

MEMORIES, HEALING, RECONCILIATION AND FORGIVENESS

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Introduction:

This paper attempts to investigate a trend afoot in the world today to promote dialogue, healing, and reconciliation between those who have been violated, and the perpetrators of that victimization. I will focus on three examples of this trend: 1. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa which attempts to bring dialogue between the perpetrators, the beneficiaries and the victims of apartheid.

2. Slavery and the situation between blacks and whites in America, and

3. A conference in Vienna in September, 1999 where there was an attempt to promote dialogue between the children of perpetrators of Nazi atrocities and the children of holocaust victims.

My particular focus is to look at these attempts at truth-seeking and reconciliation between victims and victimizers in terms of individual and societal forgiveness. Forgiveness is not a commonly used word in psychoanalytic discourse. Does dialogue and truth seeking always end in forgiveness or are some things too hard to forgive? Whatever the answer to that question, if the process of reconstruction and democracy is to prevail in the world, the politics of reconciliation have to be faced individually and socially. Even if in the present it is only possible to work towards forgiving dreadful and vile acts committed, the really important issue where victims and victimizers co-

exist, is how to transform the collective and personal pain of shared historical legacies, into a society where its members can live together in some kind of harmony.

Truth seeking and memory:

When we talk of remembering the past we are talking about memory. How we remember the past shapes how we are in the present. If we are filled with grievances and revenge, by definition this precludes our ability to love and forgive. John Keats in his *Ode on a Grecian Urn* said, 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know'. Let us investigate this matter of truth.

Lacan (1977, p. 118) said, 'Who is not personally concerned by the truth?' In a therapeutic situation, both analyst and analysand are immensely interested in, and attached to the truth. Sometimes it is not easy to speak the truth, nor to find the right words to express it, but psychoanalysis tries to ensure that a patient's speech, his or her words and stories are revealed in a holding environment which facilitates the comprehension and integration of our "unbearable truths". By holding environment I mean the safety a baby experiences when held and comforted by a "good enough" mother. This can be translated in the psychoanalytic situation to the "good enough" psychoanalyst metaphorically holding and comforting the analysand.

These same "unbearable truths" have to be dealt with in a societal situation. However, it is not easy to locate societal truth because there are so many truths. There is the personal truth, the social truth, the psychoanalytic truth, the historical truth and the political truth. For example, a woman in her late sixties was narrating her memories as an eyewitness of the Auschwitz uprising of a group of Jews to an interviewer from the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale. "All of sudden," she said, "we saw four chimneys going up in flames, exploding. The flames shot into the sky, people were running, it was unbelievable". Many months later, there was a conference of historians, psychoanalysts and artists watching the videotaped testimony. The historians claimed the testimony was not accurate and should be discredited as it was untrue. Historically, only one chimney was blown up, not all four. The psychoanalyst who had interviewed the woman profoundly disagreed. He said the woman was testifying "not to the number of chimneys blown up but to an event that broke the all compelling frame of Auschwitz where Jewish armed revolts just did not happen, and had no place. She testified to the breakage of a framework. That was historical truth" (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 59-60).

According to Jaques (1953; in Hinshilwood 1991) society itself has the potential to function as an emotional container (or a holding environment); hence the legitimacy and "authority" of certain social institutions as containers

of inchoate human experience and terrifying memories. The social institution where the politics of the (apartheid) past in South Africa was vividly re-lived, was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa:

The task of this seventeen member Commission was to establish the causes, nature, and extent of the gross human rights violations committed in the name of apartheid during the period between 1 March 1960 and the cut-off date (after 10 May 1994 and before the deadline 10 May 1997, Krog, 1998, p. 119), by conducting investigations and holding hearings. Broadly stated, the aims of the Commission were to return to victims their civil and human rights: to restore the moral order of the society; to seek the truth, record it, and make it known to the public; to create a culture of human rights and respect for the rule of law; and to prevent the shameful events of the past from happening again. The Truth Commission received 20,000 statements from victims, and nearly 8000 applications for amnesty from perpetrators. Amnesty was granted in respect of acts, omissions and offenses associated with political objectives and committed in the course of the conflicts of the past (Krog, 1998, p. vi-vii).

In general terms one could say that the majority of victims of apartheid were black (African) and the beneficiaries were mostly white. The perpetrators were

mostly the security forces of the apartheid state and stereotypically they were white Afrikaner male racists. The Blacks suffered inhumane forms of oppression and exploitation through enforced white racial superiority and segregation of whites and blacks. For example John, a man I knew well, lived with his family in a house in District Six near the center of Cape Town. When the Group Areas Act declared District Six a "White" area, this family, one of thousands of people who had their roots deep in the District area were rehoused on the Cape Flats, far from the center of Cape Town. Overnight, John's family found themselves in Bonteuwel, a dry, alien area without acculturation and modern conveniences. They lost the neighbors and friends of a lifetime.

In many cases stories were told that had never been told before. In this sense there really was a construction and re-construction of the apartheid past that now entered South African history. Dreadful and cruel acts were described in the so-called defense of law and order (apartheid). Stories were told about the killing, torturing, and disappearance of relatives and friends of the person giving his or her statement to the Truth Commission. People re-experienced unbearable memories of brutal and vicious actions committed against them or people close to them. The purpose of telling these stories was to remember and retrieve the past. To create a democratic and just social order we need to find ways of remembering that free us to

forget the past, so that we can stop suffering our forgettings, and as political beings start to act in the present (Hayes, 1998).

The Truth Commission, perhaps too naively, believed that creating the forum for telling the truth about what had happened would result in victims being able to forgive their victimizers. The whole structure of the Truth Commission was geared to contain all anger. The catchword of the Commission was "reconciliation". The Chairperson was an Archbishop of a religion in which forgiveness was the central theme. In many testimonies witnesses forgave too easily, neutralizing their anger in the service of healing. Other witnesses said they were unable to forgive and that their testimony had not improved the quality, nor had anything changed in their lives as a result of their testimony. To the best of my knowledge few victimizers owned culpability and actually apologized to the person or persons they had wronged. However, it must be remembered that the Commission in the face of a brutal past, kept alive the idea of a common humanity. Overall, the Commission's work was the beginning of a collective responsibility for what happened in South Africa during the regime of apartheid.

Slavery and the situation between blacks and whites in America

A similar reluctance to confront and perhaps forgive past wrongs echoes in the situation of slavery in America. On January 16, 2000, an article appeared on the front page

of the Los Angeles Times describing how Lisa Richardson, a Times staff writer was attempting to connect with her past, viz. her great-great-great-grandmother Lavinia Fulton Emanuel.

I invite you to picture Lavinia, a slave, married to another slave, John Emanuel. Lavinia was owned by a white man, William Fulton. Fulton's neighbor and brother-in-law, Jeremiah Dial, a white Scots-Irish Southern slave owner, lusted for Lavinia. The year was 1849. Lavinia's slave husband could do nothing to stop this. The result, a child, Ellen was born.

For the last ten years descendants of Lavinia and Ellen, about 50 to 80 Richardsons, offshoots of the black/white liaison of Lavinia and Jeremiah Dial, met regularly for family reunions. The family was legally defined black because of the black great-great-great grandmother Lavinia, even though there was a white great-great-great grandfather Jeremiah (just as Hitler defined who was or was not a Jew). The goal of the meetings was to find information about the black side of the family. The white side of the family was largely disowned. As one family member from Alabama said, "We do not seek to add white branches to our family tree: How could we ever unite with people whose kinship exists only because of Lavinia's pain". Are we seeing here a family with defensive layers of shame against having an ancestor who was a white slave owner? It does seem easier to define themselves as victims of slavery,

rather than own that by virtue of their blood connection with Jeremiah Dial, they too bore a collective responsibility for the old slave economy and the victimization of black slaves.

The author of this poignant article, Lisa Richardson, with great self awareness, wrote:

Growing up, I always thought it far superior to be descended from the oppressed than from the oppressor. To be the descendant of a slave master would be like having Nazi relatives; a shame not of your own making, yet inescapable and permanent. As a teenager, I realized that mine had been a delusional superiority. I am descended from both slave and master. And I was ashamed. Not of her, but of him.

Lisa Richardson described how in spite of their ambivalence, attempts were now being made by members of the Richardson family to connect with the white members of the family. Blacks were discovering that some whites were actually eager to meet their black cousins. Tentative contact was being made by the Richardson family with the descendants of white slave owners. The first baby steps were taken toward seeking the truth about a black and white family. However, it has taken several generations, and only now are blacks and whites beginning to look at some "unbearable truths" about their collective heritage.

In keeping with the present day trend to promote dialogue, healing and reconciliation between those who have

been violated and the perpetrators of that victimization, James Berry in an article in the Opinion section of the Los Angeles Times, August 6, 2000, wrote that the legacy of slavery, oppression and discrimination must be dealt with, overcome, and compensated for. Slavery had imposed conditions and an identity on people who had no choice and was woven into America's economy and social fabric. An admission of errors or terrible wrongs is not enough. Atonement, in addition to apology is what is needed. Atonement is a process of contrition, acts of reparation. It succeeds by changing public opinion, teaching values in the course of mending what has been torn apart, replacing right with wrong. For example, a committee has been created by Congress to investigate honouring and remembering the slaves who participated in building the White House in Washington. Perhaps building a monument would be an appropriate act of reparation.

A conference in Vienna in September, 1999.

The scene was a cocktail reception hosted by the Mayor at the Rathaus in Vienna. At the podium stood a woman with bright eyes, wearing an elegant pant suit. She told us she was born in Vienna to Jewish, Viennese parents, shortly before World War 11 broke out. At the age of 5 months she was sent to France, where she became what we now call a hidden child, shunted around, taken care of by first one Christian person, and then another. Her father visited her from time to time, but her mother remained in Vienna. The

first language the child learned to speak was French. Eventually she was re-united with her mother - a mother who spoke only German. A mother and a daughter had thus lost and needed to regain the bond of a common language. At night the little girl lay in her bed, and through the keyhole would watch her parents dancing Viennese waltzes. In the morning she asked her mother what had they been doing. Mother answered, "It is nothing to speak of."

The cocktail party was part of an International Holocaust Conference which brought together about 300 people to Vienna in the first three days of September, 1999, exactly 60 years after World War 11 began. The cataclysmic events perpetrated by the Third Reich provided the backdrop of the conference. Attempts were made to promote dialogue between the children of perpetrators of Nazi atrocities and the children of holocaust victims. Also, Austrians have traditionally regarded themselves as victims of German atrocities. Only now was Austria slowly starting to take responsibility for her participation with Germany, and her role as victimizer.

The title of the conference was, "The Presence of the Absence". Poignantly symbolizing the presence of the absence was the story told by the 60 year old woman at the cocktail party. Her mother's words, "It is nothing to speak of", were representative of dialogue in many families after the end of World War 11. The absence of dialogue created a formidable presence of an unacknowledged truth. Once again we are

looking at how hard it is to document historical truth and recover sometimes "unbearable truth" of what did happen.

Absence in many cases represented losses. A study presented at the conference illuminated to me how losses, unspoken but deeply sensed, had scarred both victims and perpetrators. Gabriele Rosenthal, editor of a book, "The Holocaust in Three Generations" published in 1998, described some of the findings of the study on which the book is based. Twenty eight families in Israel and Germany, Jewish Israelis and non-Jewish Germans, were interviewed by a team of researchers comprised of sociologists, psychologists and political scientists from Israel, West Germany and East Germany. The goal was to look at the process of how family history was passed down through the generations, in three generations of survivors and forced emigrants of the Shoah, as well as of Nazi accomplices and Nazi perpetrators. To find out how the real truth was manipulated and defended against.

The study found that in the families of Nazi perpetrators, children born between 1933 and 1939 had their own memories of witnessing crimes. Their parents denied and tried to hush up any talk of the crimes, and the children had to deal with the inconsistency of what they were told, and what they had seen and felt. Many started to feel paranoid. Children born in 1945 or later often found out about the war trials and the genocide for the first time when they went to school. In self defense their fathers

might say, "You would have done the same if you had lived at that time". Such children often became very depressed, some even committing suicide.

For the first time I thought about what it was like to be the son or daughter of a perpetrator of hideous war crimes, someone high up in the echelon of Nazi SS inflicting diabolical cruelty and harshness on people whose only crime was having Jewish blood. I met a 50 year old German judge. He was tall, blond and blue eyed. He told me when he was nine years old, his father had been shot because of his criminal activities during World War 11. I thought how particularly hard it must be to be the son of a nazi criminal. Sons after all have to identify with their fathers in order to successfully navigate the journey to manhood. What did a boy do with such a legacy? I wanted to talk to him, to find out what his story was, who he was, to recognize his humanity. I felt uneasy. Was I betraying my beloved murdered aunt by wanting to do that? I continued to listen to him, but remained silent myself. I needed some indication from him of his father's culpability in participating in the genocide of six million Jews. As a representative of those who had transgressed against me and mine, I wanted an apology from him. He said nothing, and our conversation ended abruptly with no sense of closure.

Rosenthal described how the study showed that in the families of the victims and those forced to emigrate, survivors were often silent about their painful, shameful

experiences. Fragments of stories about the past were talked about, that frequently did not quite make sense. Individual members of families who participated in the study sometimes disavowed extreme humiliation and degradation and focused on more heroic events. For example a grandfather in the study, a fraternal twin, was put in charge of the twin unit by Mengele. The Jewish survivor grandfather focused on how he had helped the twins put in his charge. He made no mention of the terrible tortures and experimentations (for example twins being sewed together) that he must have witnessed. No one in the family asked him about these things. There seemed to be a conspiracy to keep silent about this. Once again we see how shame and humiliation serve as defenses against a complete statement of historical truth. These resistances to tell the whole truth are present in both the personal, the social and the cultural domain.

I met a Jewish woman, Elsa, who had been born in Auschwitz in 1943. For the first 9 months of her life she was hidden by her mother in a shoe box under a bed bunk. For the first 9 months of Elsa's life, the very truth of her existence had been ignored. She was later told that during this period she never cried. Now she talked compulsively, hardly taking a breathe between words. For the first time I heard about tortures inflicted on the Roma and the Sinti from people who had personal experiences of these events. Yet another truth the meeting in Vienna helped unearth.

My mind went back to my own childhood. Ever since I

could remember I was urged to finish my food because of the starving children in Europe. That injunction never did make sense to me. My mother spoke very little about her war-time experiences. Just a few unrelated sentences, which she repeated, saying them each time in exactly the same way. One such sentence was that during World War 1 she, her brother and her mother had been evacuated from where they lived to France, where they were often hungry with not enough food to eat. She said this in an unemotional voice, and when I questioned her, she was unable to supply any further details or tell me what her feelings had been during this time.

During World War 11, I was a child in flight with my family from Poland. We lived for over a year in Bucharest, Romania because we were unable to purchase visas to leave. My sister and I lost our appetites and barely ate. In an effort to get us to experience hunger and then willingly ask for food, our parents starved us, giving us no food. Previously whenever I thought back to that time, I was enraged and confused at what I understood as my parents' unempathic, rather cruel behavior in the midst of a chaotic, frightening war.

Listening to Rosenthal, I suddenly made sense of this event. Psychoanalysis teaches that people repeat what they are unable to remember. Maybe my mother was unable to remember the feelings of hunger she had experienced during World War 1. All she remembered was the bare facts. She thus mindlessly repeated the hunger experience by actively

depriving her children of food, something she had once had to endure passively. As a result of my "aha experience", I was able to feel more compassion and understanding towards my mother. The effect of the past is thus not that actual past, but the manner in which it is conveyed. What I had previously regarded as my mother's cruelty, I was now able to understand and forgive.

According to the study, the first generation of Holocaust victims did not allow themselves to think about what happened. The second generation thought about what happened, and the third generation confronted their history and went to look at the graves. The influences of the past and the desire for truth seeking thus became stronger in the third generation.

Over the years I have pondered my relationship to the Holocaust. At first I was ashamed and denied any important connection with that part of my life. Then, as the years went by and I realized how much Hitler and World War II had shaped my destiny, I defined myself as a first generation child Holocaust survivor. Then I wondered, because of my extreme youth at the time of leaving Poland, was I perhaps second generation? Then I read "Crossing over" written by Ruth Wolman (1996), and I called myself a child Holocaust refugee. A friend said to me, "You are not a refugee, you emigrated." Now, listening to Gabriele Rosenthal, I realized it was true that I had emigrated, but it was a forced emigration.

Presently I call myself a child Holocaust survivor, a refugee, and a forced emigrant, compelled to leave Poland because I was Jewish and would have been murdered if I had stayed. I realized my son was the first in the family to go back to Eastern Europe "to look at the graves in Poland and Lithuania". I was finally able to accept the full truth of what had happened.

On the last evening of the conference, friends had received tickets to see Verdi's "I Vestri Siciliani" at the Vienna Opera House. I could not purchase tickets to sit next to them and obtained a single ticket in a loge. At the interval I went upstairs to meet my friends. On the way I inadvertently dropped my ticket. I did not remember which loge I had been sitting in, and could not find my way back. I had left my jacket there. I was besides myself with anxiety. I recalled that as a four year old child in Bucharest, Rumania, I had lost my family in the park. I spoke only Polish in a country where everyone spoke Rumanian. I did eventually find my way home. Now, I reminded myself, I was a grown woman and no longer a helpless child. In my broken German (which I had learned as a child from my German governess) I told the usherette, a sweet, pretty, young woman in a Viennese soldier's uniform of my plight. By now it was dark and everyone was seated. The usherette took me to a place where we stood together and watched the second act of the opera. When the next interval came, together we looked in each loge and found my jacket, my

ticket and my seat. I expressed gratitude to her for her caring behavior to a regressed four year old me.

Was this a metaphor for what the conference meant to me? Something about the usherette being Christian and Viennese and my being Jewish impacted me viscerally. In spite of our differences I was not just a number to her. I had told her my story. She had listened and then helped me in a very caring way.

Did that mean I forgave the Germans for what happened? I don't think so. I can neither forgive nor forget what happened. At the same time I know that unless we are able to heal ourselves and let go our grievances and our desire for revenge, our ability to love and forgive will be impaired. Peter Baehr (2000, p. xxx) in his book about Hannah Arendt quotes her as saying "Among the great political virtues are not only courage, which provides the strength to begin an enterprise and persist in it, but also forgiveness ...Forgiveness offers a release from a past that cannot be undone, but with which we can come to terms: it allows us to begin again, to break with attitudes that condemn us to nurse old grievances and repeat endlessly the cycle of recrimination".

Conclusions

Jurgen Habermas in Krog (1998, p. 24) said that collective guilt does not exist Whoever is guilty will have to answer individually. At the same time there is such a

thing as collective responsibility for a mental and cultural context which makes crimes against humanity possibly.

This paper attempts to look at the collective responsibility for: 1. What happened in South Africa during the apartheid era, 2. Slavery and the entrenched mentality of whitewashing its impact in America, and 3. The Hitler regime.

The real truth is often buried by ignorance, ideology and shame. However, by excavating these realities there is a possibility of a delayed justice. It is in the politics and psychology of resistance to the truth where the struggle for reconciliation takes place. Just as in personal psychotherapy, we need to work with societal resistance, interpret it and find out what it is about, otherwise it is bound to remain within "the grip of compulsive repetition".

An apology it would seem, must be personal, from those who transgressed to those whom they harmed. Truth-seeking and dialogue do not necessarily result in forgiveness. Some atrocities are so evil that a reasonable goal for the first and second generation is to try get to a place where we are in the process of not allowing "unbearable truths" to poison our souls. It no longer has power we are unable to control. However after some horrors, true working through and forgiveness can only take place in the third, fourth or fifth generation.

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