

BUILDING RECONCILIATION

In case you haven't noticed, today we live constantly surrounded by walls. The walls are everywhere. They're all around us, but except for those who stop and look, these walls--precisely because they've always been there--often go unnoticed.

There is the ever-thickening wall of economic inequality, dividing those who have wealth on the one hand and those who, through no fault of theirs, continue to suffer in poverty.

Then there is the perennial wall of prejudice that keeps us apart from those who are different from us - those who are not like us in some way--in race, religion, and gender identity--even if, when you think about it, more and more of these very people are living in our midst.

And finally--probably, the most neglected of all walls--we have the wall that separates us from the Earth, its lands, oceans, and skies, preventing us from seeing the long-term impact of our consumerist lifestyles on them.

Poverty, prejudice of any sort, and the damage in our environment--these are all problems that, for whatever reason, persist and resist solutions.

We could crunch the data to try to fix these wicked problems, but is it possible that just for now--we are being asked just to take an initial baby step, a baby step that might actually make all the difference?

Researchers have found that as we see the number of people suffering increase, our empathy--our willingness to get involved and to help--tends to decrease. This phenomenon is called "psychic numbing". Perhaps the first step before anything else is empathy.

There is a beautiful greeting common in the Zulu tribe in Africa. The greeting is "Sawubona!" And it means "I see you." When you say "Sawubona" to someone, you are relaying some very important messages in that one word.

You are telling the person: "I see you. You are important to me. I value you. This moment, in this place, all my attention is with you. I see you and I give myself permission to discover who you are. I accept you for what you are and you are part of me."

Empathy is about seeing the other person, no matter how different, no matter how far from us.

Is it possible that the first invitation for us is not so much to try to fix the big problems yet, but to see those who suffer as a result of them? Not so much to analyze the available data yet, but to listen to the stories of people first? Not so much to get lost in the numbers, but to look into people's eyes and gaze on their faces?

It is time to build bridges instead of walls. In dealing with the divisions of our time, perhaps asking these three questions might help. First, WHO are the persons involved?

Second, HOW ARE THEY AFFECTED by what we do?

And third and last question: WHAT DOES IT TAKE to bridge the gap between us and them?

How can we build a bridge of empathy to those who are different from us--in terms of social class, race, religion, and gender?

How can we teach ourselves to become good neighbours to the poor and to the strangers among us?

How can we empathize with nature itself and learn how to become more caring and responsible stewards?

And there's more

Virtual Colloquium JESEDU-Jogja2020



But there's more. How can we learn to become good ancestors to our children and to build the bridge to the future generations who will inherit the earth we leave them?