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OCCASIONAL PAPER

The art of reconciliation

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The art of reconciliation

by Charles Villa-Vicencio

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1. Introduction

Asked about reconciliation, Archbishop Desmond Tutu replied: "It is a miracle". The question is whether, reaching beyond the Archbishop's theology, the miracle can be deconstructed. It is a bit like trying to talk about God in a secular world. Erik Doxtader captures the dilemma in a thoughtful way: "When distanced from the divine, released from the notion that it is strictly a gift and action of God, the faith of reconciliation appears poetic. Reconciliation promises a beginning, the creation of that which we can neither hold nor control. It is something that goads our imagination and extends our knowledge. We quantify reconciliation at the risk of rendering it banal."[1] And yet silence is not tenable. We are compelled to speak. We are constrained to find lucid content to a poetic concept, driven by the realisation that ultimately the well-being of our lives and that of the broader community depends on relationships with others.

A tight definition often goes a long way to bedevilling the reconciliation process. To define hope too tightly, to destroy the metaphor, to overlook the inherent ambiguity of the healing process is to undermine the very goal of reconciliation – which is to bring people together. To name the ideal is to own it. To own is to limit. To define too closely is to reduce poetry to the rules of grammar. It is to turn creative imagination into pie in the sky and hope into illusion. It is to ignore what the existentialist (and atheist) philosopher, Max Horkheimer called a "theological moment", without which "no matter how skilful, [politics] in the last analysis is mere business."[2] So, perhaps (but only *perhaps*) it is better to live with definitional ambiguities – embracing rather the power of metaphor in imaginative pursuit of what is more than what exists at any given time.

Reconciliation must by definition reach beyond the restrictive ghetto of any creed, culture or ideology. It must necessarily be both conceptually and substantially available to everyone. Long held to be a religious concept, in order to attain universality, it must acquire secular meaning too.

1 Erik Doxtader, "Is it 'Reconciliation' if we say it is? Discerning the Rhetorical Problem in the South African Transition." An unpublished paper.

2 M Horkheimer, "Die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Andern," (Hamburg: Furche, 1975), 60.

A simple, even a complex, definition of reconciliation that fails to provoke imagination and unlock yet to be discovered possibilities of life, fails to enable suffering individuals and wounded people to move forward. Ideological wars over definitions of reconciliation, of what is and is not required for it to happen, are enough to persuade all but the most rigid zealots that precise definitions and formulas concerning reconciliation often do more harm than good. The goal of reconciliation is the transcendence of an impasse that has capacity to destroy.

Reconciliation defies reduction to a neat set of rules. It is more than theory. There are no simple 'how to' steps involved. It includes serendipity, imagination, risk and the exploration of what it means 'to start again'. It involves grace. It is a celebration of the human spirit. It is about making what seems impossible possible. It is about the complex business of real people engaging one another in the quest for life. It is an art rather than a science.

2. Confronting the theological demons [3]

The dominant theological paradigm of reconciliation that entrenches a sequence of *confession*, *repentance*, *restitution* and *forgiveness*, to be followed by *reconciliation,* has left a heavy imprint on both theological and secular debate. It is this that causes some to dismiss the very notion of reconciliation as unhelpful in political debate on group and national conflicts. It is perceived as a kind of utopian dream that contradicts what mere mortals (saints apart) are capable of.

The obvious appeal of the above theological sequence to those who have suffered gross violations of human rights is grounded in an understandable and natural propensity of victims and survivors to seek satisfaction. The quest in what follows is for a viable political ethic that seeks not *revenge* that may well provide short-term relief, but *satisfaction* of the kind that results from enduring peace which is dedicated to the restoration of human dignity and the beginning of a more equitable society. Put differently, the goal is

3 Writing invariably includes an autobiographical sub-text. This section of this essay is an attempt to acknowledge mine. While working in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I was asked by a journalist whether my theological career had prepared me for my work as Research Director of the Commission. I told her that while I scarcely used a theological word or symbol in my work, it was probably the most theological exercise I had ever been engaged in. The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, where I presently work, is a secular organisation. It at the same time confronts me with theological questions on a regular basis. Having been an ordained minister and taught theology for going on thirty years, this is inevitable. "You can take the boy out of the institutional church. You cannot take theology out of the boy."

authentic and lasting reconciliation, which is inevitably a slow process that goes beyond an all too often passing embrace.

This is a goal driven by an energy that stands at the intersection between theology and experience. It is an ethic that takes seriously the biblical invitation to reconcile as well as the experience of those who have suffered most, who either simply cannot reconcile or, alternatively, demand a price that their perpetrators are not prepared to pay. There is, suggests Donald Shriver, "nothing more 'natural' in human relations than revenge, and nothing less political."[4] Miroslav Volf speaks of being "caught between two betrayals – the betrayal of the suffering, exploited and excluded, and the betrayal of the very core of my faith."[5] How, politically, can we construct an ethic that affirms the understandable and legitimate demands of the violated who want acknowledgement of their suffering, repentance and justice – while affirming the theological injunction to forgive?[6]

It is argued in what follows that this becomes possible where new ways of engaging former enemies and adversaries *begin* to occur. This is invariably a slow and contested process, giving rise to a sense of interdependence between adversaries and former enemies. It requires tolerance, within which empathy and understanding begin to emerge, leading perhaps to the beginning of a relationship. Confession, repentance, restitution and forgiveness (the 'big four') are almost invariably left until later – as the completion of the reconciling process. Indeed, some would argue they are only authentically possible in the wake of a reconciling process that has at least been initiated. There must be a context of grace or acceptance (a psychologically and politically safe place) for individuals or communities to make themselves vulnerable in confession (acknowledgement) and repentance (transformation) – the more explicit theology of which will be returned to at the end of this section of the essay.

The inherent danger of postponing the 'big issues' can, of course, result in the searing legacy of bad memories. And yet, the politics of reconciliation is about the gradualism of what is conceivably possible at any given time. It is argued in the pages that follow that initiating the peace process – the first step on the reconciliation continuum within a given context – is as important

4 Donald Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (New York / Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 13.

5 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 9.

6 See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition: A Study of the Central Conditions Facing Modern Man* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), 214. Also Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (London: Rider Books, 1999).

as the ultimate success of the process. Indeed, most nations and individual relationships survive quite well on less than the ideal. The pursuit of the ultimate goal is at the same time necessary to ensure that the initial step in the process does not become the final one. A lack of movement beyond the first hesitant step in rapprochement (what are often referred to as "confidence building steps") can only serve to fuel the suspicion of the critics of political gradualism, who reject the process as little more than the rearranging of furniture on a vessel that drifts ever closer to disaster.

2.1 Nations dealing with their past

Not to deal with the past in an overt and conscious manner, not to demand repentance from the perpetrator and forgiveness from the victim or survivor, is an appealing option to nations confronted with a deeply divided past. Spain is a prime example of largely successful political amnesia. Post-Nazi Germany dealt with its past with caution and hesitation. The President of the then Federal Republic of Germany, Richard von Weizsacker, in 1995 made an important speech concerning Germany's Nazi past, in which he said that while there was no 'zero hour' for the German people in moving from the past to the future, there was a 'fresh start'.[7] France, Italy and other European countries, as well as post Stalinist Russia have dealt with their pasts with equal caution.

More recently former eastern bloc countries have more or less followed suit. Politically a 'fresh start' is more important than what von Weizsacker called the 'zero hour' in which all past sins are supposedly washed away. The question is to what extent the one is related to the other? Nations in transition from past autocratic and oppressive rule to democracy and human rights cannot but be sensitive to the question of how much introspection there should be concerning the past. They need similarly to ponder how much acknowledgement and restitution is required. A politics that reconciles is necessarily a politics of the middle ground.[8]

Most people predicted a disaster for South Africa in the late 1980s. Many within the faith communities and in secular society, understandably and with justification, called on the apartheid leaders to submit to unconditional surrender. This, it was insisted, was the only legitimate and realistic way to move forward. The breakthrough, however, came not as a result of any Damascus Road

7 Donald Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (New York / Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 84.

8 See, Erik Doxtader, "Middle Voices in Transition: The Form of Public Speech in Post-TRC South Africa," *The* Public, Vol.8 (2001), 3., 23-34.

experience or capitulation of the old regime. It came as a result of a series of encounters within which protagonists on opposing sides began to make contact with one another. Tentative, fragile steps were taken that led to 'talks about talks'. In the process, cautious relationships were forged. This opened the way to a search for peace and the beginning of a reconciling process.

John Paul Lederach reminds us that "it is a paradox of sorts that human concern for and interest in reconciliation is as old as the hills and at the same time in a pre-infancy stage". It is further, he suggests, "conceptualised from within particular religious frameworks."[9] To marry the theological and the political, the need for which has already been emphasised, the pastoral or facilitating promotion of reconciliation requires a less immediately demanding approach than what is commonly perceived as prophetic theology, or the kind of ultimatums that characterise secular crisis politics. In the South African context Nelson Mandela reassured the faithful in the liberation movements who had long demanded the ignominious and total surrender of the apartheid regime that he was pursuing the same goal by an alternative (and arguably more effective) means, made possible in South Africa, by the normalising of the political process.

The quest, in the pages that follow, is for an approach to peacemaking that distinguishes between goal and process, while recognising that the one is inherently linked to the other. In so doing, it seeks the ground of peacemaking in emerging trust that reaches beyond mere techniques of conflict management and the persuading of former enemies to sign a peace accord (as important as this is). The aim is a paradigm of peacemaking that recognises the need for a growing relationship of trust that both makes the peace accord possible and is aimed at enduring political stability beyond the accord.

2.2 A relationship-centric approach to reconciliation

Miroslav Volf reminds us that there are no "autonomous and self-constituting entities" in human relations; we are inextricably bound to others with whom we have historical and contemporary contact.[10] It is through human *encounter* that the healing process begins. This does not suggest that repentance, justice and other important dimensions of human relations are to be suspended indefinitely or played down in any other way. The struggle against injustice is part of the more fundamental pursuit of *reconciliation*. There is no ques-

9 John Paul Lederach in Raymond G. Helmick and Rodney Petersen (eds.), *Religion, Public Policy and Conflict Transformation* (Radnor, Pa.: Templeton Foundation Press, 2001), 183, 184.

10 Miroslav Volf, in Helmick and Petersen, 40.

tion about this. The pursuit of *justice* is a goal that needs to sustain the reconciliation process. It is not, however, necessarily something that must precede the process as a price to be paid for what is to follow.

The need is for what has been called "a relationship-centric approach to reconciliation.[11] Conversion is not a sudden act of moral insight. It is a process of learning. It is the beginning of a new way of living. It involves different attitudes towards and relationships with those from whom one often continues to be estranged. It is a relationship that places dialogue and reciprocity at the centre of the struggle to be fully human, suggesting that people are incomplete to the extent that they are alienated from one another. Often neglected at the height of war, rebellion and conflict, it was a principle that underlay the South African transition form apartheid to democratic rule. It involves an anthropological reality grounded in a philosophy of *ubuntu*, which states that a person is only a person through other people.[12] This quest for humanity is never in isolation from others. It is inherently in communion with others, where the mutual shaping one of the other is possible. As such it is necessarily opposed to a sense of fatalistic surrender to estrangement. It involves the creation of the kind of future that pursues the creation of a society that transcends exclusion and alienation, in reach of inclusivity and reconciliation.

There are numerous obstacles that undermine this process. These include bad memories, deep and abiding levels of hurt, the need for acknowledgement of past suffering, reparation, justice and a host of related concerns. No one has the right to prevail on victims and perpetrators to forgive or to be reconciled, let alone to suspend their quest for justice. The question is whether victims and survivors can be enabled to move on, *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 – as a basis for pursuing justice in a strong and viable manner. It does *not* mean forgetting the ghastly deeds of the past. This is usually not possible and probably not helpful. It does *not* mean necessarily becoming friends with the person responsible for one's suffering, nor does it mean *forgiving* that person. Very few accomplish this. Perhaps most people can only deal with their past suffering intermittently. At times they are able to rise above past suffering, at other times they fall beneath its sway.

2.3 Reconciliation as process

The theological demands for confession, repentance, resistance and forgiveness are important. They are enduring and need to be addressed. Any sugges-

11 Lederach, in Helmick and Petersen, 185.

12 Desmond Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 31.

tion that they are a necessary precondition for the possibility of getting reconciliation underway is, however, likely to be counter-productive in deeply divided societies. An alternative approach, which identifies reconciliation as *process* rather than *goal* is more helpful. This *pastoral* approach is not an alternative to, but an inherent part of, a viable *prophetic* ethic of reconciliation and forgiveness. It may well be the more viable way of attaining the illusive goal of justice.

Theology is at its creative best where and when it embraces the *realm of the artistic* – in liturgy, symbol and ritual, where imagination and new possibilities dwell, rather than the *realm of dogma* and legal codes. The former offers the possibility of forging new options through the celebration of human creativity and compassion, the latter lends itself to the kind of rigidity that defends past practices and entrenched rules concerning what is possible in the future. Religion that is reduced to legalism and moralism, stripped of its flexibility, humanism, aesthetics, intellectual quests and spiritual devotion, is essentially a thing of power, not of the soul. It is a limited and time-bound agenda that turns away from what Horkheimer called the "theological moment" that takes us beyond "mere business"

The truth of the matter is that many church leaders in South Africa find themselves trapped in a different approach to reconciliation and forgiveness. A reading of a series of interviews conducted by Bernard Spong with church and other religious leaders suggests that repentance needs necessarily to precede reconciliation – as a necessary price to be paid.[13] There is a concern throughout the interviews about "cheap grace," which is attributed to a failure of individuals and the church as a whole to "publicly confess their involvement in the evil of apartheid." It is argued that a failure "to provide adequate restitution and compensation" to victims and "to compensate for the legacy of the past" undermines any possibility of reconciliation. These, suggests one of the interviewees, are "the requirements for reconciliation". "In the end," says another, "reconciliation … is really only going to happen when people experience economic transformation and economic justice."

The concerns of the leadership and their understanding of the goals that need to be pursued are both noble and necessary. They offer, however, little or no suggestion as to how we should get the nation to this point of realisation. Bluntly stated, they offer a theology of law in the name of a prophetic theology. One is left asking whether there is not, in addition to the 'prophetic demands' for which church leaders are sometimes renowned, also the need for a creative and imaginative pastoral theology of grace that seeks to enable

13 Interviews conducted on behalf of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 2001.

the sinner to repent? An old lady in the Buitenkant Street Methodist Church once asked me to remember that "you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar"! My 'prophetic' zeal made it difficult for me to understand her.

There is a new challenge facing the church. It is to wrestle with the question of *how* to enable the nation to realise the goals it has explicitly set itself in its Constitution. Those were, of course, the heady days of the first democratic elections that saw Nelson Mandela become the nation's first democratically elected President. The emotional dedication that accompanied these events is, for many, a distant memory.

In addressing the importance of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) as it was beginning to be conceptualised, Dirkie Smit reminded us of the roots of the gospel:

> According to the Christian gospel it only becomes possible for this truth – about who we really are, about our pasts, about the suffering we have inflicted upon others and the guilt we have brought upon ourselves – not to become unbearable, not in fact to become something that we must push aside, repress, avoid and deny, when we acknowledge the more comprehensive truth of the love, mercy, forgiveness and acceptance of God.[14]

Smit argued that true self-knowledge, consciousness of sin and genuine repentance is only possible as a *consequence* of God' forgiveness – *not* as a condition for forgiveness. Quoting Ted Jennings' *The Liturgy of Liberation,* he suggests "the only sin we know is sin that has already been forgiven. We do not see the problem until we have seen the solution."[15] The question is what this implies for pastoral practice. It has something to do with persuading those who refuse to accede to the demands made by the church leaders that there is a friendly, reconciling and potentially forgiving context that can make this happen. This may just provide the grace to enable South Africa's most recalcitrant racists, self-satisfied white liberals who seem to suggest they bear no guilt or responsibility for the past,[16] and culpable black collaborators that it is time to come to the party!

14 Dirkie Smit, "The Truth and Reconciliation Commission – Tentative Religious and Theological Perspectives," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 90, March, 1995, 6.

15 Ibid., 7.

16 The response of some to the *Home for All Campaign* initiated on Reconciliation Day in 2000, inviting whites to acknowledge their responsibility to rebuild the nation illustrates the refusal of many whites to even acknowledge the benefits of the past, let alone to 'repent' of their ways.

The pertinent question is how to demonstrate to the most fearful and recalcitrant members of the society the generosity of those who, having suffered most in the past, are committed to building an inclusive society. Here lies an opportunity for the church. Suffice it to say the extent to which whites and others refuse to respond to the grace inherent in the new South Africa, is likely to be the extent to which reconciliation is likely to wither away.

2.4 Proclaiming the gospel to a secular society

Nation-building is ultimately about more than theology and spirituality. In the world of politics, it is about 'the art of the possible'. The question of how to attain a given end is as important as the end itself. The need is for a theology that understands this process and contributes to it. It is a process that requires theologians to take seriously the challenge presented by Dietrich Bonhoeffer more than half a century ago from his prison cell, which was to proclaim the gospel in secular language. Effectively this involves using a language that is understood by secular society. It probably also means refraining from the kind of acontextual dogmatism that seeks to prescribe how, when and where repentance and forgiveness should occur.

Implicit to the preceding argument is a theology of grace. It is not a theology of cheap grace. Its end is restitution and justice. What distinguishes it from a more rigid theology of law is process. It is about how to reach the agreed end. It is pastoral. It is pragmatic. It is also goal oriented. The latter means that any neat distinction between what the pastoral and the prophetic cannot in practice be sustained.

The pertinence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's classical text, The Cost of Discipleship, will never diminish. There is a cost. The cost is perhaps beyond the human capacity to pay. It is a gift of God that enables true repentance. Volf suggests that resistance to repentance is "not just because we do not like being wrong, but that almost inevitably the others are not completely right either."[17] Indeed it could probably be shown that most confessions contain a measure of ambivalence. They come with a mixture of repentance, self-defence, a measure of self-justification, reluctance and a desire to see the other person(s) show an equal amount of introspection and humility.[18] True repentance is even more difficult if the former perpetrator sees him or herself as a victim as a result of, for example, the changed political situation. A

17 *In Exclusion and Embrace*, 119.

18 Carl Jung's writing on post World War Two confessions is worth considering in this regard. See "Epilogue to 'Essay on Contemporary Events' ". In *Collected Works of CJ Jung*, edited by H Read et al. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 20: 227-43. Quoted in Volf, *Ibid.*

series of interviews with a number of perpetrators of gross violations of human rights who served in the former South African security forces, seeking to uncover the cause, motives and perspectives of perpetration bears ample witness to this phenomenon.[19] A pertinent contextual theological question to be addressed in contemporary South Africa concerns the kind of theological and ethical praxis that is required to enable sincere, lasting and significant repentance.

3. Discerning the metaphor

Resisting banality, determined to transcend the logic of 'what seems possible' and eager to find some pointers to practice that unites rather than alienates, the indefinite facets of reconciliation are considered rather than defined in what follows. This in an attempt to understand (rather than explain) reconciliation as a concept that lures, eludes and intrigues. It constitutes an exercise in unpacking the metaphor rather than naming it.

Consideration of reconciliation techniques is imperative, talk about reconciliation is important, and the identification of lessons learned from reconciling initiatives is essential. The spirit nevertheless blows where it wills and reconciliation happens in different places in different ways. Vigilance is required in order to discern the possibilities of reconciliation where and when they occur. And tragic is the initiative, whether theologically grounded or not, that seeks to curtail these possibilities in the name of one or another prescribed code or doctrine.

Reconciliation does not necessarily involve forgiveness.

The holocaust survivor, Simon Wiesenthal, published his memoir, *The Sunflower,* twenty-five years after being liberated from impending death.[20] He tells of an occasion when he was sent to work in a makeshift hospital for wounded German soldiers. A nurse escorted him to a mortally wounded soldier, named Karl, who was struggling to die. Karl told Wiesenthal that he needed the forgiveness of a Jew in order to die in peace. He spoke of his years in the Hitler Youth and sorrowfully confessed to having been sucked into the treachery of Nazi slaughter. The dying German soldier asked the embattled Jew for forgiveness.

19 The results of this work, being undertaken by Paul Haupt and Nazeema Ahmed, through the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, is due to be published in 2002.

20 Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976).

Wiesenthal questioned how he, a beleaguered Jew, should respond to a repentant, dying Nazi soldier. Should he have killed him? Could he forgive or deny forgiveness on behalf of other Jews? Without a word he walked out of the room, leaving the soldier to die alone. Haunted by the experience, when the war ended he went in search of Karl's mother. She confirmed for him Karl's story and the apparent sincerity of his confession. For the rest of his life Wiesenthal questioned his actions in having walked out on a repentant, dying, Nazi soldier. Wiesenthal, at the same time, pondered the lack of obvious regret by so many Nazis who were brought to trial and by a German population that wished to forget rather than to make amends.

What should he have done? He was *not* ready to forgive. He *was* tempted to break or interrupt the continuum between hatred and revenge. He went in search of Karl's mother. It was the beginning of a relationship – an attempt to transcend estrangement, which could, in different circumstances, have been taken further.

Reconciliation interrupts an established pattern of events.

Wiesenthal's search for Karl's mother suggests as much. Reconciliation is a first step beyond enmity. It makes "time for speech", sometimes in the midst of violence, without any guarantee as to whether such talk can have any long-term benefit.[21] Seen on a continuum extending from temporary suspension of the logic of established patterns of cause and effect to a rupture of such patterns that contain the possibility of new life, the interruption offers no guarantee of enduring success. It happens in different ways, at different levels of intensity. An important exercise in capturing the scarcity of reconciliation initiatives and the lure of such moments in time is to collect and reflect on stories of reconciliation, exploring their relevance to other situations in life. Theologies of reconciliation are more about stories than about theory.

Reconciliation is process.

It is a process that begins perhaps with no more than a measure of intrigue, curiosity or perhaps morbid fascination as to what it is that makes the alienated person who he or she is. "It started by me wanting to see what the people who killed my daughter looked like," observed Ginn Fourie, mother of Lyndi, who was killed in an armed attack on a Cape Town pub. "I wanted to know what made them the kind of people they were."[22] In her case, the

21 Doxtader, op cit.

22 In conversation with the author. Cape Town, 1999.

encounter with the killers led to her forgiving them and the beginning of a different kind of relationship with them. In the case of Simon Wiesenthal, it did not go that far. Reconciliation is often as painful as it is costly. It is not for the feint-hearted or easily defeated. And clearly some have no obvious desire to go in search of it at all.

Reconciliation involves understanding.

Understanding does not necessarily lead to reconciliation. When, on the other hand, the story of a perpetrator is thoughtfully told, heard and deeply understood, it can soften the perception the victim, survivor or observer has of the perpetrator concerned. It opens space for the possibility of a new kind of interaction between adversaries. Many perpetrators are themselves victims of one kind or another – of propaganda, religious indoctrination, fear, disillusionment and a culture of submission.

"Some of us were more eager than others to please our political bosses, but not a hell of a lot of policemen followed the textbook and blew the whistle on what was happening," a senior policeman in the former South African Police observed.[23] Jozef Garlinski, a Polish underground fighter who survived Auschwitz, tells of the horrendous evil he both witnessed and himself suffered. He ends his account by saying: "Please remember those young SS officers could have been your sons or mine."[24]

In understanding the perpetrator, we begin to understand the forces that make for evil. We discover the power of these forces and we begin to realise that the enemy (the German, the Serb or the Afrikaner) does not have a monopoly on moral insanity. We discover that maybe there is a 'little perpetrator' in each of us. It is this that makes unconditional negative judgement of another a little more complex and opens the possibility of a basis for interaction in the present that could lead to a new kind of future.

Reconciliation requires acknowledgement.

As understanding does not necessarily lead to reconciliation, so truth is not necessarily a conduit to reconciliation. There are, however, few who have suffered deeply who are able to begin to rise above this suffering without having at least a rudimentary knowledge of the cause and circumstances surrounding these events. They want to know who killed their spouse, child or parent. They want to know why. Silence, for the victim or survivor, concern-

23 In a private conversation.

24 Jozef Garlinski, *Fighting Auschwitz* (London: Ortis Books, 1994), 139.

ing the past often results in a wall of *inertia* – an inability to move on. There is a sense of paralysis that entraps the victim in his or her sense of defeat.

Ashley Forbes, a torture victim of the notorious torturer, Jeffrey Benzien, was critical of the decision by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission to grant Benzien amnesty, arguing that he failed to make full disclosure. Nevertheless, 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."[25]

Acknowledgement does *not* mean forgetting the ghastly deed. It does *not* mean necessarily becoming friends with the person responsible for one's suffering. It does mean a break with overt enmity, and beginning a different kind of relationship, signalled in Forbes' words: "I feel sorry for him [Benzien]." Not all survivors of torture accomplish this.

Consider the words of Kalu: "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 do so. 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 of healing. No one has the right to prevail on Kalu to forgive. Would acknowledgement about the truth about the past help her to deal with the "ball of anger"? It is an open question.

Reconciliation takes time.

I visited Rwanda, where I was asked to speak about reconciliation. "We are still burying the dead and looking for justice," I was told.[26] Reconciliation may come later. It would have been obscene to ask Jews to be reconciled with Germans in 1945. The miraculous thing is that there were some Jews who were able to explore the meaning of reconciliation in the immediate wake of the holocaust. There are some Rwandans who argue that reconciliation, in the modest sense of an *interruption* to Hutu-Tutsi violence, is the only alternative to genocide. In South Africa Nelson Mandela came out of jail after twenty-seven years seeking reconciliation – and there are others in South Africa who are ready to forgive. Icons of hope are important. But for most people, only a first enquiring venture beyond hatred is possible. The reconciling process takes time.

25 Quoted in *Sunday Independent*, 6 December 1998. In an article by Wilhelm Verwoerd.

26 In Kigali, June 1999.

4. What then is reconciliation?

4.1 The necessary reciprocity

Engraved into the South African social consciousness, the concept remains beyond either the mental or emotional understanding of many – it is at the same time a concept that refuses to go away. The affirmation of the concept by former President Nelson Mandela and the championing of reconciliation by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in his role as chairperson of the TRC has allowed few, if any South Africans, to ignore it. Some embraced it. Others rejected it. Few have been able to ignore it.

What then is reconciliation? We have suggested certain pointers: Interruption, something less than forgiveness, process, understanding, acknowledgement and patience. To the extent that *a word is what it produces*, it has something to do with the engaging of people in an attempt to overcome enmity. This could be grounded in self-interest, in curiosity or in intrigue. Ultimately it involves grace.

Whatever the immediate motivation, at a deeper level reconciliation gives credence to the African expression of *ubuntu.* It suggests that people are incomplete to the extent that they are alienated from one another. It is an African spirituality that is akin to a spirituality grounded in the Western theological tradition that comes to expression in the writing, for example, of St Augustine. Seeking to develop a way forward amidst the escalation of violence and enmity that led to the fall of Rome in 410, he gave expression to an enduring dimension of Western spirituality in his confessional meditation: "Thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts and minds shall know no rest until they find their rest in thee."[27]

Grounded in the New Testament imperative, as it is, we are reminded that the biblical 'Thee' is inextricably related to a 'thou'. Love of God and love of neighbour cannot be separated. Suffice it to say, within the kind of spirituality that links the love of God and the love of humanity, that lies at the heart of African and western spirituality (and elsewhere) there resides within humans and nations a desire for living in peace one with another, which seeks to transcend even the most hostile conflicts. Often neglected at the height of war, rebellion and conflict, this hope drives conflict resolution, peacemaking and the need for coexistence. It is an anthropological incentive, grounded in

27 Saint Augustine, *Confessions* I.i.1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3. Clearly it is necessary to note the obvious limitations of Augustine's interpretation of his own spirituality as identified, for example in Rosemary Ruether's "Augustine and Christian Political Thought," *Interpretation*, 29 (1975), 258. Few live up to the standard of their own insights!

a spiritual reality that those who would live in peace with their neighbours would do well to ponder.

When individuals and nations are consumed with anger, faced with the possibility of annihilation and yet neither willing nor able to capitulate, reconciliation is often the only alternative to the impasse. Trapped within a deadlock of destruction or submission, the quest for a way out of despair (what Karl Barth simply called "the night"[28]) is to find an alternative to what seems like the iron grip of fate. It is this kind of impasse that resulted in the South African settlement that led to the political transition of 1994.

In the words of Shakespeare's Macbeth: "as two spent swimmers, that do cling together", black and white South Africans realised that a settlement of one kind or another was imperative. It was the only option capable of bringing to an end an ever-escalating war that threatened to destroy the very identity, infrastructure and promise of a nation yet to be born. The Archbishop's "miracle" is that both sides somehow came to believe that new life could still emerge, phoenix-like, out of the strife that characterized the apartheid years.

Reconciliation begins where people who are at enmity one with the other learn to deal with conflicts in a humane manner, at the heart of which is civility and creativity. It suggests that being human involves a process of engagement between strangers and adversaries, however difficult, as a basis for the possibility of a relationship and a space within which to deal creatively with issues (material and subjective) that make us less than human. It involves refusing to heighten the potential for self and mutual destruction.

4.2 Overcoming dehumanisation

In South Africa reconciliation involves the perpetrators of gross violations of human rights, as well as beneficiaries and bystanders, but also victims and survivors, dealing with the dehumanisation that has come to characterise *their persons*. Njabulo Ndebele, powerfully and yet simply, suggests that reconciliation has essentially to do with "who we can become".[29] It involves committing ourselves to overcoming the dehumanisation that has shaped our lives as well as our dehumanising attitudes towards others. Wole Soyinka ponders the nature of the "slave condition".[30] It is a denial of humanity – "a psychological mutilation of the human entity", which in diverse (subliminal)

28 Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 43.

29 In his address at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation's award ceremony of the Reconciliation Award given to Tim Modise, 8 March 2000.

30 Wole Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 70.

ways can linger for generations in the psyche of oppressed and subjugated people. He insists it is necessary to "seize and alter that destiny". Steve Biko articulated this better than most in the South African context:

> All in all the black man [sic] has become a shell, a shadow of a man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery … The first step therefore is to make the black man come to himself; to pump back life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity, to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign in the county of his birth.[31]

Reconciliation involves the humanisation of the victims and survivors of slavery, colonialism, racism and apartheid. It involves people who have been treated as less than human and who sometimes internalise that dehumanisation, seizing their humanity and their destiny. Antjie Krog in *Country of My Skull* speaks of the importance of one who has suffered being able to shift from a pre-linguistic state within which one is overwhelmed by the extent of the suffering, to the point where one can take control of the suffering, at least, to the point of being able speak about it. A "particular memory at last captured in words can no longer haunt you, push you around, bewilder you, because you have taken control of it – you can move it wherever you want to."[32] Maybe we should say we can begin to wrestle with the possibility of 'moving' it. This, she suggests, is what the TRC was all about.

This was, in a sense, what Biko's words, quoted above, are all about. It is what Habermas[33] is talking about when he speaks of taking a measure of rational control through speech, redeeming the "inner foreign territory" of the perverse unconsciousness by bringing it to words – by naming the beast.

It also involves perpetrators, beneficiaries and bystanders dealing with the dehumanisation that has come to characterise *their persons*. This often involves claims to rightful privilege, arrogance, greed, indifference, ignorance and fear. In the South African context, the transcendence of such dehumanisation might need to involve a 'white consciousness' that seeks to strip away the layers of deceit that have come to characterise `white superiority'. This `superiority' has, in different ways, survived the momentous events that heralded the demise of apartheid in 1994 – in much the same way that the 'slave condition' has survived emancipation in the previous century.

31 Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1987), 29.

32 Antjie Krog, *Counry of My Skull* (Johannesburg: Random House, 1998), 42.

33 See Jurgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, translated by JJ Shapiro (Boston: Beacon press, 1973). Also "Systematically Distorted Communication," *Inquiry*, 13, 1970.

5. An abiding divergence

Directly related to a theory of reconciliation grounded in anthropological desire is, of course, the challenge of justice, without which the goal of the reconciliation process cannot be fully attained. It is an inherent part of reconciliation. At worst it renders reconciliation no more than a façade that is not reconciliation at all. As a case can be made for a human inclination towards self-fulfilment in relation to others, so there is a penchant within most people that seeks material and legal satisfaction for loss suffered. The weight of wrong suffered is at times such that it lends credence and understanding to an ingrained human desire for revenge.

The nature of the relationship between non-codified social rules and legal norms in society is complex and need not be entered into here.[34] It is enough to note that it is in relation to this kind of reality that Martha Minow defends organised (state) retribution as an exercise in taming, balancing and recasting the personal animus involved in vengeance.[35] By institutionalizing feelings of anger, resentment and even hatred, the state exercises procedural controls over individual and group anarchy. In Susan Jacoby's words, it is an alternative to the "wild justice" of the vigilante.[36]

The refrain of critics of the TRC is, "I want justice". But, if justice is no more than "an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth", there is an entrenched divide between justice and reconciliation that can only have the most disastrous implications for deeply divided societies like South Africa and a host of other countries in political transition. In the sense of breaking with, or interrupting, the logic of revenge, reconciliation is the creation of time and space in which to find new ways of dealing with past grievances.

It is this space that, in South Africa, has given rise to competing notions of justice that at least partially satisfy the human impulse for satisfaction. The development of notions of restorative justice as an alternative to retribution has generated extensive debate in this regard.[37] The unresolved debate con-

34 See Richard Wilson, "Reconciliation and Revenge in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Rethinking Legal Pluralism and Human Rights." Paper delivered at the workshop held by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, History Department. *The TRC: Commissioning the Past.* The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 11 - 14 June, 1999.

35 Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 12.

36 Susan Jacoby, *Wild Justice: The Evolution of Revenge* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 10.

37 John Braithwaite, *Restorative Justice: Assessing an Immodest Theory and a Pessimistic Theory.* Australian Institute of Criminology, Australian National University, 1998; Jennifer J Llewellyn and Robert Howse, "Restorative Justice: A Conceptual Framework." Tony Marshall, "Restorative justice – an overview," *Criminal Justice Quarterly*, Issue 5, 1993, 2-3; Charles Villa-Vicencio, "Why Perpetrators Should Not Always be Prosecuted," *Emory Law Journal*, Vol. 49, No.1, Winter 2000.

cerns the extent to which retribution necessarily entails vengeance. The need, not least in a deeply divided society, is to define 'reconciliation' and 'justice' in non-exclusive ways. Indeed they often feed one off the other. The threat of punishment in South Africa has, for example, in several ways contributed to the success of the TRC and the possibility of former perpetrators and their victims finding a basis for coexistence.

The TRC model of justice is not perfect. Howard Zehr suggests that from a restorative justice perspective the South African TRC "is flawed, opportunities have been missed, but the importance of this understanding [of justice] – not only in South Africa, but for the world – must not be underestimated. It is a bold step on an uncharted path."[38] The TRC was assigned the important task of instituting *corrective moral justice* by putting the record straight, in the sense of naming both perpetrators and victims, as well as pronouncing a 'just cause' in the conflict under review. It had no power to execute *punitive justice*, nor did it have the power to execute *distributive justice*, in the sense of correcting material imbalances.

We are back with the "time and space" that must be used to redress the material and other imbalances that brought the nation to the brink of collapse in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The TRC has made certain recommendations in this regard, which include recommendations of material payments to those whom it found to be victims of gross violations of human rights. The state and the nation as a whole has been regrettably slow to respond to these recommendations, which somewhat ironically, means that the success or failure of the TRC process to resolve the tension between justice and reconciliation, will not and cannot be resolved by the TRC. This is up to the state and the nation as a whole.

It is a process which includes material redress – both individual and at the level of social services for all victims of apartheid. It must necessarily also include the healing of memories. It must further enshrine in the national consciousness the memory of past abuse, through the establishment of museums, monuments, memorials and other national symbols. If the national memory is to be powerful enough to check future atrocities, future generations must encounter the memory of past atrocities. This memory must, as in the case of the holocaust, be ingrained in the consciousness of every South African. The burden of this essay is to enquire how this may be accomplished. It is about the process of reconciling a nation.

38 Howard Zehr, "Restorative Justice: When Justice and Healing Go Together," *Track Two*, Vol.6, Nos. 3 and 4, December 1997, 20.

To the extent that the nation establishes material redress, national memory and the will to resist those forces that made for apartheid, it will have achieved a level of justice that will not satisfy the thirst for revenge of all, but could have begun to redress the needs of most. It is here that the possibility of a creative encounter between justice and reconciliation resides. It is about promoting a process that focuses less on who we are and more, in the words of Njabulo Ndebele, on "who we can become".[39]

39 In an address at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation "2001 Reconciliation Award" to Tim Modise, 8 March 2001. Picking up on this thought, Antjie Krog suggests the "healing stream" initiated through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been undermined by the failure of the government to follow up on the recommendations of the TRC. In so doing, she writes, "it allowed the healthy stream of accountability that was starting to flow through the country to dry up. It curtailed compassion and left us stunted. We are no longer a country becoming." Sunday Independent, December 2, 2001.

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The art of reconciliation

Charles Villa-Vicencio

"Reconciliation cannot be defined in a neat set of rules. It is more than theory. It involves grace. It is about making what seems impossible possible. It is an art rather than a science."

From this starting-point, Charles Villa-Vicencio explores the concept of reconciliation through his experiences of the South African context. Through a set of new challenging approaches he brings forth different understandings and interpretations of this theme. The issue of justice as an inseparable component of reconciliation is also reflected in this paper.

Professor *Charles Villa-Vicencio* is the Executive Director of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation in Cape Town, South Africa. He was a former head of the Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa and Director of Research for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. An ordained Methodist minister, he has served congregations both in South Africa and the United States. He is the author of several books and, as a distinguished theologian, a frequent contributor to scholarly publications.

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