

The Meaning of Martyrs Day

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Certain stories, such as the one told below, evoke reminders that cannot be dismissed nonchalantly. A pastor of a small church preached the same sermon during two consecutive Sundays. After the second church service, a member of the congregation stopped the pastor and asked him a direct question: “Pastor, what is the meaning of harping on the same cord, repeating the very same homily twice?” The pastor answered the question with all seriousness: “A message is instilled, taken to heart, when it is hammered home in sermon after sermon. Do not be surprised, I will come knocking on your door one more time.” Every June 20th, we attempt to deliver the same message and we do not think it is hackneyed or worn out. This is our way of keeping the memory of our martyrs alive! This is our way of renewing our pledge to preserve the legacy entrusted to us.

I would like to borrow some key points from an article I wrote in the past. The prelude contains an example of the thrills and excitements Diaspora Eritreans experience when they visit their homeland. In the summer of 2007, my wife and I, along with a couple friends, had an opportunity to crisscross parts of Eritrea. We traveled over bumpy roads, occasionally shrouded by pulverized dust. We mused if that experience was our idea of having a vacation. It did not matter if we also dubbed the experience an adventure of a lifetime. Our nostalgia and homesickness were getting assuaged and we relished the respite from the hustle and bustle of our urban life in the West. The pampering and comfort were traded for an opportunity to reconnect with our roots one more time.

“Staring at precipitous cliffs, towering hills, teetering giant boulders, spanning bridges, sandy riverbeds, lush shrubbery, shimmering sea, striding camels, brazen monkeys, ostentatious ostriches and everything else we encountered had therapeutic effect, The various sceneries combined with Eritrean music transported us to a realm of rapturous joy. What an experience! What a country!”

Our visit to Eritrea is not only about elation and excitement. But it is also about somberness and reverence, gratitude and indebtedness. Heavy ransom was paid to secure Eritrea’s independence. When we ponder the torrents of blood that were spilled, the heaps of bones that were broken, the hosts of lives that were snuffed, the countless bodies that were fragmented, we are awed by the enormity and gravity of the sacrifices made by the Eritrean martyrs. It is this realization that makes our visit to Eritrea a moment of elation and somberness at the same time.

“Whose country is Eritrea anyway? Whose sacrifice made its sovereignty a reality anyway? Is it possible to visit this country and be, at the same time, completely oblivious to the martyrdom of freedom fighters? Eritrea’s freedom demanded heavy ransom. Some paid with their lives and yet others paid with their limbs. The country roads are full of permanent reminders of broken bones and spilt blood: tombs and mausoleums. The city streets are not devoid of pointers either: war veterans on wheel chairs and other means of mobility. It is a humbling experience and elicits sadness, reverence and indebtedness.”

Eritrea lost 65,000 of its sons and daughters during the struggle for national independence. As if this were not enough, another 19,000 were sacrificed to prevent reversal of Eritrean sovereignty. During this period of “no peace, no war” situation more gallant fighters are putting their life on hold and paying the ultimate price repulsing enemy encroachments. There will always be jubilation and exuberance surrounding the birth of a new nation and the continuity of its existence. Concomitant with such elation, however, grappling with the aftermath of the war and the undue burden of the families of Eritrean martyrs cannot be avoided. We may not fully grasp the gravity of the anguish felt by the families of Eritrean martyrs. But, try we must! Families, including elderly parents, widowed wives, orphaned children, are deprived of the breadwinners on whom they could depend for their livelihood. This is not to suggest that they are abandoned by the Eritrean Government but to underscore the fact that caring for the families of the martyrs is a shared responsibility. Relinquishing this obligation is categorically unpatriotic. The martyrs’ families harbor no bitterness toward the national fervor that engulfed and eventually consumed their sons and daughters. By the same measure, it is incumbent upon us to reciprocate with kindness. Callousness and obliviousness should not be traits of who we are.

Let us keep in mind that the martyrs’ families are all over Eritrea. This realization will force us to transcend the filial, ethnic, linguistic, religious and regional barriers. Whether we reside abroad or inside Eritrea, our common bond stems from the all-encompassing and uniting Eritrean nationalism. This is the cause the martyrs died for and this is our entrenched frame of reference.

As we peruse the following paragraphs, let us examine ourselves and find out which feelings we harbor, which outlook we espouse and whether or not we allocate a minute fraction of our resource to ameliorate the living conditions of the martyrs’ families.

First, there is a world outlook steeped in fatalism. Everything is predetermined. Thus, the poor, the orphans, the widows, etc. are dealt their lot by *fate*. As they grapple with and succumb to destitution, nobody has any responsibility to ameliorate their situation. A Tigrigna proverb crystallizes this kind of attitude: “Don’t give, don’t be generous. If it is to be, it is up to luck.” [አይትሃብ፡ አይትለግስ፡ ዕድል ባዕላ ትገስግስ፡] This is a pessimistic way of looking at life and advocates a callous style of handling human relationship. This is a devious way of relinquishing responsibility. If we espouse this kind of outlook, all the pleas and exhortations to support the families of Eritrean martyrs are in vain.

Second, there is an attitude shaped by an assortment of excuses such as: “the contributions are not forwarded to the needy families; we made unappreciated contributions in the past and we are not about to perpetuate such folly; we are already stretched too thin helping our needy

relatives; sporadic assistance does not bring a permanent solution to an entrenched problem; charity projects are the domain of NGOs; etc. As the Tigrigna proverb goes, ‘He who feigns to be asleep, not even the boisterousness of elephants can wake him up.’ [ብፍላጥ ዝደቀሰ ሓራምዝ ነይንቐንቐኡ።] Unless the will to play a constructive role is in place to begin with, no cause is worthy or compelling enough. It is fairly easy for the well of generosity to become bone-dry when the rubbles of excuse heap upon it.” [ከህቡ ብንይት፡ ክኸልኡ ብምኸንይት።]

Third, there is an attitude which stems “from feeling too small in front a daunting task. There is a multitude of needy families and this reality is overwhelming and paralyzing. How can a single drop quench dehydrating thirst or a single morsel satiate gnawing hunger? Yes, how can a single individual tackle the problems of so many?” This may be a genuine apprehension of the disparity between one’s ability and the enormity of the mission. We are asked to dispense what is within our reach. Nothing more, nothing less! Suffice it to tell the well-known story about the little boy and the starfish. “The old man was walking on the beach, where many starfish had washed ashore. He saw a little boy on the shoreline, throwing them back into the ocean. The boy said ‘They’ll die if I don’t get them back into the water.’ The man said ‘Son, there are hundreds of starfish ashore. It’s not going to make a difference.’ The boy picked up a starfish and threw it into the water. He turned to the man and said, ‘It made a difference to that starfish.’”

Fourth, there is the “I will share a sip when my cup is overflowing” attitude. In other words, generosity is pegged on abundance. But let truth be told: abundance is elusive, never fully attainable. Hence, charity or giving will never see the light of day. Charity and affluence are not two sides of the same coin. Liberality has nothing to do with affluence or lack thereof. We give not because we have redundant resources but out of conviction that life is about sharing and caring. The Tigrigna proverb is not a mere cliché: “He, who eats alone, dies alone.” [ቢይኑ ዝበልዕ፡ ቢይኑ ይመውት።]

Fifth, there is a persuasion devoid of concrete action. We endorse the merit of helping our martyrs’ families. But we never take the final plunge of making the necessary contribution. We postpone taking action until tomorrow. Tomorrow becomes elastic and open-ended. We become victims of procrastinators’ malaise or subscribers of procrastinators’ creed. [ኣርከቦ ረማዕ ኢሉ፡ መስተረይ ወላዊሉ።] Procrastination dampens enthusiasm and shoves matters of urgency into a back burner.

Let us make June 20th a day of cherished memory and humble gratitude! Let us make it a day of caring and sharing, a day of pledging and committing ourselves to support the families of Eritrean martyrs. Let us contact our Embassies for instructions on how to contribute to martyrs’ fund or support martyrs’ families. A more effective approach would be to establish a task force within our community to spearhead and coordinate our collective efforts.

zel’alemawi zKri nsema’etatna!
Awet nHafaS!