

Poetry and Peace

Dear hosts, Pakistan Academy of Letters, Pakistan government, representative of Swedish Embassy, Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends:

Let me first of all from my heart express how honoured and happy I feel to be back here in Islamabad again. In our western media we all read about the turbulence and the violent actions in this part of the world but seldom we are reminded about the rich cultural heritage that this country since hundreds of years has provided for the whole world. The work carried out by the Pakistan Academy is therefore of utmost importance. The idea of calling for a new worldwide conference on peace and Sufism will again place Pakistan on the map of leading cultural nations.

Last time I was here was in 1995, as president of the Swedish Writers union, invited to the historical congress organized by the Pakistan Academy of Letters and its well known president Fakhar Zaman. At this occasion I also had the privilege to meet and speak to the Prime Minister Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto, who inspired us all in our cultural and literary endeavours. She was indeed a bright star in the political night and though she now is gone I feel her presence so strongly in this very minute. To be awarded the "Quaid-e-Azam" for literature and presented for the Pakistan literary world at the same time as this outstanding historical person is an honour of unbelievable dimension.

I also want to, as former president of the Swedish cultural umbrella organization KLYS, representing some 18 artistic organizations comprising more than 30 000 individuals of all genres, to thank the chairman of the Pakistan Academy of Letters, Fakhar Zaman, for his important presidential role during our world conference in Hässelby Castle outside Stockholm in 1999. Now as then our theme was: "The role of the writers in areas of conflict". Therefore, let me concentrate on the theme Poetry and Peace.

In January 2003 I participated in a big antiwar demonstration in Istanbul and wrote this poem:

What a poet can do

What can a lonely poet do against the war?

My answer is: a lot!

Poems are not bullets that kill.

Poems are bullets of life

When a poet shoots at you

He widens your mind

A poem can suddenly highlight

What has been hidden in darkness

We all wear secret worlds inside ourselves

A poem can change your life

And make your heart beat faster

Therefore:

Poets all over the world: shoot!

Let your bullets of peace kill the war!

Your words shall disarm the armies.

First I must confess that I hesitate to speak about "Peace and Poetry". Why? Because I am afraid of all the beautiful words that always are ready to parade for the task of peace! Also because poetry does not need to be explained. Once I was asked by a German friend to provide some poems for a "Peace anthology of poems" to be published in Frankfurt. I sent him my poem "What a poet can do" but the editor of the publishing house reacted strongly against it.

"It is impossible to say that poems are "bullets of peace". Peace can never be associated with bullets!"

So there I was.

Also my second poem was refused since I was comparing bombs with butterflies floating down in the dark night. Of course using the butterfly as a symbol for a bomb was the same as insulting peace itself. Perhaps I was not a peaceful poet after all!

But in the same way as you can't invent any laws to govern the waves in the sea, you can't order poets to write and behave in a certain way. They are, and must be, under their own command. They must, as John Lennon once put it, write in their "own write". Perhaps that could also be a definition of peace itself: the right to behave under your own command as long as you don't hurt others, not to take orders from above.

There is something special with poetry: the reader feels at once of a poem stinks or not. If it is true or false. To put it in a poetic way: There is a difference between real roses and plastic ones.

You don't have to be a specialist to differentiate between the original and the artificial copy!

Also: Poetry must also use its own weapon to defend the territory of peace. Poetry is the language of your inner thoughts and of your beating heart. It tries to convince you before you know it yourself. Poetry is the inner voice in us and a poet somebody that can listen to it and express that voice in a way that we all recognize. That is how we can say that this is true and that is false.

Some years ago I took part in a so called War Tribunal organized by a Turkish solidarity committee. There was a large number of delegates from peace committees from all parts of the world gathered in a meeting hall in ancient museum of Top Capi. We listened to witnesses from Falludja and some horrible pictures were shown on the wall. Children hunted by soldiers like rats. Brutal violence against elderly people. But the strongest impression on me was an Iraqi old woman who told us her feelings when her home suddenly one night was searched by young boys with their dirty boots on, sweeping down all their family belongings, portraits and other objects on to the floor. This total ignorance and lack of respect for the culture of this house, all acted out in the name of "democracy", was terrible and painful to witness.

It is just these private values, this intimate sphere that poetry protects and defends. That is why big words such as Democracy and Right and Wrong are difficult to use in poetry. Poetry, like peace, is mostly spelled with small letters. It is the details that count. In life as well as in poetry!

We are all invaded by languages, voices and powerful commercial messages in our everyday lives. Those in power control the loudspeakers, TV and newspapers. We are indeed targets but that is not the same as victims. We can all, if we really try, resist and in this fight poetry is always on our side. Poetry is perhaps not broadcasted like TV shows but its impact is perhaps greater. The most effective way of communication is always what we have in common in our ordinary lives and deepest in our minds. Do remember the so called "kitchen revolution" in Eastern Europe after 1989 when the wall in Berlin fell.

In Czechoslovakia and in East Germany ordinary people were sitting in their kitchens talking about the fake politicians and their misuse of words and power. It was not the soldiers and the police that won this time. They had weapons, guns and lorries but they had not the credibility of the people. In less than three months the former dissident Vaclav Havel, dramatist and writer, became president of his country. Sometimes words are stronger and more resistible than steel. Truth is what counts in the long run!

The poet may stand alone on the heart of earth. But in reality he is not alone. He stands as a tree in a forest of friends. When you read a poem, when a poem talks to you, you not only read it but also write it at the same time. I think it was Ezra Pound that once said that poetry is news that never gets old.

Poetry is always here and now and we all can share it together!

Thank you for your attention.

Peter Curman, Islamabad 26 November, 2009.