



# Living in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: A retroactive reflection

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

To understand and evaluate the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, it is crucial to understand its origin and identity. It emerged as result of a negotiated settlement between black and white, within which neither side won or lost. The conflict began with a fragile white Portuguese presence in the Cape in the latter part of the fifteenth century. It endured Dutch and English colonialism from the seventeenth century to the beginning of the twentieth. It persisted through generations of institutionalised racism and culminated in a 30-year race war.

In the words of Shakespeare's Macbeth: "as two spent swimmers, that do cling together", it drew to a climax in an historic settlement, forged essentially between black Africans and white Boers. The settlement was designed to stop an escalating war that threatened to destroy the very identity, infrastructure and promise of a nation yet to be born. Both sides to the conflict some how believed that new life could still emerge out of the phoenix strife that characterised the apartheid years. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was expected to facilitate the process. Its brief was to help cultivate a milieu within which the gross violations of the past would not be repeated in the future.

Judge Richard Goldstone, Constitutional Court judge and former Prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and later for Rwanda, put it this way (1997): "The decision to opt for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission was an important compromise. If the ANC (African National Congress) had insisted on Nuremberg-style trials for the leaders of the former apartheid government, there would have been no peaceful transition to democracy, and if the former government had insisted on a blanket amnesty then, similarly, the negotiations would have broken down. A bloody revolution sooner rather than later would have been inevitable. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a bridge from the old to the new."<sup>1</sup>

The events that culminated in the TRC report being handed to the President on 29 October 1998 are well known. A total of 22 500 victims

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<sup>1</sup> See further Sarkin 1996; 1997; 1998.

of gross violations of human rights volunteered to tell the commission their stories. Over 7 000 people applied for amnesty. The TRC, with the exception of some amnesty hearings that are still outstanding, is now over. It must be over. It is time to move on. The nation was experiencing what the media called 'TRC fatigue'. Having received saturation coverage in the media, no South Africa (black or white) can ever again say 'it did not happen' or 'I never knew'. And yet the past dies only with difficulty. Some struggle to put it behind them, others continue to seek to turn away from it too quickly maybe not wanting to stop to reflect too deeply, to look too carefully, or to take responsibility for what happened.

## 2 HAS THE EXPERIMENT WORKED?

Some ask more brashly, has the TRC saved or reconciled the nation? The answer is "of course not". It would be presumptuous to think that a commission of the nature and duration of the TRC could reconcile a nation torn apart by 350 years of colonialism and 50 years of apartheid rule. The mandate of the commission was captured in the title of its founding act, the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 34 of 1995. Its mandate was the *promotion* of national unity and reconciliation. The commission has contributed to this process, in the sense of promoting, consolidating and advancing a process of reconciliation that had started with the negotiation process and needs to continue to happen if it is to succeed.<sup>2</sup>

I offer three somewhat crude models or typologies of response to the TRC in South Africa:

- some rejected the mandate of the commission
- some enthusiastically embraced the mandate of the commission
- the majority of South Africans are essentially ambivalent about the mandate of the commission.

### 2.1 Some rejected the mandate of the commission

There is an understandable reluctance among some victims to put the past behind them. Chris Ribeiro, the son of the murdered Florence and Fabian Ribeiro, objected to anyone "pushing reconciliation down my throat". Marius Schoon, who lost his wife and a daughter in a South African army raid into Botswana, in turn, complains about "the imposition of a Christian morality of forgiveness".

Polish dissident Adam Michnik<sup>3</sup> (1993) tells how when he was in prison he resolved never to seek revenge or to refuse to forgive. Yet he kept repeating to himself a fragment of Zbigniew Herbert's poem: "And do not forgive, as it is not within your power to forgive on behalf of those betrayed at dawn". He argued that we can forgive harm done *to us*. But, it is not in our power to forgive harm done *to others*. "We can try to convince people to forgive, but if they want justice, they are entitled to demand it."

<sup>2</sup> See Gerwel 1999: 277–287.

<sup>3</sup> In *Journal of Democracy* 4(1) January 1993.

It is the responsibility of the democratically-elected government to govern, mindful that some within the nation are not prepared to put the past behind them. The point is well made by Jose Zalaquett, who served on the Chilean National Truth and Reconciliation Commission. "Leaders," he suggests, "should never forget that the lack of political pressure to put these issues on the agenda does not mean they are not boiling underground, waiting to erupt" (Boraine 1994:15) The demand by many Chileans almost ten years after the establishment of the Chilean Commission that General Augusto Pinochet stand trial, following his arrest in the United Kingdom, underlines Zalaquett's point. Some are not prepared to settle for less than retribution. Some even demand revenge.

## 2.2 Some enthusiastically embraced the mandate of the commission

Having spend 27 years in prison, former President Nelson Mandela was ready to forgive and be reconciled with those who jailed him. Not everyone could emulate his stance. Yet people like Cynthia Nomveyu Ngewu, whose son Christopher Piet was one of the Gugulethu seven shot by the police in an ambush in March 1986, was asked for her response to the position of those who supported the imprisonment of perpetrators, she replied:

"In my opinion, I do not agree with this view. We do not want to see people suffer in the same way that we did suffer, and we did not want our families to have suffered. We do not want to return the suffering that was imposed upon us. So, I do not agree with that view at all. We would like to see peace in this country . . . I think that all South Africans should be committed to the idea of re-accepting these people back into the community. We do not want to return the evil that perpetrators committed to the nation. We want to demonstrate humanness towards them, so that they in turn may restore their own humanity" (TRC 1998 vol 5 chapter 9 para. 33).

The testimony of Ginn Fourie, mother of Lyndi Fourie who was killed in the Heidelberg Tavern massacre, carried out by three young APLA (Azanian People's Liberation Army) operatives in December 1993, captures the importance of discovering the humanity, compassion and courtesy of her daughter's assassins. At the close of the amnesty hearing for the young men responsible for the deed, Mrs Fourie met with them as they were about to be returned to their prison cells. She had on a previous occasion offered them her forgiveness. They had suggested that perhaps there was a need for joint counselling, involving perpetrator and victim or survivor. I quote her account of the meeting:

"The warders insisted that the meeting adjourn, a hug for each indicated the depth of community we had entered into in this short while. The amnesty applicants then shackled themselves, which at that moment symbolised to me the enormous responsibility which accompanies freedom of choice and the sad outcome of making poor choices. Tears came to my eyes. Humphrey Gqomfa (one of the killers) turned to the interpreter and said: 'Please take Mrs Fourie home'. Once more I was amazed by the sensitivity and leadership potential of this man, the same man who was also a perpetrator of gross violations of human rights against my own daughter" (Fourie 1998).

The magnanimity of spirit shown by Ginn Fourie and the killers of her daughter should never be taken for granted. It cannot be demanded of

anyone. It is, at the same time, the kind of response that constitutes the wellspring on which healing is premised for victim and perpetrator alike. There are other stories. They include the story of Neville Clarence who lost his sight in the Church Street bomb detonated outside of the Airforce Headquarters in Pretoria on 20 May 1983. Although blinded by the bomb, Clarence seemed to look Aboobaker Ismael, the commanding officer of the operation of Mkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the African National Congress, in the eye: "I forgive you for what you have done. I came . . . to share my feelings with you. I wanted you to know that I harbour no thoughts of revenge."<sup>4</sup> Brian Mitchell, responsible for the Trust Fields Massacre in December 1988 asked for forgiveness of those who survived the attack and committed himself to working in the community he had destroyed. Jubulisiwe Ngubane, who had lost her mother and her children in the attack observed: "It is not easy to forgive, but because he stepped forward and asked for forgiveness, I have no choice. I must forgive him . . ."<sup>5</sup> Some did forgive. It cannot be demanded. It cannot be presumed. It cannot even be expected. Where it happens it is grace.

### 2.3 The majority of South Africans are essentially ambivalent about the mandate of the commission

The ambivalence has many different sources. There are those (primarily whites) whose ambivalence comes to expression primarily in indifference. They want to forget the past. Some want to ignore its persisting presence. Few are ready to engage it, reflect on it and ask what it may teach them about the present and the future.

There is another kind of ambivalence about the past which manifests itself in an inability not to remember, while being determined to get on with life. One sees this among private individuals who have borne the brunt of the past and now struggle to engage the future. One also sees this among those in government who are eager to close past wounds and to have the nation move on. Their fear is that too much memory will fuel continuing resentments. It will reopen past divisions and undermine possibilities of peaceful coexistence.

These differing sources of ambivalence, giving expression to opposite political and ideological poles in a nation living between the past and the future, ironically find a measure of common ground in a unclear response to the past. They find this in a desire to look forward: to go to school or have their children do so, to find employment and be successful, to have their offspring succeed in life, to enjoy the 'good things' of life, to live and let live. It is a philosophy that at times makes for a robust competitiveness and at times for a measure of protectionism. It, at the same time, carries the seed of rugged individualism and a potential indifference to the lesson that the past has to teach. I was recently in conversation with a very bright and ambitious young black student who told me that 'the struggle' of the 1980s was not his struggle. He explained that his struggle is the future. It involves gaining material prosperity and social influence.

4 See account in Meiring 1999: 339-341.

5 See account in Meiring 1999: 121-23.

In 1995, Richard von Weizsacker, president of what was then the Federal Republic of Germany, made an important speech concerning the country's Nazi past. He said that while there was no "zero hour" for the German people in moving the past to the future, there was a fresh start.<sup>6</sup> South Africa has in some ways risked a similar (but, of course, different) kind of transition.

It is too early to say whether it has worked. If those who in different ways supported, promoted, tolerated and invariably benefited from apartheid are not prepared to build a new South Africa, the forces that brought the nation to the brink of disaster in 1989 could be found to still be there – demanding satisfaction, this time, in a less compromising way. In the event that time and space is such that these matters can be dealt with, those at the two poles of the political-memory spectrum may just find one another. It is what the present state leadership is hoping for, and yet, there are factors militating against it. Antjie Krog, celebrated author of *Country of My Skull*, tells of her recent visit to Germany. "I wanted to be there to find out how do you live with the responsibility and guilt of the past" she says. "I was astounded. I assumed other places are like South Africa, but what I didn't realise, of course, was that there were hardly any Jews left in Germany. Here (in South Africa) we see each other daily in other words we confront the past daily..." (*Cape Times* 25 February 2000). The issues that divide the two ends of South African society stand out in sharp relief in the post-apartheid period. The past continues to be present be it economically, psychologically, spiritually and at a host of other levels from language and humour to art and music. And yet, it is within this diversity that South Africans need to learn to live together. It is here, in the morally murky ambivalence from the past, that nation-building will be required to happen. There is simply no other option. To expect every South African to undergo a cathartic experience in dealing with the past, is to expect everyone to be caught up in the enthusiasm of an evangelical preacher on a Sunday morning. In reality, most people do not even show up to hear the sermon.

## 2.4 Given these different responses to the TRC, can the nation heal itself?

Bad memories do not easily go away. The Oxford-based historian Timothy Garton Ash (1997:201) reminds us that "often it is the victims who are cursed by memory, while perpetrators are blessed by forgetting". In South Africa it is primarily those who suffered least (and prospered most) who are most determined to forget the pain of others. Those who survived the nightmare of suffering, torture and death can do nothing other than remember. And yet, as suggested, some who have suffered and been deprived are, for different reasons, committed to move on.

Speaking in the National Assembly in May 1998, then Deputy President Thabo Mbeki identified two "interrelated elements" constitutive of the process of the reconciliation needed between what he calls the "two nations in one country", one which is "white and relatively prosperous" and the other which is "black and poor".

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<sup>6</sup> In Shriver 1995: 84.

The first element of Mbeki's analysis of the challenge facing South Africa is the creation of a material base whereby the "grossly underdeveloped" black nation may be assisted to elevate itself from the vastly inferior material living conditions it was forced to accept during apartheid. The need for this to happen, as an essential basis for healing and reconciliation, is self-explanatory.

The second challenge that Mbeki identified is the promotion of what he called a "subjective factor", aimed at sustaining the hope and conviction among South Africans that the process of reconciliation and nation building can succeed. As such, reconciliation is seen to involve an enduring process of reconstruction and economic development, but also the promotion of public processes designed to facilitate co-operation and trust between people who have lived in isolation from one another for so long. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, despite the compromises, risks, shortcomings and court orders, has functioned essentially at this "subjective" level.

Now, in the wake of the work of the TRC, several questions need to be asked yet again. These are questions that were asked when the idea of a commission was first mooted as an alternative to both trials and amnesia.

## 2.5 Why does a nation remember?

Is it merely because some cannot forget? Can it serve any good? Does time not eventually heal? Hear the words of President Roman Herzog on the occasion of the Deutscher Bundestag in 1996:

"The pictures of the piles of corpses, of murdered children, women and men, of starved bodies are so penetrating that they remain distinctly engraved, not just in the minds of survivors and liberators, but in those who read and view accounts of [the Holocaust] today. . . . Why then do we have the will to keep this memory alive? Would it not be an evident desire to let the wounds heal into scars and to lay the dead to rest? . . . History fades quickly if it is not part of one's own experience. [But] memory is living future. We do not want to conserve the horror. We want to draw lessons that future generations can use as guidance. . . . In the light of sober description the worst barbarous act shrinks into an anonymous event. If we wish for the erasure of this memory we ourselves will be the first victims of self-deception".<sup>7</sup>

The implication is that we remember in order not to repeat past atrocities. The problem is that there is not much evidence to suggest that history equips us not to repeat past abuses. Terrence McCaughey, President of the former Irish Anti Apartheid Movement, tells of his student days at Tübingen University in Germany in the late 1950s.<sup>8</sup> There had been a week-long film series on German politics from the Weimer Republic to the rise and fall of Adolf Hitler. Academic life almost came to a standstill. He tells of his Old Testament lecturer, Professor Karl Elliger, addressing his class on the morning after the final presentation: "You young people no doubt think we were all stupid not to have seen what was happening," he said. "We have

7 Presse und Informationsdienst der Bundesregierung, 23.01.96. Translated and quoted in Kayser 1998.

8 Speaking in Dublin Ireland March 1999.

no excuses. But learn this, evil never comes from the same direction, wearing the same face. I hope you will be wiser and more discerning than our generation when the threat of evil next comes around. You need to be vigilant.” The professor turned to his notes and lectured his students on the Book of Joshua.

We remember in the hope that we will not repeat past atrocities. But primarily we remember because we cannot, while the past remains unresolved, lay its ghost to rest. The words of Rebecca Hanse, a relative of Fezile Hanse who, together with Andile Majol and Patrick Madikane was shot dead by riot police on 17 June 1985 in Bongoletu, a black township on the outskirts of Oudtshoorn, are pertinent: “We must preserve the bones of our children until they can rest in peace. We cannot forget. We must keep our children alive. They were not ready to die. There is much for them still to do. We are not ready to let them go.”<sup>9</sup> Maybe a time will come when their bones *will* rest in peace. In time, hopefully, the past will no longer be with us in as excruciating a way as it is at present.

Why do we remember? Ultimately the nation is called to remember for the sake of those who suffer. It is a manner of restoring the dignity of victims and survivors by ensuring that their suffering does not pass unnoticed. It is to say to victims and survivors: “Your suffering is part of our healing as a nation. We remember you.”

## 2.6 But how reliable is memory?

Memory sometimes plays tricks on us. Bad memories are fraught with trauma and often with incomprehension. It gives expression to the inability of language to articulate what needs to be said. What are the implications of this healing and reconciliation?

Memory is perhaps always incomplete. Its very incompleteness is what cries out to be heard. There is the testimony of silence. There is body language. There is fear, anger and confusion. There is a struggle between telling what happened and explaining it away. Mxolisi (Ace) Mgxashe struggles with the very question of truth. “Inyani iyababa,” he observes. “In Xhosa it means ‘truth is bitter’. . . It is so bitter [that] sometimes we find ourselves quarreling over whether it should be told at all. Even when there has been some consensus that the truth should be told . . . we invariably disagree on the extent to which it must be told” (*Argus* 14 June 1996).

Sometimes we involuntarily hide the truth as much from ourselves as others. Antje Krog prefers not to even use the word “truth”. “I prefer the word lie” she says. “The moment the lie raises its head, I smell blood. Because it is there . . . where truth is closest” (Krog 1998:36). Truth rarely leaps forth to introduce itself unmolested by lies, confusion, forgetfulness and evasion. It needs to be dug out!

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<sup>9</sup> In conversation at the grave of the Bongoletu Three June 1996 See also TRC 1998 vol 3: 437–439.

What then is the relationship between truth and fiction? Testifying at a Cape Town hearing of the TRC into the killing of the Guguletu Seven in April 1996, Cynthia Ngewu (to whom reference has already been made), the mother of Christopher Piet, one of those killed, wrestled with what had in fact happened. "Now nobody knows the real-real story," she noted.<sup>10</sup> The ambiguity of memory is real. It is a reality that is frequently exploited by people who seek to discredit those who have suffered and struggle to find words to articulate their deepest experience of what happened. Thus Anthea Jeffery (1999) attacks the Commission because (according to her) insufficient attention was given to the importance of factual or objective truth, by recognising the importance of what the Commission called *personal or narrative (dialogue) truth*, as well as *social truth* and *healing or restorative truth*. The Commission deliberately chose to wrestle with these notions of truth in relation to *factual or forensic truth*. The Commission was not a court of law and (for good reason) it did not subject victim and survivor testimony to cross-examination.<sup>11</sup>

Albert Camus has defined truth as being "as mysterious as it is inaccessible" and yet, he insisted, worth "being fought for eternally".<sup>12</sup> Its discovery involves a long and slow process. It often involves conflict arising from stories that contradict one another. This is part of the process of national reconciliation. Donald Shriver's words (1995:230) are compelling: "One does not argue long with people whom one deems of no real importance. Democracy is at its best when people of clashing points of view argue far into the night, because they know that the next day they are going to encounter each other as residents of the [same] neighbourhood." The difficulties of creating democracy out of a culture of gross violations of human rights are immense. It can be facilitated through what the Chileans call *reconvivencia* meaning a period of getting used to living with each other again. Above all, it involves being exposed to the worst fears of one's adversaries. It requires getting to know one another, gaining a new insight into *what* happened as well as an empathetic understanding of *how* a particular event is viewed by one's adversaries.

## 2.7 Is there a role for storytelling?

Getting to know one another and building relationships between former enemies involves many things. Important among these is welding together a story that unites rather than one that divides. This involves the difficult process of moving beyond testimony which, I have suggested, is frequently fraught with trauma, incompleteness and sometimes incomprehension.

10 Human Rights Violations' Committee Hearing Cape Town 22 April 1996.

11 It did, however, through its corroboration assess such testimony on the basis of a balance of probability. Graeme Simpson (1999) is correct: "... most of the legal and jurisprudential dilemmas presented by the TRC process are actually rooted in its own almost bi-polar roles as both a 'fact-finding' and a 'quasi-judicial' enterprise on the one hand, and as a psychologically sensitive mechanism for story telling and healing on the other."

12 Cited in Cherry 1999.



This is perhaps where poetry, music and myth can contribute more to healing than any attempt to explain in some rigid forensic way 'who did what to whom'. Anjie Krog's celebrated novel on the work of the TRC, *Country of my skull*, weaves fragments from different testimonies and interviews into a semi-fictional historical account of events. The commission was obliged to do both *more* and *less* than what she accomplished. It was, above all, obliged to be more comprehensive and thus compelled to reduce or translate the richness of raw memory, or what has been called first generation testimony, into historical narrative. This material awaits a dozen poets, musicians and storytellers to be retold in a healing way. Silences in testimony need to be heard if not interpreted. There needs to be reading between the lines, behind the words and within the context of the moment. The testimony is to be heard for what it is – a cry from the heart. It is difficult to conceive how any historical text can capture that. And yet, the healing of the nation requires that it be heard.

## 2.8 Getting on with life

Is it ever possible, for those who truly suffered, to put the past behind us? The words of holocaust victim Primo Levi (1976:426) can only haunt the soul of any person of compassion:

"This is the awful privilege of our generation and of my people, no one better than us has ever been able to grasp the incurable nature of the offence, that spreads like a contagion. It is foolish to think that human justice can eradicate it. It is an inexhaustible fount of evil; it breaks the body and the spirit of the submerged, it perpetuates itself as hatred among survivors, and swarms around in a thousand ways, against the very will of all, as thirst for revenge, as a moral capitulation, as denial, as weariness, as renunciation".

Clearly some show a resilience to rise above the anguish of past suffering better than others. Testimony that witnesses both have a willingness or desire to "get on with life" as well a reluctance or inability to do so is there to be heard and analysed. I offer rather the comment of a young woman named Kalu that highlights the internalised emotions inherent to the transition from the old to the new:<sup>13</sup> "What really makes me angry about the TRC and Tutu is that they are putting pressure on me to forgive. . . . I don't know if I will ever be able to forgive. I carry this ball of anger within me and I don't know where to begin dealing with it. The oppression was bad, but what is much worse, what makes me even angrier, is that they are trying to dictate my forgiveness". Her words capture the pathos involved in the long and fragile journey towards reconciliation. No one has the right to prevail on Kalu to forgive. The question is whether victims and survivors can be assisted to *get on with the rest of their lives* in the sense of not allowing anger or self-pity to be the all-consuming dimension of their existence. Reflecting on the response of Kalu, my colleague, Wilhelm Verwoerd, refers to the response of Ashley Forbes to his torture at the hands of the notorious torturer, Jeffrey Benzien. Although critical of the decision to grant Benzien amnesty, arguing that he failed to make full disclosure, he observed: "I forgive him and feel sorry for him. And now that the TRC has showed what happened, I can get on with the rest of my life".

13 See Verwoerd 1998 and Villa-Vicencio 1999.

Not every victim deals with his or her past in this way. It is important, however, for their own sake, that victims and survivors are assisted (to the extent that it is possible) to indeed *get on with life*. This does *not* mean forgetting the ghastly deeds of the past. This is usually not possible and probably not helpful. There is indeed a place for righteous anger, which can be a source of self-worth and dignity. To get on with life does not necessarily mean becoming friends with the person responsible for one's suffering. Very few accomplish this. It *does* mean dealing with the "ball of anger" that prevents one from getting on with life.

However, the graph of the journey forward is rarely a progressively even one. Such progress that is made in getting on with life tends to take place in concentric circles. Progress can be made. Time and circumstances of different kinds do assist the healing process. But there is also *deep memory* that reminds us that the past is never quite past. Bernard Langer, reflecting on the suicide of Primo Levi, 40 years after his release from Auschwitz, speaks of the "painful and uneasy stress between trauma and recovery". Levi's prolific writing at no time fails to portray the presence of melancholy. Langer (1998:xv), argues that:

"Levi, as a suicide, demolishes the idea that he had mastered his past, come to term with the atrocity of Auschwitz, and rejoined the human community healed and whole. Life went on for him, of course, though it is probably a mistake to think of his writings as a form of therapy, a catharsis that freed him from what he called the memory of the offense. It is clear from everything he wrote that survival did not mean a restored connection with what had gone before. The legacy of permanent disruption may be difficult to accept, but it lingers in his suicide like an abiding parasite".

Levi's testimony is that of one who seeks to wash his conscience and memory clean. Refusing to reduce the immensity of his particular ordeal to "a capacity for evil buried in human nature somewhere," he is angry at society's apparent indifference to the question as to what makes killers resort to the depths of humanity that they do. And yet he insisted, "to a greater or lesser degree all were responsible". The "greater majority of Germans," he writes, "... accepted [the persecution of the Jews] in the beginning out of mental laziness, myopic calculations, stupidity and national pride. . . ." (Langer 1998:23-42).

Wrestling with memories of suffering and questions concerning the nature of evil, he killed himself. The concentric circles of others in the quest to get on with life are less decisive. Joe Seremane is angry with the TRC for failing to probe deeply enough into death of his brother Timothy Tebogo Sermane in the ANC Quatro Camp in 1981. "You owe us a lot," he told the commission. "Not monetary compensation, but our bones buried in shallow graves in Angola and heaven knows where else." He quotes words from Langston Hughes's *Minstrel man*:

"Because my mouth is wide with laughter And my throat deep with song, Do you not think I suffer, after I have held My pain so long?" (Langer 1998)

Whatever the truth of the various allegations (by Seremane and the counter charges by the ANC) the pathos of his words should not be missed. The question is what can society do to help those who suffer to move on? In Ndebele's words, the question is how to promote "visible measures for

improving the lives of the victims of the past, who even while they are still in a state of severe disadvantage ought not to experience themselves any more as victims”.

### 3 ARE THERE LESSONS TO BE LEARNED FROM THE SOUTH AFRICAN EXPERIMENT IN HEALING?

Situations and contexts differ. It is insensitive to dare seek to impose one's own attempt at a solution onto others. But this much we can learn: Where people suffer, healing is needed. And yet healing is never complete. It involves moving on in concentric circles. This means that compassion, support and understanding is required. This constitutes the acid test of the TRC and indeed of the entire South African transitional process. It involves the question of whether our reflection on the past will succeed in making us a more compassionate, supportive and understanding people. The jury is still out on this one.

Bluntly put, unless the South African experiment in healing reaches not only victims and survivors of the apartheid years but also heals the hardened hearts of both direct perpetrators of gross violations of human rights as well as the benefactors of apartheid, the healing process that is taking place is likely to be incomplete. This would be a huge tragedy for a nation that has done so incredibly well in seeking to heal itself in so many other ways.

In closing, I cite WS Merwin's prose poem *Unchopping a tree*. It provides a powerful metaphor, reminding us of the limitations of any human attempt to heal.<sup>14</sup> Merwin describes the incredibly difficult process of how one could go about unchopping a tree for example by placing each fallen branch, withered twig and dried leaf in its appropriate place, as well as relocating birds' nests. The final lines of the poem read as follows:

“The first breeze that touches its dead leaves . . . You are afraid the motion of the clouds will be enough to push it over. What more can you do? What more can you do? But there is nothing more you can do Others are waiting Everything is going to have to be put back”.

Have the leaves been placed in the correct place? How many twigs are missing? Will the birds recognise their nests? Will the tree take root and grow? Perhaps endurance, not restitution, never full recovery, not even full healing, is all that survivors can strive for. Some dare to hope for more. Some remember. Others are fearful to do so. What is important is the dream of a great tree that can be. It involves a dream. It also involves hard work.

Has the TRC worked? When the British historian, EP Thompson, was asked a few years back whether he thought the French Revolution was a success, he noted that it is still too early to tell. The jury is still out on the South African transition. What is certain is that we cannot afford to wait 200 years for a verdict.

<sup>14</sup> In Merwin 1970: 85–88.

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