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A Space Where Healing Begins

by

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Abstract

My paper is a brief personalised account of - in part - my experiences with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and its process. It speaks in broad strokes of my own dialogue with the TRC, having testified before its Human Rights Violations Committee. At the same time it is a dialogue with the impact of individuals who have commented on or through individual testimonies such as mine. It is also an attempt to highlight the need for dialogue in South Africa, and argues that the TRC process despite its many failures and contradictions contains important lessons, sends out serious messages and warnings to people both in South Africa and the rest of the world. It is based on my experiences as "witness", as "victim", as "perpetrator", as "survivor", as "South African" - as human having to deal with the consequences of war. With this paper it is my intention to contribute toward the creation of "*safe spaces*" in which South Africans may begin the process of learning to talk with one another.

Written in memory and appreciation of all those who died for peace and freedom in South Africa.

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Despite the faults and problems associated with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission(TRC), it provided a space for some people to speak, to reach out, express their pain and face themselves. It also helped them to face the nation. This aside, it contains important lessons and it sends serious messages and warnings to human beings both in South Africa and around the world.

I share what I have gained after coming into contact with this process - offering in part a brief personalised account of my experience with and through the TRC process. Hopefully what I write will be a reminder to South Africans and people elsewhere in the world that the will to live together in peace can be far stronger than individual wills that may give expression to other emotions.

For this I endeavour to set aside my many moral and conceptual problems with the TRC, especially to the extent that it trivialises the lived experience of oppression and exploitation in South Africa. Committed as it is to national reconciliation, it too often played down the full extent of human suffering. This carries the danger of undermining the culture of socio-economic human rights and the need for justice that grew out of and through resistance to apartheid's socio-economic exploitation and its military-political domination. I also listened to my psycho-therapist's advice that the TRC, could in fact be my only hope of surviving the physical and psychological deterioration that was happening to me due to my experiences at the hands of the apartheid state.

My Space?

The TRC process was intended to provide a space within which people were able to speak and tell their stories of abuse and violation. For varying reasons this did not and does not exist

elsewhere in our society. This space was for me the most positive aspect of my contact with the TRC.

Although the actual hearings formed only a part of the complex procedural, ideological and political processes of the Commission, the hearings were the only contact which most people had with the Commission. Most people were unaware of the complex maze that constituted the basis for this artificial space controlled by the TRC Act, as well as personnel and procedures within the institutional framework of the TRC. At the time of my hearing in August '96, the TRC provided a space into which I could reach out in desperation. In many ways, for me, it was the "rolling of the dice". Up until then I had been denied an opportunity to tell my truth as I knew it and had to live, to survive within a context of pain and silence imposed by several truths and untruths. This was a context in which I had neither the space nor the ability to contest or counterpose perceptions about me or the process of which I was a part.

So like the many witnesses albeit for different reasons of my own, I sat in a witness box awaiting my chance to face South Africa and tell the world what had happened to me. I was asking for an opportunity to be judged only for who I was, in the context of what had happened to me. For me there was nothing further to lose, nothing worse could happen to me. However, in the immediate weeks, months and years that followed my few hours in this space, I came to realise how the complexity of the maze, to which I have already referred, would colour and re-colour my experience - how its limitations and positive aspects are bounded into a complex gamut of contradiction that needs to be learnt from and carefully communicated in a sensitive manner to our society as a whole.

My Testimony?

Since testifying before the TRC's Human Rights Violations(HRV) committee, I have been called many names, placed within several stories and given several histories. The most harmful narrative that has now become a part of my public face and I have to carry around with me. It is the narrative that places me within the confines of the agonised confessor or the betrayer that should be pitied, constructed since my testimony by individuals commenting on the TRC, the media and the TRC's final report.

Antjie Krog in her book, *Country Of My Skull*, includes a chapter called "the narrative of betrayal has to be re-invented everytime" in which she ostensibly uses a version of my testimony, that she edits to fit this narrative. Other pieces concerning me have titles such as "betrayal was the price of my family's lives", "MK member collapses after admitting betrayal" and "agonised confession moves listeners to applause". I am not only questioning the intentions and responsibility of these authors I am also expressing how they have, with serious personal consequences, impacted upon my life.

The following article, describing my testimony, is one example of the complex ways in which my testimony has been appropriated, interpreted, retold and sold:

"The pain was overwhelming, the tension almost unbearable - as Yazir Henry struggled for nearly an hour to tell his harrowing tale to the TRC's human rights committee, a gamut of emotions played across his pale face. At times his fine boned features, framed by his dark hair and eyebrows were cold and disdainful, and he gazed at the audience - or perhaps a few individuals in the audience - with undisguised anger.

It was an anger that was close to the surface, and it spilled over when the translator bowdlerised his recollection of an abusive Afrikaans phrase which a security policeman had used about him at one point in his traumatic detention. "I said 'fokking donner'!" he shouted at the translator, who had turned his words into a politer "man".

Several times he drew his lips back in anguish, baring his teeth in a way that turned his face almost skeletal . Occasionally he leaned his head right back on to his shoulders, trying to relieve the appalling pain that seemed to concentrate his neck muscles. His voice, interspersed with sobs, sighs and coughs fell and rose with his emotions. At times Mr Henry sounded like a young Allan Boesak, his high clear tone ringing through the huge hall.

With other phrases his voice cracked and shattered - especially when he referred to his comrade-in-arms, whom he had betrayed to the security police just as someone else had done to him. "I was 19, I don't think anyone in the world should have been given such a choice." He said of his decision to lead security police to Anton Fransch as a quid pro quo for them not killing his mother and four year old nephew. "The brutality and the tenacity with which they questioned me, and my knowledge of what they had done to others,...made their threat to kill my family very real."

At the end of his testimony, Truth Commission Chairman Desmond Tutu told him the audience had listened to his story "with deep reverence". "We hope that having told your story, there will be a lifting of your spirit, and that some of your nightmares may reduce."

Mr Henry dropped his head and wept again at the archbishop's words, and many in the audience rose to their feet and applauded him.

After a lengthy debriefing session with TRC staff, he later told journalists that he had heard clapping only as a background noise. "Nothing made sense to me. I'm extremely tired. I have so little energy left. I just want to be judged for who I am, that's all. I just want to be given a chance to start life again - I've been living in a nightmare." It was a nightmare of concentrated pain that will have etched itself into the consciousness of all who heard it. (Yon Yeld, Cape Argus, 7 Aug 1996)

Some Limitations

The TRC created an expectation within the hearts and minds of those who came before it as witnesses, that it would in some way be able to provide a form of immediate reparation. This happened at different stages and levels but was compounded by both the statement takers and the commissioners when they, at the end of individual statements and testimonies, asked witnesses what it was that they would want the commission to do to alleviate their personal and family situations.

After my testimony in which I had broken down physically, I had almost no contact with the Commission for almost a year and a half. I remember reading an email written by one of the commissioners almost two years later after being employed at the commission that "...in her medical opinion she thought I was on the verge of a psychotic breakdown..." The lack of sensitivity with which one's story was treated once it left the confines of that space and became part of the public domain was immediately apparent as my face and the story of my life was flashed across the country - on television, in newspapers, magazines and books out of the context in which I spoke. It was out of my control and done without my explicit permission.

Although some efforts from myself and my family were made to stop this, it became clear, the TRC had neither the time nor the logistical capacity to honour or protect the space it gave me to bear my soul and tell my story. The TRC had already moved to its next space, to its next set of witnesses. My life had changed completely from the point at which I sat in the witness box, to the time I had to be carried from the stage into a debriefing room.

In the two and a half years since occupying that space, I have survived one attempt on my life, I have been accosted and humiliated several times in public, for reasons directly relating to my entering and speaking in the space provided by the TRC. At the same time I am fulfilling dreams that would never have been possible had I not entered it. In spite of a number of limitations and difficulties, what was important about this space was that it provided, even if only briefly, the opportunity to face not only myself, but also everyone else - from Commissioners to the people listening in the hallways and elsewhere. It was an opportunity for me to face my past and the same time interface with the present, in ways that have enabled me to begin a personal journey of healing.

What good came out of it?

Following my testimony I could not interact with anybody, except my immediate family. It felt as if I had spent everything that was inside me and that the slightest bit of external pressure would finally and completely crush me. In the weeks that followed, my relationships with everything and almost everybody began to re-define itself. This transformation was so extreme that even the air that I breathed tasted differently. I could never have imagined what availing myself to the space - of breaking my silence, would do to my life. It seemed to take all courage and strength that I had from me.

There were people who were unable to believe or relate to what I had said. Despite the denials by individuals who were directly or indirectly responsible for what had happened to me, the human response to my willingness (driven by my instinct for survival) to face my past in a painful, open and truthful way, was huge. Although I received negative responses from some quarters, I received overwhelmingly positive responses. Most people who spoke with me directly or indirectly conveyed to me a message that suggested that we are all fallible and human - whether we wish to admit it or not. It made me realise that I had survived and needed to get on with the rest of my life.

In the two and a half years that has passed since I testified as a witness before the TRC, there has been a discursive combination of me breaking my silence and human support. This has enabled me to begin to come to terms with my past, take a firm grip on my present and with continued pain view the future with renewed hope . This process allows me to not only remember but also believe that we as humans are all interdependent, that we can only exist through our common humanity.

This experience has convinced me that it is possible to create '*safe spaces*' where we are able to face each other as human beings. It has persuaded me that we must face our painful history in order to realise that our future is one that we share. If we fail to do this it will be impossible to progress toward a future in which we coexist peacefully. The TRC initiated a process through which coexistence and eventual reconciliation may be achieved. It's up to all of us to make this possibility a reality.

Truth and Justice

The negotiated settlement in South Africa has left our society with an inevitable degree of continuity between the old and the new. It has been argued that this is in the interest of national reconciliation and that it will safeguard the nation against civil war. This has limited the framework of the TRC and hampered our efforts to obtain a truth that acknowledges the extent to which apartheid bedevilled society. It undermines an attempt to show the extent to which imposed separation and exploitation resulted in the alienation, estrangement and ultimately the militarisation of almost all the sectors of our society. It gave rise to a reality in which the security forces largely enjoyed impunity - and were backed by the ideological, political, economic, legal and psycho-social framework of apartheid.

The violent disruption of protest marches that have occurred recently in the Western Cape raise a number of concerns in this regard. The manner in which the SANDF and the SAPS, have chosen to deal with the conflict poses the question of why the new order is so similar to the old. It makes one wonder whether the lessons of our recent past are being integrated into post apartheid reality.

This, in turn, raises the question of the extent to which the TRC and the new South African state has held the former institutions of the apartheid, especially those of the armed forces, accountable for past abuses. Our new government, regardless of its arguments of political realism, must in the interests of truth and justice deal with the tyranny of our past in a more direct manner. Only in this way will the call "never again" reverberate through the nation with more than a hollow sound.

The indiscriminate failure to punish certain individuals, without exposing the institutional framework that bred and nurtured these individuals to public scrutiny, can only leave open a window for the continuation of past violations.

At the same time there has been very little acknowledgement by the overwhelmingly majority of whites who supported and benefited from the system of apartheid. There is, in fact, no conducive public space available for whites in which to admit that they benefited from apartheid and were caught up in a vicious system that in a *different way* also deprived and traumatised them. This failure makes it almost impossible for whites and others who supported the former regime to take responsibility for the past as a basis for creating a better society.

Accountability

Despite the rules governing amnesty, in the opinion of many who suffered at his hands, the decision, for example, to grant amnesty to Warrant Officer Jeffrey Benzien has not promoted reconciliation. It will, I feel, remain unpopular and continue to be contested and widely regarded as illegitimate - more so because Tony Yengeni and Ashley Forbes amongst others, who were tortured by him, publicly opposed his amnesty application.

There is a popular perception that he(Benzien) did not make full disclosure and his actions were disproportionate to his political motivation. He also showed very little remorse and in some ways continued to torture Yengeni, Forbes and others in his appearance before the Commission, as a result of the attitude he adopted towards them. He asked Yengeni to remember how he gave up not only his arms but also his comrade Bongani Jonas without the security police having to lay a finger on him. He asked Forbes to tell the audience that he (Benzien) had not only bought him ice-cream and books but also broke bread with him and played with him in the snow during his detention. I remember asking myself how a process that was supposed to be holding him accountable for his brutal and systematic torture of people could go so horribly wrong. I struggled with my anger and resolved not to participate in any further amnesty proceedings - even though I knew that the people responsible for

torturing and nearly killing me would apply for amnesty. I realised that the amnesty process was hampering my own efforts to deal with the trauma of capture, detention and the obligation to watch a comrade die in front of me from police fire.

The TRC's inability to provide a precedent for deciding who is to be held accountable and how, sends an unclear message to the SA population. How are we, as South Africans, to create, build and consolidate a democratic human rights culture on the basis of an official culture that continues to tolerate extreme violence in the enforcement of legislation that was itself illegitimate?

Reparation

Closely linked to the amnesty process is reparation. Central to the understanding of reparation policies as forwarded by the TRC is the realisation that reparation is necessary to the extent that it is possible. Only in this way can progress be made towards national reconciliation - as a basis for the promotion of a human rights culture.

It has generally been accepted and openly stated in the TRC Act that survivors and their families be compensated as a basis to counter-balance the generous and comprehensive amnesty process available to perpetrators. It has also been accepted both on moral and legal grounds that this be the responsibility of the present state.

It is not clear whether the government is ready to own this responsibility. The release of the TRC's Final Report, with its recommendations on both interim and more extensive reparation, has been ambiguously responded to by government. Its response has been confusing, inadequate and disconcerting.

Financial compensation alone is clearly inadequate and unacceptable - if this is intended to provide a quick-fix solution, that hastily seeks to close the book on the atrocities of the past. The groups of persons benefiting from such grants are limited. It excludes those who did not make statements and those who were victims of human rights abuses that do not fall within the ambit of the TRC's conceptualisation of victimhood.

The administration of Urgent Interim Reparation policies have proven seriously problematic as these reparations have been disconnected from the human drama that surrounded the space provided by the TRC. It has reduced the symbolic sense of the reparation of trauma, led to a re-experiencing of past trauma and in some instances created new traumas.

Although I feel that there is a place for individual compensation, there is wide consensus among survivors, that more needs to be done. I am not attempting to simplify the question of financial compensation. However, it is my experience that the acceptance of a small amount of money as reparation has in no way alleviated the depression, pain and frustration that typifies an unfinished process of mourning. And yet, the precarious socio-economic conditions that most survivors face, forces them to accept the limited financial aid.

Conclusions

It is important that my criticisms are viewed in a constructive manner. It is my hope as a person who has experienced war, and who to a certain extent continues to live in its shadow, that we in South Africa avoid another period of conflict.

Despite all its problems, the TRC provided a space where people could face, however painfully, the atrocities and abuse of their past. Crucially, the space set up and controlled by the TRC was an important one that must be adapted and extended to other sectors of our society. South Africa remains a deeply divided society. It needs safe spaces in which people can continue to tell their stories and where dialogue can continue - or begin to take place.

It is my contention, that we in South Africa, ranging from top government officials to ordinary people in the street, must stop and take a deep introspective look at ourselves. We need to realise that although a lot rests on the shoulders of government, each and every South African has a responsibility to ensure that the lessons of pain and suffering that penetrate our daily lives is acknowledged and addressed. The price paid by those witnesses who testified before the TRC is only the beginning of a process that must be carried forward by each and every one of us. The TRC has initiated a process, it has not healed the nation.

I have been a part of a larger group of combatants who have experienced military demobilisation, the consequences of a loss of prior educational opportunities, serious post-war trauma and chronic unemployment. Although I have known a sense of social and personal disintegration, I have come to realise that healing must take place within and through each and everyone living in SA.

I have also discovered that the pain of facing the past is both bearable and possible within a context of caring and wrestling with the truth of past injustices. Painful as it is, the truth should not be suppressed. Apartheid affected everybody, everyone has a story to tell. People need to be given the opportunity to express these stories since there are different perceptions of truths. These perceptions need to be addressed within a context of calm and tolerance. I have tried to tell my story and share my truth. I am also still trying to make sense of my story for myself and continue to discover what is my truth.
