Nothing but the truth: Honest remembrance

by Miroslav Volf in the July 12, 2003 issue

We often engage in disputes about how events from the past should be remembered. Whether we've had an argument with a child, a quarrel with a spouse or a debate about national history, the truth about the past seems to matter a great deal. And yet there are powerful voices in our culture that tell us that we should let go of this interest. The truth about the past cannot be had, the argument goes, and the demand for truth is dangerous. I disagree strenuously. I believe that we have a moral obligation to remember truthfully.

Suppose I were skiing at Mammoth Mountain in California with my friend Alexander. One evening, with Alexander present, I say to my friends, "Today we went up chair 26 to the top of the mountain and skied down Drop Out." Alexander looks at me and says, "No, no, no! We turned left and skied down Wipe Out." The correction is innocent; it is just a matter of remembering the name of the run or the direction in which we turned at the top of the mountain. But if I'm telling what happened, I have an obligation to tell it truthfully. I can tell a fictional story, of course, or engage in creative renarration of events that are designed to elicit laughter or make a point. In those cases, the obligation does not apply in the same way.

As Paul Ricoeur argues in *The Reality of the Historical Past*, "When one wants to indicate the difference between fiction and history one unavoidably invokes the idea of a certain correspondence between the narrative and what really happened." True, correspondence is always a reconstruction—"a different construction than the course of events reported." The narrator's relation to the past is that of an "unpaid debt," argues Ricoeur. "This idea of debt, which may seem strange at first, appears to me to emerge out of an expression common to the painter and to the historian: both seek to 'render' a landscape, a course of events. Under the term 'render' can be recognized the intention of 'rendering its due to what is and to what was.'"

The obligation to truthfulness is heightened if a story reflects well or badly on a person's character. Imagine if I told my ski story like this: "From the top of the chair lift, we started skiing toward Drop Out; Alexander was a bit shaky when he looked at the sheer vertical drop, but I went straight down with no problem." In this case Alexander might have replied, "Wait a second. You chickened out! You wanted to ski all the way around the back of the mountain; *I* was the one who went down first!" Alexander's intervention here is more significant than in the previous case. In the way I was remembering and retelling what happened, I was unjustly bolstering my reputation and undermining his. It matters whether I skied down the Drop Out or who skied first down the Drop Out because the memory entails comparative judgments about me in relation to Alexander. Hence I have a moral obligation to remember truthfully. In such cases, *to remember untruthfully is to act unjustly*. This is even more true in cases that involve conflict between parties. At bottom, the obligation to truthfulness is an obligation to justice.

What about possible dangers associated with this obligation? If both parties claim to know the truth of what transpired between them but their "truths" clash, they will have all the more reason to cross swords. This seems right on the whole, although one can very well imagine that even in a conflict situation a person can stick to her version of the story as true but eschew any form of violence and refuse to cross swords. I take this to be what the Christian faith demands of us all.

Notice, however, that the objection concerns the claim of each party to *possess* the truth, not the moral obligation of both to *seek* the truth. The clash is caused less by the fact that truthfulness matters to persons too much than by the fact that it matters too little—so little that they, as fallible human beings, can simply assert that they possess the truth and therefore forego seeking it. The claim to possess the truth may be dangerous when it matters to a person more than the truth itself. But this takes us back to the moral obligation to remember truthfully. A sense of obligation to remember truthfully will work against these dangers.

A moral obligation to truthfulness is salutary. What is dangerous is to give up the quest for truth and satisfy oneself with multiple stories, none of them corresponding more to reality than the others. When Heinrich Himmler spoke to the SS in 1943, he lauded the project of the extermination of Jews as "a glorious page in our history." With such claims in mind, historian Omar Bartov notes that efforts to come to terms with ambiguous reality by suggesting there are a multiplicity of equally valid perspectives "can play . . . easily into the hands of those who have no qualms about

producing realities of the most horrific nature and then claiming that they had never taken place.”

Giving up the moral obligation to remember truthfully is dangerous. Embracing this obligation is salutary—provided we don’t subvert that obligation by a false claim to the truth or by using the claim to truth to justify the use of violence.