

Recalling South Africa

Memory Work across Time and Space

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1 Introduction

I remember well the time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). I had come to South Africa a few months before the start of the first hearing, as a “bright-eyed and bushy-tailed” twenty-something enthusiastic about witnessing and partaking in this time of transformation in the country. At that time I only knew South Africa from my youthful times of rebellion in the German anti-apartheid movement. I loved the sincerity and courage with which South Africans approached the task, even though it was clear from the start that this would be a tremendously painful exercise. I recall going to one of the first hearings of the TRC and being warmly welcomed when I shared my interest in memory work based on my experience of having led youth exchange visits to concentration camps in Poland and inter-generational dialogue projects in Germany.

In a short space of time I came to know a set of widening circles of the people leading, working in, contributing to, and accompanying the TRC process. It was much the same people who stuck with it until the end and who patiently kept engaging in conversation with the never-ending stream of researchers and visitors coming in and out of South Africa at the time, wishing to somehow capture a piece of this extraordinary moment and process. Brandon Hamber was one of these dedicated contributors to the TRC process, and I have appreciated his work ever since because it stimulates questions that continue to intrigue me too, about how individuals’ healing processes link to broader societal transformational agendas. I recall a number of conversations and seminars at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVr)¹ in which we debated how communities could be more involved, what a genuinely safe space would look like for telling stories of great harm, and how to stay out of “rescue mode”² while being present to people who had lived through the enormous brutality of apartheid policy and practice.

Reminiscing, I observe us now in South Africa at another juncture in time. While I am writing this comment, xenophobic attacks are – again – targeting so-called “foreign nationals” in South Africa. People, most of them from African countries further north, are being chased from their homes, their shops looted and their livelihoods, if not their lives, taken from them. It seems that both the “othering” and the high level of violence embodied in apartheid policies and practices, themselves rooted in colonial conquest, have lingered and found new forms and avenues for their perpetually de-humanising patterns. I wonder about the appropriate response in the now, thinking about the work done during the TRC, recalling the disillusionment that set in quite early with regard to what the process could really achieve. The TRC marked a moment in time but was unable to shift the entrenched societal divisions. It allowed us to attain some truth in some cases but also left us with an overwhelming sense of the work still to be done. The TRC reached only a limited number of people in a direct, tangible way, yet it left behind a footprint of the nation’s attempt to “face the past” for future generations to rediscover.

The first of these future generations is now coming of age in a way that finds voice, as we recently witnessed in the efforts of University of Cape Town (UCT) students to remove the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, an arch-symbol of the colonial past and conquest. The statue was still standing in the centre of the university campus, twenty-one years after “independence”. I recall being part of a group of students that protested the continued existence of the Rhodes memorial in the 1990s (then it was graffiti, now it was “poo-throwing”, which has become something of a Cape Town protest signature of late). I recall speaking to former students who had protested against the symbolism of the statue some ten years before us, in the late 1980s. Now, in 2015, the students were successful. The statue was removed after a three-week-long occupation by the students of the university’s main administration building. The students demonstrated

¹ See: <http://www.csvr.org.za/> [accessed 20 July 2015].

² This is also known as the “White Knight Syndrome”. Read more at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-white-knight-syndrome/200905/rescuing-yourself-your-need-rescue-others> [accessed 20 July 2015].

their courage, grit and willingness to dialogue, and it seems they came at the right moment in time. Some set up mini-dialogues on racial exclusion right in the middle of the busy campus, and all have vowed to continue a movement for social transformation, starting with the university. A new generation is finding its own struggle.

2 Transferring memory across generations – inaccessible emotions and disrupted meanings

What does this excursion into the past and present realities of South Africa have to do with Brandon Hamber's contribution on "Dealing with painful memories and Violent Pasts"? In my view Hamber also addresses a missing, or perhaps nascent, conversation between different generations in South Africa. I see a need for greater awareness of the potential and benefits of this conversation. The reality in South Africa is that the older generations know very well the impact of mass violence and the destruction of trust, relationships and belonging that Hamber describes: "A world is created where nowhere is seen as safe and where the line between death and extreme suffering on the one hand and ordinary living on the other is obliterated" (Hamber 2015, 3). South Africa has several societal fault lines in this vein that may speak to other countries' realities as well – fault lines of memory, in a sense, that persist long after or violent oppression have ended.

In South Africa one such fault line is the divide between those who can now access relative comfort and safety and those who cannot. For many South Africans, a war-like reality – a situation where "nowhere is seen as safe" – continues until today in the form of crime and domestic violence. On the Cape Flats, an area to which many black South Africans were forcefully removed during apartheid's racially based displacement schemes, the transgenerational transfer of trauma is palpable. Children are exposed to violence on the street and in the home from an early age and grow up to perpetuate the cycle. Other South Africans have managed to escape, or were privileged to never fully experience, these stark realities. This is the horizontal divide across the nation, mostly based on a still-racialised economic system. There is also a transtemporal divide, and this is the one I want to focus on in my response to Hamber's essay.

The current parent and grandparent generations experienced apartheid violence and exclusion in ways that their children may not even be able to imagine from the perspective of their own lives. Yet even those South African children privileged to now live lives sheltered from violence and poverty inherit something akin to "emotional residues"³; they absorb the unspoken and unprocessed past fears and sufferings of their parents. Children of (now) middle-class parents who were themselves deprived under apartheid experience this phenomenon often in ways that may be hard to discern. They may live with an ever-present feeling that all is not as rosy as it is made out to be when parents emphasise "how good the children have it now". They are often told that they are not suffering as the parents did in the times of apartheid. Yet they may have strong emotions and inexplicable sentiments they cannot make sense of. These are the ways in which traumatic experience, as Hamber (2015, 3) describes, "precludes its [own] knowing", as it is transferred

3 Raymond Williams speaks about this as "structures of feeling" and "formations of relationship" (see Williams [1989c] quoted in Eldridge/Eldridge 1994, 4; see also Kayser-Whande 2005, 11; 21).

into later generations' lives. The same children may have actual physical symptoms or be prone to illness, addiction and suicide without any overt reason.

Sabine Bode has written extensively about this phenomenon in the context of the German "war children" and "war grandchildren". When she began to research this topic in the early 2000s she discovered an unspoken pact of silence. Germans born between 1930 and 1945 described their war childhood as normal. They showed no interest in talking about it and seemed generally "cut off" from the emotional reality of their early years:

Here we have a group of people who had terrible experiences in their childhoods, and yet, for decades, never had the feeling that they had experienced anything particularly unpleasant. They are unable to engage emotionally with these experiences and, as a result, lack access to the most important influences of their childhoods (Bode 2004).⁴

She also describes the impact of this silence and inaccessible emotional reality on the later generation, the "children of the war children" (which is my generation). In some of her stories, for instance, descendants were having dreams with vivid details of a war which they neither experienced nor were ever told about. They dreamt their parents' actual unprocessed memories.

People born in the 60s and 70s have frequently told me about their dreams about the war. [...] Children can "inherit" the war fears of their parents, and how serious the consequences of such a legacy from the Forgotten Generation can be (Bode 2009).⁵

In South Africa it is especially the domain of the family that is little talked about when considering the broader societal transformation process. I concur with the critique Hamber levels at PTSD and trauma models being superimposed on a reality like South Africa where many cosmologies and modalities for understanding intra-psychic phenomena exist. I really appreciate his efforts to highlight the significance of "meaning-making" in the process of healing memories of a harmful past. Violence, as he says, "disrupt[s] meaning systems, ways of life and everyday existence" (Hamber 2015, 5). Hence, understanding what meaning is attributed to the past is not only "integral to recovery" but central to releasing the creativity that is required to imagine and make new lives at all. For most black South Africans, there is not really a desirable prior state of being to 'recover' to. Many white South Africans realise, too, that any nostalgia for the authoritarian past is not only 'costly' at a social level but also potentially inhibits their own prospects of the future. Something new has to be imagined, created and lived, and even now, twenty-one years into the 'new' South Africa, it still feels like just the beginning of that process.

4 Sabine Bode (n.d.), quotation from an excerpt in English entitled "War Grandchildren – the Heirs of the Forgotten Generation", available at www.sabine-bode-koeln.de/war-children/war-grandchildren/ [accessed 20 July 2015]. The original was published in German (Bode 2009).

5 Sabine Bode (n.d.), quotation from an excerpt in English entitled "The Forgotten Generation – The War Children Break their Silence", available at <http://www.sabine-bode-koeln.de/war-children/the-forgotten-generation/> [accessed 20 July 2015]. The original was published in German (Bode 2004).

3 What really matters – to imagine, to relate

I am not convinced that, in such processes, there really is a needs pyramid, as Hamber suggests, where some needs are deemed more important than others, depending on the time elapsed after the period of harm. I concur that securing basic survival and supporting the activation of existing resources and support systems has to precede specialised professional intervention where possible, so as to avoid prioritising a project-based, work-generating modus for professionals at the expense of existing local resources and healing practices. However, based on my own experience I would be inclined to work with Max-Neef's paradigm on human needs (Ekins/Max-Neef 1992) rather than a Maslowian hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1943):

Human needs must be understood as a system. That is, all human needs are interrelated and interactive. With the sole exception of the need of subsistence, that is, to remain alive, no hierarchies exist within the system. On the contrary, simultaneities, complementarities and trade-offs are characteristic of the process of needs satisfaction (ibid, 99).

In this regard, for instance, “transcendence”⁶ can be just as much the primary need in a situation of deprivation as anything else, depending on the traditions, values and viewpoint of the people concerned. I remember a lot of anger being directed at me when, during the time of the TRC, in a storytelling process known as the Healing of Memories, we suggested that perhaps participants from more impoverished areas would prefer more livelihood-oriented projects instead of a storytelling-based retreat experience. The notion of prioritising economic practicalities over psychological needs and even spiritual healing was strongly rejected:

What do you mean? That because I am poor all I want is food and nothing for the soul? How do you think we survive all along? How can we uplift ourselves when our spirits are down? No my dear, the workshop is all right for us. The healing is important even if you need bread (quoted in Kayser-Whande 2005, 213-214).

The question of how much emphasis is placed on healing and restoration as something akin to returning to a *prior* state of being and a *prior* state of relationships (especially since reconciliation implies this) has moved in me for a long time. In South Africa, for instance, the authors of the Freedom Charter⁷ were able to put into writing a thinking that was quite unimaginable in the reality of 1955. They displayed the vital ability to imagine the unimaginable. It seems to me that this is the key to activating potential in scenarios of social devastation – to (re)imagine, to dream new relationships and, based on these, to innovate and co-create a new reality over time. Being imaginative in a context that has defied and destroyed relationships is one quality at the core of social healing processes, yet it is often subsumed under practical and functional needs in countries emerging from war and destruction. While life after a physical injury

6 Transcendence has the spiritual connotation of coming to terms with a life event or story, in this instance regardless of the circumstances of the present. Verene Nicolas and Alastair McIntosh of Scotland's Centre for Human Ecology developed Max-Neef's suggestions into the “Wheel of Fundamental Human Needs”, which includes the need for ‘transcendence’; see www.verenenicolas.org and www.alastairmcintosh.com [accessed 20 July 2015].

7 In 1955, the ANC sent out 50,000 volunteers into townships and the countryside to collect “freedom demands” from the people of South Africa. This system was designed to give all South Africans equal rights. The Freedom Charter was the statement of core principles of the South African Congress Alliance, which consisted of the African National Congress (ANC) and its allies - the South African Indian Congress, the South African Congress of Democrats and the Coloured People's Congress. A copy of the charter can be found on the website of the African National Congress (ANC); see www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=72 [accessed 20 July 2015].

may be characterised by nostalgia for a prior ‘healthy’ state in the light of bodily woundedness, the notion of “social woundedness” does not really work on the same terms. Instead it requires, the creation of spaces in which it is again possible to “dream” new realities into being. This dreaming is not something ethereal but a tangible process in which the human ability to (re)create meaningful and substantive lives feeds off a generative impulse that is first imagined (or dreamt). This process may be in motion long before any action is visibly taken. In my observation it needs a quality of quietening, silence, and silent listening that can too easily be interpreted as a wish for denial or forgetting. Often only later generations live the dreams of the previous ones. Yet the failure of the dreams to become reality in one generation makes them no less important to that generation.”

4 Healing across time

Experiences across the generations in post-independence Africa, post-war Europe and the post-dictatorship Americas show that our vision of “dealing with painful memories and violent pasts” needs to be much more long-term. Hence, the inter- and transgenerational dimension, I feel, could form a stronger part of Hamber’s framework. He points out the limitations of any process aimed at dealing with the past, none ever “making good” completely: “Coming to terms with the past ... is a life-long process that is context-dependent and changes over time” (Hamber 2015, 7). I would suggest it is a transgenerational process that affects at least the next four generations. Indigenous wisdom – for instance, that of Native American and African traditions – would say that each of our actions affects at least the next seven generations. After four generations, as now in Germany, the impact of the past is no longer seen as in any way personal or direct. Yet a less tangible sensation of guilt can still be traced that may drive a young German to want to “go out and better the world” (see South African German Network 2011). I recall a conference on memory work in Cambodia a few years ago, where it turned out that most of the organisations hosting the conference had young German volunteers who had been giving pivotal support to the process (see Impunity Watch 2012).

What does this transgenerational outlook mean for the healing framework Hamber proposes? He suggests that “[h]ealing, therefore, is learning to live with situations of extreme suffering and integrating them into one’s life so that one can build relationships and engage productively, ensuring that loss does not dominate everyday experiences” (Hamber 2015, 8). This he describes as a continuum that changes according to context and individual circumstance – rightly so, in my view. However, as much as this may be the task of the generation most directly affected – to find a way to function in life again, to be able to move and not stay frozen in the moment of trauma or be stuck in a traumatic time zone – the task of the following generations is somewhat different and also needs to be noted in the framework. It may well be that the next generation busies itself with “making good” what to them is the suffering of the victimised parents. Children of perpetrators and beneficiaries may attempt to “make good socially” the deeds of the parents and grandparents with regard to these family members’ (often unacknowledged and unprocessed) responsibility for harm. Most of the generation that experienced apartheid seems to have a more outward focus. What matters now is to become economically successful and to climb up the social ladder. A following generation (perhaps only the third) may well find itself looking inward again and asking questions about the psycho-emotional realities of family and community. In this way, loss unacknowledged and unseen has a tendency to resurface, even if it has been ignored by a generation or two.

In Germany this happened in the 1980s, when the third generation after the war reached adulthood. Many small projects of oral history, of tracing what happened in one’s own town or family, emerged. Teachers incorporated such efforts into history lessons, sending their students on research missions to the local town hall. Perhaps not surprisingly, many such projects were met with hostility, even forty years after

the war, as Hirsch 2012 has outlined (the film “The Nasty Girl” by Michael Verhoeven, 1990, also gives a good illustration of this problem).⁸

Hence, although the aim may initially be, as Hamber says, to ensure that loss does not dominate everyday experience, later generations often feel called to go back to that loss and explore its implications more deeply. This is not least because memories of severe harm continue to drain energy even from the life of later generations, who can often make no link between their (frequently individualised, personalised or pathologised) illnesses, addictions, or suicides and the memories themselves. They are often unaware of how strong the broader society suffers from harm experienced in the past, and that such memory radiates across the boundaries of families and communities into national and trans-national systems.

5 Healing across space

In my years of working in the field of trauma and memory work I have not met a single person, including myself, who is not driven by a deep healing quest that ultimately stems from their personal biography. Sometimes this is hidden from consciousness, and I meet strong resistance, with statements like: “The cause I am involved in is bigger, and there is nothing personal in my being here”. The more my focus is on “helping” and “healing” others in ways that occlude the focus on self and on one’s own journey within this particular engagement and its modalities, the more I may need to look closely at the impulse that spurs me on. Psychologists may be familiar with this impetus of self-reflexivity. But within other disciplines related to the field of transitional justice, memory work and healing, I do not find a similar kind of readiness for reflection. Healing is often seen as something separate that needs to be “outsourced to the psychologists” or “comes later”. The personal needs to be contained, impersonalised and dealt with ‘professionally’, as if psychological hurt is infectious.

I believe that engagement for healing is not, and cannot be treated as, separate from the interveners’ deeply personal work of self-healing. If the two dimensions were indeed seen to be related, it would pose interesting questions regarding “professionalism” and the notion that professionals go and offer services to “others” who are deemed in need of such professional help. While, undoubtedly, there is merit to professional support systems and to rigour in the “art and trade of helping”, there is an element here that, to me, cuts across all professions that engage in processes of dealing with the past. Perhaps, invoking Steve Biko’s famous remarks, this is best expressed in the notion of a quest of what it means to be “truly human” (Biko 1987/1978)? What are we trying to remember, as humanity, in this collective quest to “make good” and create alternative realities for future generations to remember?

In that vein there is, as Hamber (2015, 8) states, a need to be wary of selling techniques or addressing a set of symptoms through a series of interventions. I agree with his sense that timing is critical and that different processes may prove beneficial at different moments and in different generations. I also suggest that a spatial dimension be taken into account, so that we ask not only *when* meaningful, transformative memory work can happen but *where* certain parts of this work can take place. Bear with me for a moment as I depict my own experience:

When I was involved with the TRC process in South Africa, my mother came to visit me from Germany. We went to one of the TRC hearings together, and she was deeply moved by the experience. I recall that we decided to climb Table Mountain together afterwards. It was during this walk that she suddenly opened up and related to me the story of her childhood. In eloquent and harrowing detail she painted a picture of her

⁸ *The Nasty Girl* (German: *Das schreckliche Mädchen*) is a 1990 West German film by Michael Verhoeven. The film describes the efforts of a German high school student to undertake an oral history project about her town during the Nazi era and how this leads not only to her uncovering unspoken history but also to her being socially ostracised. See www.bpb.de/shop/lernen/filmhefte/34132/das-schreckliche-maedchen [accessed 20 July 2015].

early years – born disabled, placed straight into a euthanasia programme of the Nazis, saved by her mother to then live through displacement, bombings, the rape of her mother by Russian soldiers, the hunger after the war and the flight from east Germany, then her later efforts to build a stable life and family. She spoke of still facing sleeping disorders, panic attacks and persistent nervousness, yet never considering that there could be a broader pathology than her own personal struggles. The story went on for several hours. I felt both bewildered and blessed at that moment. After so many years of searching for answers to the complex causalities around my sister's death (she starved herself to death as a teenager in 1981), I suddenly saw the mosaic puzzle of the family tragedy drop into a crystal clarity against the backdrop of history.

By adding the missing pieces of my mother's experience, I was able to trace some of what I had felt in my own body without ever having had an explanation for these sensations. One inexplicable sentence in my head started making sense: I often told myself, "You have no right to exist". Nobody had ever said that to me, yet these words played in my mind. Was I living my mother's experience of being considered worthless life upon her birth? Later, during a return visit to Germany, I asked my mother for more details on some of the events in the story. She looked at me blankly and said: "Really, did I say those things to you? I do not remember that." So strong was the need of her first-generation memory to conceal itself that, when in Germany, she could not remember some of what she had told me on Table Mountain. I suspect that in order to ensure her survival and sanity, such obstructions had literally become "emplaced" in her memory. I chose to respect this and allow her silence.

I learned from this incident that memory work not only takes us across time but also across space. This experience may help illumine some of the questions I have received from South African friends who have gone abroad because they felt they simply couldn't stand it anymore and had to leave that place. They may need a break from memory. It is often their children who have to come back and "search for the missing pieces of the story" (for an account of similar memory journeys, see Girulat et al. 2007).

6 Allowing closure, defying closure

When Hamber warns against a language of closure, I concur and would take it further, and argue: *at a personal and interpersonal level, closure is the felt sense of a temporary resting place in a journey of memory (work) across the generations.* Healing, in that sense, is more a dissolution of the stranglehold of the past on future generations than a resolution. In the end, it is the kind of narrative incision that interventions such as the TRC attempted to make on a broader scale. It means saying to each other: "Now we will tell a different story, even if that which is dreamt up is not yet our reality". Even if that which once was our reality still continues to harm: the 'in between' space matters. It is about the courage to dream in the face of a reality that persists even after it has supposedly disappeared. It is about the courage to face pain and allow it, even if this allowing becomes possible only a generation or two, or three, later. It is in the *allowing* of the continuities of pain – at whatever point in time – that a form of witnessing can take place. As Hamber (2015, 9) says, one needs to accept that these processes are "always contested, incomplete, and being negotiated and re-negotiated over long periods of time and through different [...] contexts." If laying the past to rest is possible, seeing, sensing, experiencing memories across time and space then become the faculties that enable some of the phenomena and pathologies to dissolve and disappear. Others remain, re-ignite and need another quality of attention, one that perhaps only the next generation can bring to them. The stories need to be told, while the silences need to be respected, even if this seems paradoxical.

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