

Good evening, dear friends! Parev sireli paregamner!

Today marks Hrant Dink's birthday. Today, Hrant turns 72. And once again, he is here among us, here by our side...

It happens from time to time. As though he can hear our voices. He rises from where he lies on that pavement, joins us, reaches out and touches us, lends us a hand. And then, quietly, he returns there and lies face down again.

We know this. First and foremost, his beloved Rakel and his children know it; and so do those who were shot alongside him that day, yet remained standing and kept telling his story and carrying his words forward. We know this.

He first made us feel his presence in the streets of Istanbul, resounding with the cry, 'We are all Hrant, we are all Armenian'. Sometimes we feel it at the commemorations outside his newspaper, Agos, every 19 January; and sometimes at the 23.5 Hrant Dink Site of Memory and Hrant Dink Foundation; or during the International Hrant Dink Award ceremonies...

Whenever he sees another of his dreams coming true, he simply cannot contain himself. With that unmistakable Hrant enthusiasm, he comes running and joins us.

We do know this so well, because, at such moments, we feel cleansed; together, we begin to heal...

Because the journalist Hrant Dink was also a healer... He worked with his hands. When he spoke to people, he could not help but reach out and touch them. And everyone he touched would undergo a change, a transformation. Because he carried within him enough love and warmth for everyone, and he shared this gift bestowed upon him with an utterly spontaneous, almost unrestrained naturalness.

Like every healer, as he healed us, he too was healed. Because we, Turks and Armenians, had fallen ill some hundred years ago...Because of all that was inflicted and all that was endured on these lands...

The path to healing would be through reaching out and touching one another. Through speaking while reaching out to one another...Through conversation, we would understand each other, accept each other, and face our past.

Hrant was a storyteller. Through the stories of ordinary people, he told the larger story of his ancestors, a story that had long been denied to the people of Turkey.

'Have you ever wondered why they disappeared?' he would ask, gently testing what he himself called our 'locked consciences'. He did so without accusing or judging. He spoke the language of making peace — the language of peace.

What he had begun to tell through his articles in Agos, he later carried into meetings across Turkey as he joined the intellectuals of the country. Like a dengbêj, a traditional minstrel, he travelled across Anatolia, telling his story wherever he went.

He was an Armenian with a century of history in him!

Along this journey, he went beyond struggling for his own identity. Over time, he became an active defender for the cause of democracy and human rights in Turkey.

Hrant lived by reaching out to individuals and communities of different identities, touching their lives and building bridges between them.

I was one of the people my friend touched.

To tell the story of his extraordinary life, I wrote the 700-page book *Hrant*, completing it in time for another birthday and offering it to him on 15 September 2010. I wrote the book to lift Hrant up from that pavement where he had fallen. I built it around the voices of his family, first and foremost, and of those who had witnessed his life and his struggle most closely. I did not lift him alone. Together, all of us lifted him.

Years passed. Meanwhile, the Friends of Hrant have continued to organise the commemorations every 19 January and followed the murder trials that spanned over years, creating a new record for collective memory. The Hrant Dink Foundation was established. Oral history studies, conferences, publications and field visits followed one another, giving voice to the silenced past of Armenians of Anatolia.

And at the former premises of Hrant's newspaper, *Agos*, the 23.5 Hrant Dink Site of Memory came into being.

The Site of Memory, which presents Hrant's life alongside Turkey's recent history and its policies towards minorities, was also touched by an artist's hand. The great master Sarkis created a magical Room of Remembrance and Offering out of the storeroom next to Hrant's office, where old newspapers had once been piled up; and there, Hrant's book found itself transformed into a timeless wall clock.

Through all of this, in a sense, a shared collective memory has been built around Hrant and his legacy.

It was over the course of these years that 15 September, Hrant's birthday, became the date for presenting this award to you—to human rights defenders from Turkey and around the world who have devoted their lives to the struggle for freedom and justice, just like Hrant.

Dear friends!

The spirit of our times is forcing us all into a dark era. Across the world, and here in our own country.

And yet, despite everything, we want to embrace hope.

Because Hrant remained hopeful even when he was living through the darkest of times. And he always stood for peace.

As early as *Agos*'s first year, when signing a declaration for peace, he went so far as to say: 'May war meet its death through my signature—and may my own death come through Peace!'

Today, as we celebrate the laureates of the 18th International Hrant Dink Award, on this evening of solidarity and sharing, we say once again 'peace, against all odds', and we are honoured to keep growing this hope together with all of you.