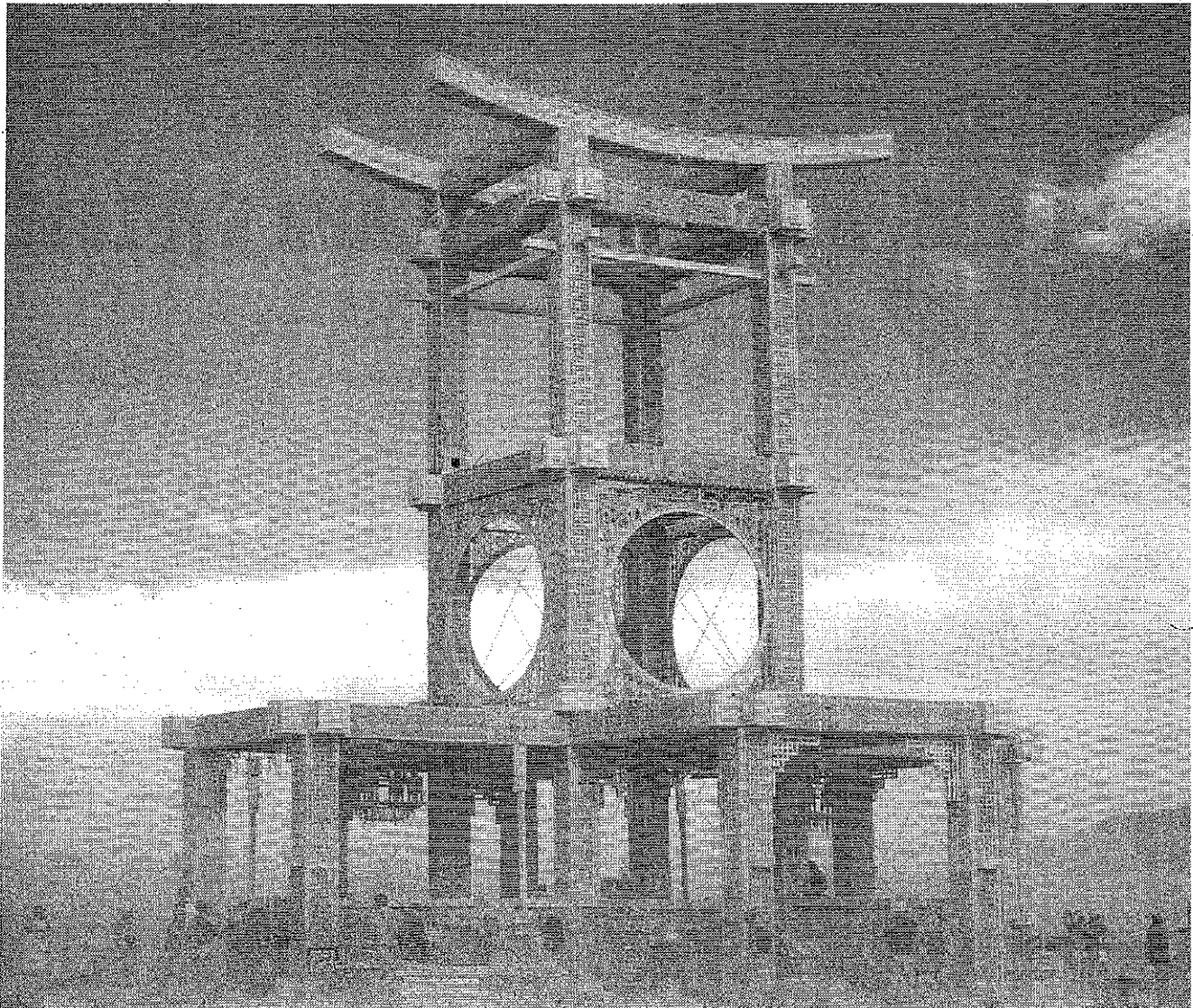


OPINION

The Okanagan Sunday, January 3, 2010



FORGIVENESS

Practice makes perfect

Temple of
Forgiveness at
the Burning
Man Festival in
Nevada.

"Forgiveness is the fragrance that the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it." — Mark Twain

I could write a list of goals for every aspect of my life. I could eat better, get more exercise, spend more prudently, be kinder and find more compassion. Easy, eh?

OK, not really.

This last category of compassion intrigues me a great deal because compassion is much more challenging than it appears. I have sat in churches looking for it. I have even given talks on the subject.

I have donated my time and energies to non-profit organizations.

Heck, I think I even cry at all the right times in movies, but I don't feel that I am yet a compassionate person.

If I cannot find more compassion in my life, then I wonder if I can make a difference. We all keep up with the news and try not to absorb its full import, but let's state the obvious: the world is in deep trouble, not just economically, not just environmentally, but psychologically.

In the words written here, I have expressed a kind of stress or pain that crosses the boundaries of generations and time. My father and mother were joyous and deeply troubled people. My grandmother allowed bitterness and anger to crush her hopes. The country of my origin, Korea, has suffered greatly under decades of occupation.

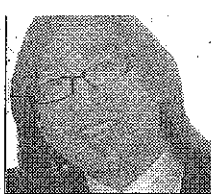
I know this sounds odd, but I feel this strange generational pain as a numbness, an angst, a sadness, not about our potential as humans beings to achieve our goals, but our inability to confront the biggest obstacle of all: our inability to forgive ourselves.

If we cannot forgive ourselves, then compassion becomes impossible.

Try on this thought if you can: if we can forgive ourselves, then the world can change, then we can collectively break the cycle of pain that locks us into generations of war, violence and vengeance.

Forgiveness makes compassion possible. With compassion will come a new life on this planet.

At Ground Zero in New York, a priest wants to build a garden of compassion like the one under construction in Beirut. A good idea for some, a terrible idea for oth-



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ers. We all know that forgiveness heals, but that doesn't mean it can be forced.

A friend is writing an important study about the life cycle of monuments. She describes how and why we build monuments, how they represent a community's highest ideals and how they evolve over time.

She describes how a monument like the one built to commemorate the sacrifices of the Vietnam War helped America forgive its soldiers and itself. This work, as you can imagine, is extremely taxing because it makes you think about yourself, your influences, your world, your pain.

I still remember the sunrise ceremony hosted by the Metepenagiag people of the Mi'kmaq First Nation. We sat on the banks of the Miramichi in New Brunswick.

On June 11, 2008, our prime minister apologized for the wrongs committed in residential schools.

"The treatment of children in Indian residential schools is a sad chapter in our history," he said. "Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country."

Two aboriginal women at our sunrise ceremony sobbed. I feel that this day was an important step in healing for not just aboriginal people but this nation. When I think of compassion, I think of falling into the arms of these women. They held me, just as much as I held them.

In my own journey, I must start with the things that I cannot forgive about myself. When I harm others, when I exclude, when I disrespect difference, when I do not keep my word — when I do these things I damage others. I dishonour my ancestors, my planet and myself.

If I cannot forgive myself, if I cannot move beyond the obstacles in my heart, I will always be intolerant of others and myself. This is what I must NOT do: continue

the cycle of pain and suffering. In the space between living and dreaming my ancestors expect me to break this cycle.

My mentors tell me that to grow as a human being, to appreciate all that life has to offer, is not about reaching the pinnacle of material, intellectual, or physical success. Life is not about winning, scoring the biggest toys, or looking down from the top. Life is about love, my mentors say, but sometimes, I just don't get it.

Love is the subject of every pop song, countless clichés and every other trinket in your favourite store, but that does not mean that love is accessible. I want to open my heart, but where is the door?

How does one forgive oneself? When my children ask me how to get good at anything I always respond with the same exhortation: practice.

So I guess I will practise self-forgiveness.

I forgive myself for not taking better care of my dying mother. I forgive myself for giving her cancer, even though I know this is impossible. I forgive myself for being unable to help my father, so lost was I in anger and denial and immaturity. I forgive myself for being so selfish, so focused on the wrong things, so average. I forgive myself for not exceeding expectations, for squandering my insights, for not loving myself and others fully, for holding onto anger and resentment. I forgive myself for being vengeful.

I don't know if I have the courage to look in the mirror and say these words: I forgive you.

Practising self-forgiveness feels odd, incredibly self-centred and a little bit stupid. But by trying, there is only one thing we have to lose: pain.

I don't know if we can change the world by forgiving ourselves. But we have all seen what happens to people who hold onto their pain. We have watched souls corrode. We have seen what happens to people who believe they don't deserve happiness.

But how can we reach our potential for peace and prosperity, if we continue to live in anger and vengeance? Let's not forget that in the last decade we have also seen forgiveness become a possibility in South Africa, Ireland, Germany and Canada.

Your heart is the world's heart.

Do you think the world can change, if our hearts do?

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