



Memory, Narrative and Forgiveness *Reflecting on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Ten Years Later*

Three hundred kindred spirits from twenty-one countries gathered in South Africa in November for a conference sponsored by the Psychology Department of the University of Cape Town and spearheaded by renowned TRC Commissioner, author, and Professor Dr. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela. Participants and presenters alike were drawn by the visionary role and remarkable impact of the TRC 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 Desmond Tutu, the TRC chair.

As a fellow traveler in the world of healing, reconciliation and peacebuilding, I was invited to co-present aspects of my own work and insights. I chose to focus on two case studies, one the CONTACT Program and the other a long-term community building and reconciliation project in Bosnia. Our theme was 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 one's own healing process. Our session, which was placed on the first morning of the conference, was well-received and elicited a strong discussion of the potential for mutual healing across time, distance, and particular conflict dynamics. I think it illustrated our models well and might encourage further cross-cultural explorations of successful paths and practices of reconciliation and forgiveness. Later in the week, I also moderated a number of other presentations, each of which was rich and full of learning opportunities.

Although many TRC Commissioners spoke, the keynote 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 TRC, 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 TRC 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 dealing with the possibilities and challenges of forgiveness, the particular roles of victims, bystanders and perpetrators in the reconciling process, the lessons of the Holocaust on second generation transmission of trauma, the relationship between social healing, reparations and justice, and much else. I learned that many in South Africa believe that the TRC 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. My understanding of the complexities of the postwar forgiveness discourse deepened significantly and 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, creating new consciousness or repeating old patterns of separation. 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.



KARUNA CENTER FOR PEACEBUILDING, INC.
447 WEST STREET
AMHERST, MA 01002
www.karunacenter.org