Ebbs and flows: when to conserve the scars of pain? When to let them heal?

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Once upon a time, in Germany, there was a mediaeval marketplace. This is its story. It is set in Hildesheim, a Saxon town much enhanced by the artistic and cultural works of its eleventh-century Bishop, Bernwald. In 1997, music filled the Romanesque Church of St Michael for the opening of an international symposium on the World's Cultural Heritage. In addition to St Michael's Church, Hildesheim's jewels include the Cathedral of St Mary, the Roemer and Peiizaeus Museum, a revered ancient rose-tree and a mediaeval marketplace. In the dying days of World War II, 300 RAF bombers attacked Hildesheim. Both churches were severely damaged and only one side of the marketplace remained. Over ensuing years, the churches were repaired, the rose-tree bloomed again and the City cleared the rubble from the marketplace, replacing missing sides with modern shops and generous car parking in the centre. The community put the pain of war behind them, cleaned up the mess and started life afresh.

This is Stage 1 of the ebb and flow: Erasure.

What is interesting is the sequel, over 30 years later, when it seems that some ache of memory returned. In 1985, the two resuscitated churches of Hildesheim were successfully inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List, as cultural properties of 'outstanding universal value'. Also in the 1980s, a bank in the remnant mediaeval portion of the square sought consent to modernise and extend its building. There was a public outcry. Under a City grant, the project was converted to sympathetic restoration in Gothic form. The result was so popular that the citizens demanded the historic reconstruction of the entire market square. Now, as in Warsaw, a twelfth-century re-created mediaeval urban space is in place for all to see. And the market-place lived happily after.

This is Stage 2 of the ebb and flow: Recall.

What happened to Hildesheim's Marketplace is not unique. In the immediacy of here and now, following profound trauma, survivors cry out for Stage 1 - to relieve the pain, to disengage the mind from reminders, to re-invigorate body and spirit, to see the sky again. Clean up, build as new and, above all, re-define and re-activate life. A shocking concomitant to this most understandable and health-giving stage is the risk that washing away the evidence may, through communal amnesia, serve the perpetrators' interest.

With the distance of time and deeper reflection, those same survivors reach out to Stage 2 - seeking to re-engage the public memory. And with urgency. To defend and display in perpetuity, if only that was possible, the evidence - either of what was lost (the exquisite pre-bomb square) or of what was suffered (its shattered remains).

So, Stage 2 itself comes in two forms:

- the first attempts to annul loss through restoration
- the second acknowledges the quiet but tangible evidence of the horror itself - the remnants of Hiroshima's Genbuka dome or the slave holding-rooms on Senegal's ile de Goree.

In Stage 2, the community faces the grim task of looking deep into the eye of cyclical history and conserving what it sees - often ambivalent, continually recurring, ebbing and flowing themes.

Now, let us consider places drawn into institutionalised cruelty.

In the aftermath, what are the differing roles of the survivor, conservationist and poet?

It is on the whole easier to study places objectively, when their historic significance derives from events long ago. Perversely therefore, I introduce you to Chile's military coup on the relatively recent 11 September 1973 - just one face of the troubled, subjective twentieth century - and to buildings with stories to tell about General Pinochet's first decade. I confess this is personal. I never kept diaries - or only once, for 27 days in 1973, when my world in Chile stood on its head. For everyone's sake, it was written in code; I doubt that I have the key now - so haphazard was it with anger and grief.

But, before we cross the Pacific Ocean, to witness human abuse at another time in another place, let us recall current events on Australia's beloved soil and sea. The relentless failure to respect, or reconcile with, Aboriginal peoples or to deal with Native Title; the demonising of people seeking rescue here; their detention, incomunicado, behind razor wire; their abandonment to death at sea. And the new visibility of the military ... Is this a significant stage in our history? If so, how do we, the professionals, deal with the evidence? The Stage 1 whitewash? The Stage 2 black armband? Or will we turn a corner to share the colour of hope?

So, to Chile, 1973 — please forgive the poet Pablo Neruda, 1904-73, if he interrupts me occasionally.

Chile is a slim North-South country of extraordinary beauty, wedged between the freezing Southern Pacific and the lofty ranges of the Andes. Santiago was founded by Spain in 1541; independence came in 1818. Despite occasional wars with neighbours and suppression of indigenous peoples, its history was relatively benign for its region. In the 1970s, its population was 11 million, highly urbanised - with 4 million in the greater Santiago, 80% mestizo, 20% European, half a million Mapuche Indians. Chile is Spanish-speaking, highly literate, Catholic and with a solid middle class.

Much to everyone's surprise, in this place, in 1970, Dr Salvador Allende became the world's first elected Marxist president. His coalition Popular Unity government stood for socialist reforms within the democratic framework of the Chilean constitution. It was greeted with exuberant excitement, in art, song and deafening talk, relatively untempered by the bitter opposition of the formerly privileged.

Neruda: de las alturas terribles donde yace el cobre ... surgió un movimiento liberador de magnitud grandiosa!

From the terrible heights, where the copper lies buried, arose a liberation movement of grandiose proportions!

Three years later, on that jinxed date of 11 September, this
government was ousted by a violent military coup, during which Salvador Allende and others died.

On 14 September 1973, Neruda wrote: 'Mi pueblo ha sido el mas traicionado de este tiempo. My people have been the most betrayed in these times'. Nine days later, he died of a broken heart.

Sandbags and police dogs appeared on street corners and helicopters overhead. Thousands were detained and a secret police force, the DINA, was set up. Trade unions and Congress were dissolved. Foreigners, students, indigenous land-holders, sociologists, journalists, singers were arrested and interrogated. Books, music, even the traditional Andean flute, were banned. Military deans were appointed to the universities. A decade of Chicago-school economics, repression and assassinations followed, interspersed by bursts of celebration from the Right and protest from the Left.

In the first curfewed weeks of the military regime, over 20 covert interrogation centres were established within Santiago alone (many of the 1000 missing persons were last seen in one of these centres). Provincial detention centres were almost as harsh and remote as our own Woomera – eminent politicians and Mapuche leaders froze on islands in the Magellan Straits; trade union leaders and miners baked in the northern Chacabuco desert. What part did buildings play over this period? And murals? the voices of singers? poets?

I bring you six built messages from Chile – from the 'great clean-up' to the bombed Moneda and its replacement. I bring you a sports stadium and I bring you memory museums.

Buildings talk

The first message: Erasure

During the Allende government, popular art flourished and spilled onto public walls, splashing colour along the canalised River Mapocho, up the sides of schools. In their first days of power, the Junta, deeply offended by this visible expression of the Cancer of Communism, sent out squads of high school students in smocks to whitewash away every trace. This exercise was named the 'Gran Limpieza', the Great Clean Up.

I have tended to admire the resilience of graffiti cultures ever since witnessing that Gran Limpieza en la ciudad de Santiago.

The second message: Restoration

The Palacio De La Moneda is an imposing neo-classic building, designed in 1788 as the nation's mint, but which later became the country's seat of government. Modifications in the 1850s allowed a century of Presidents to live there, and further extensions admitted the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On the morning of 11 September 1973 when, after due warning, President Allende refused to surrender, five Hawker Hunters bombed the Moneda from the air and armoured tanks attacked it from the ground. The manner of Allende's death is disputed. His last recorded words call on the people - rural women, young students, workers, intellectuals - to hold high their faith in Chile and its destiny. No evidence of damage to the Moneda or its public square has been conserved. The building's meticulous repair and restoration by conservation specialists took seven years, after which it could, once again, become the seat of government.

Surprisingly, a statue of Allende now stands in the square.

The third message: Naming

In 1972, under the Popular Unity government, just down the road from the Moneda building, a modern steel-framed conference hall was custom-built for the visit of the UN's Commission for Trade and Development. It was consequently known as the UNCTAD Building. After the conference, it became a cultural centre and was re-named Gabriela Mistral, in honour of a woman much loved in Chile for her Nobel prize-winning poetry. The previous government house having been severely bomb-damaged and requiring, as already mentioned, some years of repair, the military regime took over this brand new building as its seat of government from 1973 to 1981. Inevitably, it was re-named, this time after Diego Portales, the man who, in 1833, introduced a centralised, authoritarian constitution for Chile, and whose bust still adorns the building's entrance.

Neruda: Aquellos que quieren apartar la poesía de la política, quieren amordazar, quieren apagar el canto, el canto eterno. Those who want to separate poetry from politics, seek to muffle us all and to silence our song, our eternal song.

The fourth message: Silence

In two stadiums in Santiago, the Estadio de Chile and the Estadio Nacional, over 7000 prisoners were held incommunicado, over the first weeks of the military regime. Most were later transferred to secret locations. Prisoners stayed, day and night, on the stands; the change-rooms were used for interrogation and torture. Hundreds detained at the State Technical University were transferred to the stadiums on the first day. Several were executed, amongst them the singer/guitarist Victor Jara. Before his death, he sang for his fellow detainees in the stadium, including a Neruda poem that may resonate for us here, in Australia, and now.

Jara/Neruda: Yo no quiero la patria dividida -- cabemos todos en la tierra mia. I don't want my country divided; there's room for us all on this land.

The stadiums continue to house sporting events. As far as I know, no reference is made to their strange role in September 1973 – other than the haunting memory of song.

The fifth message: Rebirth

This is the story of the current Peace Park at Villa Grimaldi, Penalolen, in what is now a suburb of Santiago. Early in the nineteenth century, Penalolen was a rural holding, whose owner was most influential in establishing Chilean independence and republicanism. The homestead, Villa Grimaldi, became a convivial meeting-place for intellectuals, writers and musicians. The tradition of elegant literary soirees and long discussions of liberal politics continued under new owners into the 1940s. This pattern was abruptly curtailed in 1973, when house and grounds were acquired by General Pinochet for interrogation purposes.

The military renamed it the 'cuartel Terranova'. Its red adobe walls were surrounded by barbed wire and purpose-built structures were added. From 1974, some 5000 prisoners passed through the new iron gate. Over 140 disappeared and all, or almost all, were tortured. One survivor, a British doctor, Sheila Cassidy, had earlier rumbled with me over the Andean foothills, accompanied by her small dogs and my small daughters. Villa Grimaldi became the most important of over 20
secret precincts of detention and torture for the DINA. I choose not to describe what went on 24 hours a day at the base of the Torre, or in the dark closets of the ‘Casas Chille’, or on the metal frame of ‘La Parrilla’. The unimaginable filth of nightmares.

In 1990, a neighbour alerted the Press of building at the ‘cuartel Terranova’. Investigations revealed that in 1987 General Wenzl had corruptly sold the public property to his own family trust as a development site. The Auditor's Office and democratic parliamentarians intervened; the black gate was thrown open to the Commission of Human Rights and former internees; and the Villa Grimaldi Park for Peace was created. Now, on the site of each former building there is a mosaic-patterned floor – the only portion visible for the blindfolded; a Wall of Names commemorates those who died or disappeared; the garden flourishes. Last year, poets from around the world gathered here to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of Pablo Neruda’s receipt of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1971.

**The sixth and final message: the Phoenix**

This message concerns the house museums of Pablo Neruda.

In September 1973, the military grudgingly permitted Pablo Neruda’s funeral, so soon after the coup, to occur during curfew. It was of course only a family affair. During the ceremony (and curfew), his houses and their contents in both Santiago and Valparaíso were savagely looted and vandalised.

The establishment in 1986 of the Pablo Neruda Foundation was arduous. It was created to fulfill Neruda’s wish for ‘el cultivo y propagación de las artes y las letras’, the cultivation and dissemination of the arts and literature. The military government had no sympathy for Neruda’s work. Nonetheless, his houses – la Chascona in Santiago; la Sebastiana in Valparaíso and la Casa de Isla Negra – have now all been repaired and restored, as have his collections of art, books and archival material. All three houses are museums, with over 280,000 visitors per year. The Foundation offers poetry workshops, prizes, cultural events and access to research materials.

> Neruda: Pueblo mío, ¿Verdad que en primavera suena mi nombre en tus oídos y tu me reconoces como si fuera un río que pasa por tu puerta? My people – is it true that, in spring, my name rings in your ears and that you sense my presence as a river flowing past your door?

How difficult it is to say, from these jumbled stories of pain, indifference and hope, whether Allende’s final angry optimism or Neruda’s despair at the coup’s inception was the more appropriate. Chile still walks a political tightrope. We have seen the Erasure, Restoration, Re-naming, Silence and Rebirth of six historically significant places, each related to activities surrounding the Chilean coup. The three wise monkeys saw no evil, heard no evil, spoke no evil – but there is a shadowy fourth who, sees and hears it all and, out of it all, somehow creates new life.

Ephemeral messages appear in this naming and renaming of places, in the painting and erasing of murals and graffiti, in the erection of statues, in the creation of chants and songs. All are political acts, shorthand versions of the art of conservation.

**Postscript**

... and really the whole point of my paper ...

In 1999, that blessedly gifted author, Arundhati Roy, wrote in The End of Imagination of her horror at India’s decision to test nuclear weapons: ‘My world has died. And I write to mourn its passing. Admittedly it was a flawed world ... but it didn’t deserve to die.’ That same despair has engulfed me, since Australian voters (having thrown out reconciliation and the republic) were persuaded to abandon the story of the Good Samaritan in order to savage the Alien.

Australia’s generous heart, together with our collective soul, did not deserve to die.

At this alarming stage of history, must Woomera, Port Headland, Curtin and outposts like Nauru be seen through the Black Armband of Recall, to resonate like Port Arthur? Or will we adopt the Whitewash of Erasure (la Gran Limpieza), whereby it is only the victims who can remember?

Maybe, just maybe, it can be neither. Even recalcitrant Labour may join doctors, lawyers, teachers and rural communities in demanding a genuine change.

Maybe, just maybe, our work could one day be seen to be, neither black nor white, but blue and gold: a program of well-conserved forget-me-nots set in the gold of A Bran Nue Day? What do the professionals say? I still can’t hear them.