

Another meaning of forgiveness

By Sar Somanos, writer and engineer



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*The author of Khmer Apocalypse believes that forgiveness cannot be granted by anyone else but the victims of the Khmer Rouge, "not even by judges". In the following article written for Ka-set, **Sar Somanos** discusses how and why he has forgiven those who took the lives of part of his family and cast dark shadows over Cambodia for 3 years, 8 months and 20 days.*

"Asking for forgiveness is the most natural thing. Saying sorry for the small mistakes we make in life, like bumping into someone in the street because you are a little absent-minded or distracted by a pretty woman or a handsome boy. It is a simple question of manners, a little something that contributes to some extent to global harmony in society.

"Forgiveness exists in all cultures, though it is totally ignored by some religions. Who has never asked for forgiveness? And who never granted it? Forgiveness is part of everybody's experience, whatever our spiritual beliefs may be. It is actually so deeply ingrained in our cultural environment that we rarely wonder about its true meaning. When we find ourselves asking for or granting pardon, we do it in a mechanical way without giving much thought about what is really happening deep inside our heart.

Asking for forgiveness means recognising one's faults and making the implicit promise not to repeat them. But it also denotes the desire to regain some peace with oneself and those we have hurt. Granting forgiveness means that the fault is mended and the scar it caused can heal. Therefore, each and everyone can resume their normal lives, together or separately. A chapter is closed.

However, it can be noted that the more serious the fault will be, the more difficult it is for forgiveness to take place, simply because it becomes as difficult to ask for it as to grant it. Justice is then the only remedy left. Not only does its verdict play a social role of dissuasion, but it also allows victims to resume their lives normally.

Yet, there are situations where neither justice nor forgiveness is possible. The same rule applies with revenge.

This was my feeling after watching Rithy Panh's movie S21, The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine. Throughout their confrontation with victims, the torturers kept skirting around their responsibility. As a usual response, they will say : "I killed because otherwise, I would have been killed", as if living – or more precisely staying alive –

could justify everything... At no point did they express any regret.

My godmother and I left the cinema as soon as the movie was over. I felt the urge to let my tears out in the darkness of a small street of Paris. I felt trapped and oppressed, like a prisoner. If there was any justice, the torturers should be the ones to feel the way I felt. But there was no justice. Back then, there was barely any prospect of a tribunal to judge the former Khmer Rouge leaders. And yet, I felt ready to forgive, despite the impossibility to forget the scathe. But they never showed any will to acknowledge their faults, not even half-heartedly.

I felt so devastated that I let the tears out, surrounded by the distant traffic noise. I was racked with nausea and had a terrible knot in my stomach... Then, I thought about my children and how it would affect my daughters to see me in such a state. Knowing them, I was sure they would also suffer, they would also hate, in my place. They in turn would pass the grief and the hatred on to their descendants and so on... The risk to transmit poisoned memories – instead of enriching ones – loomed over one generation after the other. I thought about my sister Thoep who sacrificed herself so I could live. She certainly did not reach such an extreme situation to see me live like a shattered being forever.

So, in the name of love for those so dear to my heart, I decided to deny eternal victory to those who hurt us so much. I needed a key to run away from this mental prison and break the vicious circle. And this key came to me in the form of the following reasoning. Never mind if you are refusing to admit your mistakes, I will still forgive you. And if I forgive you, it is because faults were committed. This simple thought allowed me to proceed to a reversal by putting responsibility back where it should be – back with the torturers. This time, they can no longer skirt around their responsibilities because my forgiveness stems from the crimes perpetrated.

This approach has sometimes been misunderstood, because the concept of forgiveness is so closely associated with the Judaeo-Christian kindness as exemplified by the phrase, "If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also." There is really none of this in my approach, which actually has no link at all with any religion or culture. It is a personal approach and its aim is first and foremost to make everyone face their responsibilities. It is certainly not the victims who should be feeling guilty. I want to stress that this stance reflects the psychological process that enabled me to escape from the mental pitfall of victimisation, to keep moving forward in my life, without forgetting the rich lessons I learned with all this torment.

In any case, all this is only a matter of choice. Everyone is free to choose their own fate. This is a fundamental freedom and I chose to live with happiness. Because I want to give meaning to the life for which my sister gave hers. Because it is also the best way to clear memory from its poison, torment and resentment, in order to pass on

a memory full of wisdom and discernment. Because remembrance is not an obligation but a rich concept. And because if there really is an obligation for anyone, it would then be the duty to be happy.”

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Sar Somanos, engineer and writer

Sar Somanos was born in Phnom Penh in 1965 and arrived in France in 1981 without any knowledge of the French language. He is now an IT engineer and the author of two published books, Khmer Apocalypse (original French title *L'Apocalypse khmère* – Editions Jean Picollec, 2003, which won the 2005 Prix Tropiques, awarded by the Agence Française de Développement) and The Shadow of a Doubt (original French title *L'ombre d'un doute* – Editions Les 2 Encres, 2007, which won the Prix Phnom Penh Accueil 2008). He is currently working on his third novel, set in Cambodia in the years preceding April 17th 1975.

Sar Somanos, who has since started his own family, lost his father and four brothers and sisters under the Khmer Rouge regime. He explains that he has since felt like he had no choice but to live several lives within one. The issue of the passing on of memory is like an obsession for the survivor.

In addition to his literary skills, the engineer also became involved in a project to set up an air transport company.

Sar Somanos, the author's website

Sar Somanos has an up-to-date personal website on somanos.fr. The website is a compendium of his poems, thoughts, photographs, book excerpts and information on his activities and interests.

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