

A tale of two roads

A story of division and reconciliation by **Paulo Coelho**

Centuries before the media were filled with news of the so-called “effects of globalization”, Sheikh Qalandar Shah told the following story in his book *Asrar-I-Khilwatia* (“Secrets of the Solitary”). In eastern Armenia there was once a tiny village that had grown up along two parallel roads, known respectively as the South Road and the North Road. One day a traveller from far away came walking along the South Road and decided to visit the other road, too; however, the local tradespeople noticed that his eyes were full of tears.

“Someone must have died on the South Road,” said the butcher to the draper. “See how this poor stranger, who has just come from there, is weeping!”

A child overheard the remark and, since he knew that death was something very sad, started crying hysterically. Soon, all the children in the street were crying.

Much alarmed, the traveller decided to leave at once. He threw away the onions he had been peeling to eat – the reason his eyes were full of tears – and vanished.

Mothers, meanwhile, concerned to see their children crying, immediately went to find out what was going on and discovered that the butcher, the draper and, by then, various other tradespeople were all greatly exercised about the tragedy that had occurred on the South Road.

Then the rumours started to fly; and since the village had only a few inhabitants, soon everyone who lived near the two roads knew that something horrible had happened. The grown-ups began to fear the worst and, anxious about the possible scale of the tragedy, resolved to ask nothing so as not to make the situation worse.

A blind man, who lived on the South Road and did not understand what was going on, asked, “Why so much sadness in a place that has always been so happy?”

“Something dreadful has happened on the North Road,” replied one of the inhabitants. “The children are crying, the men are frowning, the mothers are calling for their children to come home, and the only visitor to this town in many years left with his eyes full of tears. Perhaps the other road has been affected by plague.”

It was not long before the rumour of the advent of a fatal, previously unknown disease had spread around the entire village. Since the weeping had begun with the visit of the traveller to the South Road, it became clear to the inhabitants of the North Road that the plague must have begun there.

Before nightfall, the inhabitants of both roads had abandoned their houses and left for the mountains in the East.

Today, centuries later, the village through which the traveller passed, while peeling onions, remains deserted. Not far from there, two new villages sprang up called East Road and West Road.

The inhabitants, descendants of the people from the first village, still do not talk to each other because time and legend have placed a great barrier of fear between them: they are convinced that, were they to re-establish contact, the world in which they live could be placed in grave danger.

Sheikh Qalandar Shah remarks, “Everything in the world depends not on the things themselves, but on our attitude towards them.”

When we look at today’s world, we can see how relevant this story still is. At the end of the 1990s the traveller in question must have been roaring with laughter as he or she walked along some major road in the global village – for the old economy disappeared, stock markets rose, walls fell, interest rates dropped, individual values returned to what they had been at the end of the 19th century and conservative governments came to power. Everything was in perfect harmony. All that was missing was the one thing every civilization needs in order to survive – an enemy.

It was too complicated to get involved in new wars, and so the enemy could not be the genocide in Rwanda or the fratricide in Yugoslavia. Thus the great villain at the end of the last century became the cigarette. Yes, believe it or not, there was a time, not so very long ago, when the greatest threat to the modern world was a small cylinder of paper packed with dried leaves, with a glowing tip at one end and an idiot at the other.

Meanwhile, before any terrorist attacks took place, another traveller had walked through the global village, again eating onions. The just war returned to Europe with its “collateral damage” in Belgrade; the stock markets started to plummet; the analysts who had been encouraging us to buy shares were now saying that the fall was inevitable; people started worrying about their pension funds, their retirement, what decisions they should take.

When real danger showed its face – on the morning of September 11, 2001 – it found humanity on the verge of a nervous breakdown and, at that moment, the inhabitants of the North Road (also known as Judaeo-Christianity) made a traumatic break with the South Road (also known as Islam). All the newspapers deny this, all the television pro-

grammes say nothing has changed, theologians from both sides meet at international conferences and treat each other with tolerance and respect. But in real life, if our neighbour is Christian or Jewish (on the South Road) or goes to a mosque and asks his wife to wear a headscarf (on the North Road), we had better keep a close eye on him because something terrible could happen at any moment.

Will it ever be possible to reconcile these two villages before the hysteria provokes even worse consequences? I believe it will. We must put aside political analyses, economic forecasts and sociological studies and try to find the answer to a basic question: Who am I? And why am I behaving like this? There is no better way to do this than to look at our life as if it were a bicycle race.

At the start, when we are still young, we all set off together, sharing friendship and enthusiasm. But as the race progresses, that initial happiness gives way to the real challenges – tiredness, boredom, doubts about our own abilities. We notice that a few friends have, in their hearts, already given up – they are still cycling, but only because they cannot stop in the middle of the road. There are more and more of them, pedalling along beside the support vehicle – also known as routine – talking among themselves, fulfilling their obligations, but oblivious to the beauties and challenges of the road. We eventually leave them behind us, and then we come face to face with loneliness, with unfamiliar bends in the road and mechanical problems with our bicycle.

We pass through dark forests and, there, anything can happen because they are peopled by the ghosts of our imagination. At a certain stage, after suffering a few falls with no one near at hand to help, we begin to ask ourselves if it is really worth all the effort.

Yes, it is. It is just a question of not giving up. Father Alan Jones says that in order to overcome these obstacles and contribute to improving the state of the world, we need four invisible forces – love, death, power and time. We must love because we ourselves are loved – even though our loneliness often makes us believe the opposite. We must have an awareness of death in order to understand life fully.

We must struggle in order to grow, but without allowing ourselves to be deceived by the power that is gained through that struggle because we know that such power is worthless.

Finally, we must accept that our life – regardless of whether or not we believe in the paradise that follows – is at this moment caught in the web of time, with all its opportunities and limitations. Therefore, in our solitary bicycle race, we must behave as if time existed and do everything we can to value each second, to rest when necessary, but to keep going in the direction we have chosen.

These four forces cannot be treated as problems to be solved, because they are beyond our control. We must accept them and let them teach us what we need to learn.

We live in a universe that is at once vast enough to frighten us and small enough for us to believe that we have everything under control. As we pedal towards our goal, we must make a point of asking ourselves, “What is different about today?” The sun might be shining but, if it happens to be raining, always remember that all this means is that the dark clouds will soon have disappeared. The clouds disappear, the

sun remains the same and never goes away. In moments of loneliness it is important to remember that.

During such moments, let us remember the existence of that other village and, when the going gets very tough, let us not forget that – independent of race, colour, social situation, beliefs or culture – the people there are experiencing exactly the same thing. A lovely prayer written by the Egyptian Sufi master Dhu ‘l-Nun (AD 796-861) neatly sums up the attitude one needs to adopt at such times.

“O God, when I listen to the voices of the animals, to the sound of the trees, the murmur of the water, the singing of the birds, to the rushing of the wind or to the rumble of thunder, I see in them evidence of Your unity; I feel that You are supreme power, supreme knowledge, supreme wisdom, supreme justice.

“O God, I also recognize you in the difficulties I am experiencing now. God, let Your satisfaction be my satisfaction, and let me be Your joy, the joy that a Father takes in his child. And let me remember You with calmness and determination, even when it is hard for me to say: I love You.”


As we return to the simple truths that exist in us, we distance ourselves from the collective hysteria and can intervene realistically in the world around us. At some point tragedy crosses the path of every human being – it might be the destruction of a city, the death of a child, a baseless accusation or an illness that appears

without warning and brings with it permanent disability. Sometimes we inherit tragedies that belonged to previous generations, as happened with the South Road and the North Road.

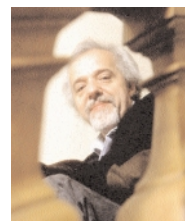
Meanwhile, we have love, death, power and time, which will help us to maintain our serenity the next time a man walks along the road through our village, be he crying or laughing. If we are confronted by a genuine problem, the newspapers will not be able to convince us otherwise.

If it is just another case of someone peeling onions, the saviours of the fatherland and civilization will not be able to go off and commit

crimes in our name. For it is always good to remember how we learned to ride a bicycle. It was not by calculating vectors, critical mass, G-forces or the ideal speed. It was not by sitting down in front of a teacher and having him explain to us how that two-wheeled vehicle manages to keep moving. It was not because someone said our bicycle was better and safer than someone else’s bicycle, and so we could cycle forth with confidence. It was not because we listened to this or that opinion, or because we saw endless TV coverage of the Tour de France or the Olympic Games.

It was because we dared to make that first pedal stroke. We tried, we fell off and tried again, until one day, almost miraculously, we achieved perfect balance. And we never ever forget, even if 10 or 20 years pass without our even getting on a bicycle. Can it be explained? No, it cannot. But we know how to ride a bicycle, and that is the important thing, because then we can visit another village, create a road, lose our fear and discover how much we have in common (including bicycles). 

Translated from the Portuguese by Margaret Jull Costa.



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