

Conflict and Compassion in a Global Community

Excerpts from a plenary session at the
Authentic Leadership Summer Program

Halifax, Nova Scotia
June 19, 2003

3. GUIDED CONTEMPLATION

The following is excerpted from a contemplation on three shoes that belonged to victims of the Bosnian death camps. This contemplation was led by Richard Reoch, who worked for many years as a senior official of the human rights organization Amnesty International and who is currently the president of Shambhala, a community of 165 meditation centers worldwide.

Some years ago, I was attending a United Nations Conference in Vienna, at a very large, glacial UN building with very wide, highly polished corridors. In one of these corridors was an enormous pile of shoes. One of the remarkable things about this was that both the people who were attending this conference and the people who were working in the building were walking up and down this corridor as if that pile of shoes wasn't there. I went over and looked at these shoes, and I saw that there were three women nearby. I asked where they were from. They said that they were from Bosnia. I said, "Are you connected with these shoes?" They said, "Yes. These are the shoes of our relatives. We searched for our loved ones and we found the death camp where they died. Because nobody believes that this is going on in our country, we brought these shoes here."

I told them that I also come from a part of the world where nobody believes these things are happening and asked if they would they make me a gift of a few of those shoes so that I could help them in their work. They said yes and allowed me to take three of the shoes from the pile. I have them here with me today. There's a shoe that belonged to a young boy, a little girl's pink bedroom slipper, and a white shoe that was probably worn by a young woman. They are all that remain of these people.

The extraordinary thing about these shoes is that we don't know very much about this little boy or this little girl or this young woman. We don't know their names. We don't have photos of them. Most of us don't speak their language, and many of us have never visited their country. We never met them. We have never shaken their hands. Yet somehow none of that matters. Deep within us, we all know these people. In the presence of their shoes, we can feel our unshakable human connection to these people. We feel it in our bones, in our blood, in our hearts.

We know that whatever happened to them should never happen to anybody. That feeling, no matter how unbearable, is the most precious jewel in the world. Out of the mud and stench of a death camp arises the miracle of our profound common humanity.

We feel compassion for this young boy, little girl, and young woman. Our feelings for them are the first ripples of ever widening circles of compassion. Let us extend our compassion to their families and to all those who witnessed this horror, who saw the truckloads and the people disappearing. To all the people who knew they were being exterminated, yet somehow believed that the world would be a safer place if this young boy, this little girl, and this woman were killed. To all those who worked in the camps and to all those who provided the services for the camps—it takes a whole society to run a death camp. To the people in government who gave the orders, those who participated in the cover-up and the excuses, those outside the country who looked the other way. To all those who were selling armaments and making profits from this dreadful war. And to all those who never knew or never took the time to know, who saw some grizzly footage on their television screens, continued eating, and felt helpless in the face of history.

Wherever the victims of a holocaust are remembered, there are piles of shoes like this. In all the museums of the holocaust, they have piled up the shoes of the dead. We could find piles of flip-flops in Rwanda. We could go to Iraq, we could go to Afghanistan, and the shoes of the dead would be waiting for us. And among the tons of rubble that covered Ground Zero, there must have been at least 6,000 pairs of shoes.

So let us take this frayed and fading footwear as our breath. Let us meditate upon the suffering of all those beings and on the endless knot of their unfolding karma and our own.