

Ana Teresa Torres:

“In times of hardship, we need the bonds that connect us in solidarity.”

Amid the turmoil that rattles the Venezuelan spirit, the psychologist, professor, and celebrated writer urges us to resist pessimism, highlights the value of communal life, and reminds us that “nothing is entirely stable or permanent.”

—In a conversation about the country's situation, a colleague from the state of Táchira asks: Will we always live like this? What would you answer?

I would say that I cannot answer with a simple yes or no, and I would add that measuring time in terms of our personal lives is different from measuring it in historical terms. For many people, the country's situation has become the only measure of time, but even so, it is necessary to understand the circumstances in perspective.

I know what I say is not consolation, but I try to weigh the circumstances and know a bit of history —ours and that of other countries. That helps to understand that nothing is completely stable or permanent, neither the good nor the bad. To give a few

examples, I had always thought that the United States' democratic system was untouchable, and now I am beginning to doubt it because there are signs that it is being undermined. Conversely, countries that endured long dictatorships, such as Spain and Portugal, have established democratic systems that have proven quite resilient.

–Faced with a crisis like the one Venezuela is experiencing, the temptation of “every man for himself” always arises, with each person retreating into their own bubble to try to survive. How can we revive community life and shared values to address the challenges posed by the government?

I understand that for some people isolation may be a way to protect themselves, but in my opinion, it is a mistake. Precisely in moments of crisis is when we need others the most. In times of hardship, we need the bonds that connect us in solidarity. For that, it is not necessary to surround oneself with many people, but instead with those with whom we share values, memories, and affections.

I know this is challenging, especially since community life has been disrupted by the diaspora that fractured family, friendship, professional, and neighborhood networks, but it is not impossible. It requires the will to weave strategies and ensure that bonds are not lost, even creating new ones with people who enter our lives for different reasons.

–Perhaps more as a caricature than a portrait, the Venezuelan is described as a permanently happy, smiling, optimistic being. But now, clearly, the soul of the Venezuelan is pierced by rage, pain, pessimism, and above all, fear.

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How can these two sides be reconciled, and how can one navigate these emotions to keep moving forward?

Certainly, Venezuelans often have a lighthearted way of understanding circumstances, but to assume that we are always happy and optimistic is a big leap. I don't know when this image was created, which distorts us and does not represent us properly. It probably merged an image of Caribbean sun and musical joy, which may sometimes exist, but obviously not always, and which is more an accepted and publicized image than a reality.

Rage, pain, and pessimism are common human emotions that are also present in us. Reconciling them with others of a different kind is a properly human task: knowing when to laugh and when to cry, when to fear and when to trust, when to be happy and when to suffer. It does not benefit us to think that we were once happy and optimistic, only to find ourselves in the opposite state now, as it can lead to pessimism. The challenge is to be able to find, even in unhappy situations, the moments that bring us joy.

–The country that aspired to a gradual transition now finds itself plunging toward the opposite extreme. Experts report that censorship is increasing, while the government forces citizens to accept and repeat its narrative under threat of severe punishment. How can one resist and cling to the truth amid this scenario?

This was many years ago, but I still remember a conversation with a woman who had been born and spent most of her life under a totalitarian regime. She was an educated person, spoke several languages, and had extensive historical and artistic knowledge about her city, Riga –the capital of Latvia. She earned a living teaching it to tourists. Someone asked her what life had been like

behind closed doors, when it was essential that her family and she herself followed the steps of a Soviet education. Her answer was roughly this: “My family was always in opposition. I was educated in a Soviet republic, so I learned very well the value of silence, but Sovietization was something outward-facing. At home, we were not communists.”

I thought I could hear in her words the pulse of resentment that persists when so much humiliation has been suffered, so many insults endured, so many people killed, and at the same time the pride of having resisted.

–The discourse that constantly appeals for help from the international community is growing. Has it been proven that we Venezuelans are incapable of solving the problems we ourselves created?

Once again, I appeal to the historical perspective on events. Which country has resolved its crises without the cooperation of others? I cite a few examples: In World War II, the alliances between democratic countries were key to defeating the Axis of Nazism and Fascism. The democratization of European countries that remained under Soviet rule for more than forty years was not exclusively an internal struggle, but also relied on the help of other countries. Even closer to home, Bolívar asked President Pétion of Haiti for help to organize expeditions, sent diplomatic missions to the United States and Great Britain, received financial aid from the Sephardic colony in Curaçao, and benefited from the participation of foreign soldiers in the War of Independence.

International aid is not a demonstration of incapacity, but a resource that has been used from ancient times to the present all over the world. To think that needing help to solve problems

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—political or of any other kind— is a sign of weakness is both a naive and, at the same time, arrogant way of seeing things.

—In Venezuela, people are always looking for a savior —with the hope of restarting history and reaching that elusive bright future. Has the time come to give up on that idea and understand that there will be no easy or quick way out of our drama??

There are never easy and quick solutions for serious and complicated problems; by now, that seems obvious. On the other hand, the idea of salvation is a messianic idea —the hope that someone will come to save us is deeply rooted in humanity, and not only in Venezuela, although among us, the utopia of restarting history in search of a bright future is an illusion that dates back to Bolivarian times and has been spurred at different moments in contemporary history.

History, like life, cannot be restarted; it can only continue, trying to build on the good that has been left behind and to correct the bad that persists. Reconstruction is arduous work, with bright and dark moments, with advances and setbacks. It benefits from capable and committed leaders, but it is built through collective effort. That is why what we saw earlier is important: preserving bonds with those who share our values.