

THE GARDEN OF FORGIVENESS

By Alexandra Asseily¹

“Forgiveness is an expression of tolerance and love. It is the subordination of hatred and vengeance. Forgiveness is, above all, a human necessity and a means to live. Without forgiveness friendships end, love terminates, and eventually the beauty of life ceases to refine our senses. Without forgiveness no one will ever learn from a mistake or bad luck but will be blinded by retaliation and killed by pride.”

(Lebanese Student, May 1998)

THE VISION

A garden in which people can gather strength and inspiration, a place for calm and gentle reflection. A garden for individual introspection, a sanctuary accessible to all. An edifying place, archetypal of Lebanon’s flora, with flowing water, suitably covered by sun and shade, which nurtures sentiments of peace, joy and healing.

THE CONCEPT

The concept of forgiveness is an essential key to reconstruction and rehabilitation. Without it, the impressive projects underway may well be eclipsed by the same forces which razed their predecessors. Friends can live in the same shack and remain friends but enemies, embittered by the feelings of enmity and revenge, cannot share even a palace in the hope of becoming friends.

WHY FORGIVENESS?

Of all the approaches sought to break the age-old cycle of violence and counter-violence so endemic to Lebanon (and in particular to this very spot) none is more potent than forgiveness. Forgiveness is, in its essence, a spiritual force with boundless therapeutic virtues. It is upheld by all the great religions and countless philosophers as the basis for goodness and well-being. Education, economic prosperity, social welfare and all efforts at integration do much to quell fears and clear misconceptions between different and segregated communities. They nonetheless need to be consolidated by forgiveness, which transcends painful memories and grievances and redirects this energy into genuine venues for peaceful and creative coexistence.

The path to forgiveness is an internal journey. It can be one of the hardest things to do and cannot be imposed. It must be undertaken by the individual. Each and every person has his or her unique relationship with their memories and ancestry. Hoarding bitter sentiments leads to the destruction of the individual and society.

Coming to terms with the cruelties of war is compounded by the distractions of a modern city. Such diversions drain our attention span and disengage us from contemplation. The path to forgiveness may shelter us from the paranoia of seeking refuge in a contrived past, just as it may ward off the insecurities and enticements of the present. The Garden of Forgiveness, by being both serene and regenerative, can encourage reflection; it can serve as an antidote to fear and a redemptive channel for rejuvenation and conviviality.

¹ (The above ‘Vision’ of the Garden of Forgiveness, was written in July 1998 by Alexandra Asseily, following a personal vision concerning the theme, in August 1997)

THE PROPOSED SITE IN BEIRUT

The site envisioned for this Garden -- as a place to nurture and encourage forgiveness -- is ideal. Ensnared between archaeological relics and religious edifices of a more recent communal heritage, the Garden will come to symbolise a unique cultural and historical abundance particular to Lebanon but extending to include humanity as a whole. It will nourish the subjectivity of every being and community. Otherwise the memory of war, like the harrowing events themselves, may well be trivialised, forgotten and buried and hence, prone to recurrence.

The Garden of Forgiveness on this spot will be more than just a crucial lung at the heart of a big city. People can come with their collective memory, to learn about their heritage and each other. It can become a site for re-enchantment, a place to reach out and embrace others around us, where rivalry and contention can be superseded by cooperation and mutual respect. Beirut can reclaim its distinctive character as a mixed, hybrid, and unified city and a pillar of Lebanese and Arab identity. It could serve as an example to areas of conflict in the world searching for peace and reconciliation.

By its very essence the Garden must be a space open to all: a place of inclusion, not exclusion, not born from or clouded by social, political, religious, or financial special interests. Through its own energy and design it will also play a part in encouraging social reflection and integration. The foreign visitor will also be intimately drawn by the Garden's universal appeal and emboldened by the values it espouses.

TODAY'S OPPORTUNITIES

The Garden of Forgiveness is a wondrous and timely chance for the Lebanese to remind themselves about what is really important in their personal lives and collective identities in order to achieve a lasting, cultural, and political peace. It is a symbolic place which can reconcile past, present, and future generations. It must be central and unencumbered.

The central district was always a meeting point for Lebanon's many communities. It can therefore offer an important neutral location with a multi-communal history that other parts of Beirut, or Lebanon as a whole, cannot. This area can also stand out as a paragon of social integration and reconstruction. As a global landmark, it will differentiate itself along spiritual lines rather than according to physical form or architectural grandeur.

By integrating the archeological sites into parts of the Garden, one invokes a historical context which at once educates the individual about a shared ancestry that predates the recent conflict. By exposing layers of great civilizations below his or her feet, the Garden can inspire the individual to think more vividly about the temporal (not physical) foundations of his or her own civilization. It will serve as a poignant reminder of man's ability both to construct and destruct. This garden will use the foundations of the past to build foundations for the future.

The Garden is destined to induce, not preach, the concept of forgiveness. Given the layers of history and cultural pluralism upon which it rests, it will help us to nourish, to ponder and hence to appreciate difference without indifference.

The Garden's location between the different churches and mosques will enhance the symbolism of coming together. A multi-confessional space whose importance is held equally highly by different communities is not new to this spot. The Nouriyeh shrine has been witness to this for centuries.

If judiciously planned and landscaped, the Garden could reinforce its geographic neutrality. Epigrams, aphorisms, reflective sayings and sobering thoughts, extracted from our deep spiritual and cultural heritage could be both cleansing and uplifting. At the very least the Garden will offer a physical and conceptual link between these places of worship and reinforce a spirit of humanity. It will cultivate forgiveness as an universal concept and help all congregations to coexist in tolerance and mutual respect.

As a transcending and neutral space the Garden of Forgiveness will give a human face to reconstruction and lend character and soul to Beirut's city centre. It will give all, irrespective of class or affiliation, reason to visit the centre for something other than business, shopping or for popular culture and entertainment. As a public space it is desperately needed. Its motive and theme will be clear but each and every person will draw something different from it. This is an unique opportunity to reconnect the Lebanese to their heritage, expose the past to dialogue and provide a bridge of hope to the future.

Caveats

This project is for all Lebanese, yet no group today can speak or act in the name of all Lebanese.

It is a possibility, like many efforts that seek to promote peace and social integration that the project may meet with resistance from groups who feel, for some reason or another that they are being left out. They may feel this if the project takes on an image or a message from which they have been excluded. For most people, a simple explanation about the nature and purpose of this project will help them to understand and therefore to feel included.

No credit is needed for the Garden's creation so that nothing is taken from this gift to the citizens of Beirut. In this way no one will feel like they are making a statement or supporting someone by going there. Therefore, it is very important that there be no hidden agenda, no partisanship; the message that the Garden gives is then determined by each individual. This can only serve to encourage plurality.

Alexandra Asseily

As witness of the pain of the civil war in Lebanon, Alexandra explored her own responsibility for war and for peace. She became a psychotherapist. She is a governor and founder of the Centre for Lebanese Studies, Oxford, a Trustee of the Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace, and a founder member of the Ara Pacis Initiative, and a former member of the Advisory Board of the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University.

In 1998 Alexandra initiated Hadiquat as Samah, the Garden of Forgiveness, in downtown Beirut. She is actively involved in helping individuals and groups reach a better understanding of forgiveness, as a bridge to peace.