

Testimony to a forgiving heart

BY PAULA GREEN



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South Africa recently celebrated the 10th anniversary of its Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This notable experiment in justice stands as a landmark in the international quest for legal and psychological procedures in the transition following mass violence and is the benchmark against which all other truth and justice processes measure themselves. On the world stage thus far, there have been no other commissions that have come close to what South Africa has managed by way of balancing truth, justice and compassion, while also preventing revenge killing and new cycles of violence. It is partly due to the stunning moral leadership of former President Nelson Mandela and the commission's chairman, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, that this complex process achieved extraordinary outcomes.

Three hundred kindred spirits from 21 countries gathered in South Africa in November for a conference sponsored by the University of Cape Town psychology department and spearheaded by Dr. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, the renowned Truth and Reconciliation commissioner, author and professor. Participants and presenters alike were drawn by the visionary role and remarkable impact of the commission in promoting the field of postwar communal reconciliation and forgiveness. The aim of the conference was to explore this impact, to expand applications of healing in other social and political conflicts, and to celebrate the 75th birthday of Archbishop Tutu.

As a fellow traveler in the world of healing, reconciliation and peacebuilding, I was invited to present aspects of my own work and insights as the director of Karuna Center for Peacebuilding and as a professor of conflict transformation at the School for International Training. I chose to focus on two case studies: Karuna Center's six-year community building and reconciliation project in Bosnia and the Conflict Transformation Across Cultures (CONTACT) Program at the School for International Training. In Bosnia, the Karuna Center invited German and Jewish members of a post-Holocaust group to talk with our Bosnian participants about the way that trauma passes down through generations. At the CONTACT program, participants from war-ravaged countries around the world gather for an annual summer institute, where themes of reconciliation and forgiveness are explored and experienced. The theme binding these two programs, and indeed much of the conference, is the healing potential of cross-conflict exchanges, where opportunities exist to narrate personal stories, bear witness to the reconciling journeys of others, develop and receive empathic support, and take further steps in the healing process.

Although many Truth and Reconciliation commissioners spoke, the keynote address by Archbishop Tutu was certainly a highlight of the conference. At 75 he is as sprightly and filled with light and wisdom as ever, reminding us that "it is our duty to be joyful." For one who spent most of his life fighting the horrors of apartheid, that itself is a testimony

to a forgiving heart. He reminded us that we are all "God-carriers," that we "stand on holy ground" when we contemplate the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and that we are reminded to be deeply humbled by the capacity of victims to forgive those who committed such "demonic acts."

With him on the dais were several mothers whose sons fell victim to the apartheid regime; each spoke of her personal journey to forgiveness and the release that came with letting go of hatred and desires for revenge. The humbleness and beauty of these women touched me deeply and I agreed with the archbishop when he called them the "mothers of South Africa." The mothers spoke of their gratitude for the commission and their wish that we live to see the miracle of "all South Africans together as one Rainbow Nation."

Conference presenters, both scholars and practitioners, covered a wide range of topics. I learned that many in South Africa believe that the Truth and Reconciliation process is incomplete because reparations have been so meager and slow in coming, that prosecutions are necessary for the many apartheid leaders who never sought amnesty in exchange for truth, and that the vast disparities in wealth and privilege that still exist must be addressed if South Africa is to continue a peaceful transition from apartheid to democracy and majority rule. I felt at times overwhelmed by the tasks of healing that face the global community and at other moments uplifted by the living examples of those who have embarked on this path.

My own questions center around what level of mutual understanding and healing is possible between direct victims and perpetrators, because I believe that we cannot afford to wait for the second generation to take on the mantle of healing for their parents' generation. There are so many violent conflicts in the world now, and we are at such a dangerous crossroad. How each of us re-humanizes the "other," manages anger, blame, guilt and shame, and develops compassion and empathy for those who suffer and those who perpetrate, all our actions and responses matter enormously. Much depends on whether we can stand on Archbishop Tutu's "holy ground" and be "God-carriers" of truth, justice, compassion and peace. The challenge and responsibility belongs to each of us.

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