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Memory, Conflict and Space



Time and Space for Healing Old Wounds

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I am the Founder/Director of a South African NGO called The Institute for Healing of Memories. Although we are a small organization we have an outsized reach, and we facilitate healing and reconciliation in areas of conflict and oppression in many parts of the world. The heart of our work is what we call Healing of Memories workshops. These are residential weekend-long communal experiences for people who carry unresolved pain, anger, and grief about the past. Our method originated in 1994 as a program of Cape Town's Trauma Centre for Victims of Violence and Torture where I was the Chaplain at the time. Only four years previously while still in exile in Zimbabwe I had received a letter bomb from the apartheid state. In the explosion I lost both my hands and one eye. Healing of Memories work is in part an outgrowth of my own experience in healing from my injuries, physically, emotionally and spiritually.

When I returned to South Africa from exile, I soon realized that everyone in the country had been damaged by the apartheid experience, no matter what side of the conflict they were on. I also discovered that everyone had a story to tell and many people were eager to unburden themselves to anyone who would listen. Soon after I returned, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission under the leadership of Archbishop Tutu got underway. Working with different people including a group of interfaith religious leaders, we devised the Healing of Memories workshops in parallel to the Commission's work. They were intended to help the many people who, for a variety of reasons, were not able to appear before the Commission, but who nevertheless carried deep inside them a significant burden of unacknowledged pain. While Healing Memories work sprang from our commitment to help people heal from the brutality and humiliation of apartheid, it was not long before word of our success began to spread much more widely and we soon found ourselves with invitations to lead workshops in other countries that had experienced conflict and oppression. We have now worked in many different contexts of conflict, violence, and oppression across the globe, with the result that I spend much of my life on airplanes.

So what is it that we do? And what is a Healing of Memories workshop? Briefly, we create what we refer to as safe and sacred spaces where people who carry unresolved pain and "poison" from traumatic pasts can come together and tell their stories to one another in an atmosphere of deep and respectful listening. There their pain is acknowledged and they are honored for the sacrifices that many of them have made and they are enabled to move into the future once again with hope.

The space, both physical and metaphorical, in which this healing work unfolds is critical. Our workshops typically are weekend long residential experiences held in unpretentious, secure venues. People are provided with a comfortable bed and simple meals for whose preparation they need take no responsibility. Especially in developing countries where daily existence can be a struggle, even dangerous, this secure and nurturing environment provides a refuge that allows people to set aside the cares and distractions of home and family life and begin to move deep within themselves. In addition to the physical aspects of the venue, we define an emotional space within which people work by asking all participants to agree to certain ground rules. These include being present for the entire workshop, observing strict confidentiality, and listening respectfully to one another without criticism or giving unasked for advice. Taken together, these precautions help define what we

refer to as a safe and sacred space. It is one in which participants feels valued and respected and which affords them an opportunity to look deeply into themselves, often for the first time.

A workshop is not an intellectual exercise; rather, it is a powerful psychological, emotional, and spiritual journey both in the sequence of activities that unfold during the weekend and in the emotional path taken by the participants as they remember their painful memories and re-experience and re-examine the feelings associated with them. We begin moving people into feelings as soon as possible because that is where both the pain and the possibility of healing lie. We use a variety of emotional triggers for doing this. I am sometimes asked, "Don't you think it is a bit dangerous to plunge people into their feelings so abruptly?" In our experience, it is not. The reason lies partly in the safety that surrounds the physical and emotional aspects of the space we create and partly in the sense of affirmation that people receive the moment they walk in the door. There, each person is greeted with compassion and warmth and is treated as a person of great value.

Perhaps it is worth quoting some introductory remarks that I often make at the start of a workshop. "This workshop will provide you with an opportunity to tell your story and share the pain of what brought you here. We hope you'll leave some of your burden behind and be able to move on with the rest of your life feeling lighter. For many of us, this can be a challenging path to walk, but we offer you the opportunity to take one step. However, it can be a giant step and in some cases it may even be life- changing." So, to the conference theme of "space," I would also add the notion of "time." Both were components of whatever historical conflict occurred, and both are equally important elements of the journey of healing and reconciliation.

I often say that the workshop is deceptively simple. That is because it appears to flow from start to finish with a seamless inevitability. However, that sense of inevitability arises from a sequence of activities that has been painstakingly designed and is watched over by a team of facilitators trained in the flexibility and perceptiveness needed to encourage participants to move gently along the path. In this respect it resembles a liturgy which is also a sequence of performed elements designed to point celebrants towards the sacred. In the case of a Healing of Memories workshop it is the affirmation of the life of each person present that is sacred. Of course, powerful as the workshop is, for most people it is only one step on the road to healing and wholeness. So from this perspective, the workshop is part of a larger journey that can be the work of a lifetime.

During the workshop we use space in creative and symbolic ways. For example, during story-telling we divide the participants into small groups, each with a facilitator and when possible each group occupies its own small room. Chairs are drawn together into a tight little circle that creates an enclosure of safety around the intimate space in which memories are revealed and shared. It is a time of soulful telling and deep listening. A key part of the healing process is that for many participants this is the first time that their suffering has been acknowledged, and that acknowledgment is vital. Acknowledgement is not the same as knowledge. With acknowledgment we recognize the impact that terrible events had on the lives of individuals. As the story telling continues, there is an atmosphere of solemnity and depth in which feelings such as sadness and anger, even hatred, are expressed and accepted by the group. There are also light-hearted moments marked by smiles and laughter when joy and playfulness emerge. By a mysterious sort of alchemy, the loving spirit of acceptance generated by the group transforms all that has been said into something beautiful. That is because what has happened affirms the dignity and worth of each human life. In this way the past becomes redeemed.

By the last day of the workshop the mood has changed. When people no longer feel victimized and let go of their burdens, they are able to become once again agents of history who shape and create their world. We give life to the truth of this transformation in the plan of the final day of the workshop. The space opens up, and everyone rejoins the larger group. There, people are invited to create a celebration of their own devising that marks this rite of passage from victim to victor. The life energy of each participant is mobilized, and in the ensuing hustle and bustle of planning and preparation people come to embody the sense of empowerment that they gained in the experience of the previous day. No two celebrations are ever exactly alike. What they have in common is a wondrous mix of sadness and joy, solemnity and laughter. There are songs, dances, skits, and poetry. One particular performance comes to mind. At a recent workshop in the United States a group of African Americans presented a rap using verses from Ecclesiastes 3 that was jaw-droppingly creative:

To everything there is a season, a time to every purpose under heaven:

A time to be born, a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up what has been planted,

A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to breakdown, and a time to build up,

A time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.

Nothing could better express what a Healing of Memories workshop is about.

Let us now turn to a larger stage. It is not only individuals, but also countries who travel a journey of healing and reconciliation. This must surely be why I am invited to travel so widely to places like Rwanda, Northern Ireland, Bosnia, and Sri Lanka where conflicts have not only left deep wounds in individuals but have rent the fabric of society itself. If the journey for individuals is measured in lifetimes, for countries it is likely to be measured in generations. For us in South Africa, for example, now almost 20 years after the advent of democracy, a much longer road still lies ahead of us.

The journey towards the healing of a country, as with individuals, is likely to be marked by smaller healing events along the way, and key among them, once again, is acknowledgment. That is why formal apologies at the national level are so important. Since this is an event being held in the United Kingdom, I will use two examples that involve recent actions by the British government. However, Britain has no monopoly on instances of this sort and examples exist in many other parts of the world.

In 2010 the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, apologized for the Bloody Sunday massacre that occurred in Derry, Northern Ireland nearly 40 years ago. Fourteen unarmed people died on that occasion and many more were injured at the hands of the British army. It is worth reading the remarks of the Prime Minister because his powerful and unequivocal language would have been profoundly healing for many who heard his words.

The conclusions (of the investigation) are absolutely clear. There is no doubt, there is nothing equivocal. There are no ambiguities. What happened on Bloody Sunday was both unjustified and unjustifiable. It was wrong. Some members of our armed forces acted

wrongly. The Government is ultimately responsible for the conduct of our armed forces and for that, on behalf of the Government, and indeed our country - I am deeply sorry.

This apology changed things. The victims are still dead, but the survivors felt that finally what was done to their loved ones was acknowledged in a public way, even though the Prime Minister himself was only a child when it happened. The larger public, on whose behalf the acknowledgment was offered, may also be touched, so hopefully everyone is changed in the process and the groundwork may be laid for future reconciliation.

Then last month, the British Foreign Secretary William Hague publicly admitted that the British government had tortured Kenyans during the Mau Mau uprising against British colonial rule in the 1950s. The Foreign Secretary expressed regret and announced that the government had agreed to pay 13.9 million British pounds to claimants as well as to build a memorial in Nairobi to victims of torture and ill treatment during the colonial administration. A lawsuit had been in the courts for years and had been steadfastly opposed by the British government which, among other things, claimed that any liability rests with the present Kenyan government and that it was too long ago anyway. When the court recently ruled that the lawsuit could go forward, the British government decided to settle out of court, quite possibly to avoid having a legal precedent set that would encourage similar claims being made by other people formerly colonized by Britain.. In fact, the British Foreign Secretary's statement of regret was marred by his explicit statement that this settlement does not set such a precedent (precisely because it did).

In instances such as these, the pain does not go away even though events may have occurred so long ago that many of the original victims are deceased. For those who survive and the descendants of all the victims, the aftermath still leaves what amounts to a gaping wound. Even when reparations are generous and they seldom are, if they are paid at all, they are always symbolic because they can never be commensurate to the damage caused.

Let us once again look at the example of South Africa. Under apartheid, people had some knowledge of the terrible things that happened, but there was little or no recognition of the impact on people's lives. In fact, many white people resisted acknowledging what had been done in their name, no doubt out of a sense of guilt and shame. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission under the leadership of Archbishop Desmond Tutu transformed the national conversation. For more than five years, day after day, the hearings of the Commission were broadcast on radio, and excerpts and commentaries appeared on television and in all the newspapers. In a highly perceptive book entitled, *Performing South Africa's Truth Commission*, the author Catherine Cole points out that the public media opened wide the space in which the events of the past were examined so that it included the entire country. After its hearings no one could convincingly deny the truth of what we did to each other and this was a significant step in the healing of those who suffered. There is another way in which the Commission widened the space for dialogue: it took the hearings to the people. The Archbishop, the other commissioners, and the Commission's considerable staff, to say nothing of an army of journalists, broadcasters, and technicians traveled to large and small towns throughout the country, where they sat on rickety chairs, spoke from unsteady lecterns, shared inadequate public facilities, and wept with the local inhabitants as the terrible stories of the apartheid years were recounted. Their very presence said to people, "You are important and your suffering mattered."

It is important to say that acknowledgment alone is not enough. Many beneficiaries of apartheid expect those who were oppressed under the old order to forgive and move on as if the past had not happened. These people would have us act according to what I call bicycle theology. This is when I steal your bicycle. Then six months later I come back to you and apologize, saying, "Yes, I'm very sorry, I stole your bike. Please will you forgive me?" Perhaps being a good person, you say, "Yes, I forgive you." Then I keep the bike! Acknowledging the harm inflicted is an important step in healing, but if we want full reconciliation we have to make restitution, including material restitution, in the instances where this is possible. Forgiveness and healing relationships involve returning the bike. In South Africa's case, inequality of wealth and land ownership continue to dog our footsteps and until real and substantial programs to level the playing field are put in place, neither full healing nor true reconciliation can occur.

That said, symbolic acts can have great value—a fact well appreciated by Nelson Mandela who undertook two journeys of reconciliation that had a substantial impact on the nation. Under apartheid, rugby was a white sport and the Springboks, the South African team, were detested by many blacks as the very symbol of apartheid. In 1995, only a year after President Mandela's inauguration, the Rugby World Cup was held in newly democratic South Africa. Mandela decided to use this as an opportunity to promote reconciliation. He courted and won over the team manager, who in turn insisted that the players learn the African words to the new national anthem, which they joined in singing publicly before every game. To everyone's surprise, the team did far better than anyone expected, and Mandela went to the stadium for the final match where he appeared on the field wearing a Springbok jersey. The Boks won the match and therefore the World Cup, and Mandela again appeared on the field to present the Cup amid the cheers of the white crowd. This spectacle was not lost on either the white or the black population. Later that same year, Mandela made another journey, this time to the all-white, privately-owned settlement of Orania to pay a call on ninety-four year old Betsie Verwoerd, widow of Hendrik Verwoerd. Her husband, the former Prime Minister of South Africa, was the architect of apartheid and governed during some of its ugliest days. Although Mandela was criticized by some black people for these initiatives, they nevertheless held up an ideal of reconciliation for the nation to aspire to.

In conclusion I would like to express appreciation to the organizers of this conference for inviting me to speak. The theme, "Memory, Conflict, and Space," has provided us an opportunity to examine our work from a somewhat different angle than is our usual vantage point, and that must surely be one of the goals of a conference such as this.