

Dear Readers

This Autumn edition of our newsletter is devoted to our recent seminar on 'Dealing with the Past'. It contains papers by the three speakers, Andrew Rigby, Roberta Bacic and William Saa (all revised since they were distributed before the seminar) and, starting on page 17, a report of the seminar itself. Preliminary details of our next seminar appear on the back page.

Three contrasting approaches for 'Dealing with the Past': collective amnesia, retributive justice and prioritising truth

Dr Andrew Rigby, Professor of Peace Studies and Director of the Centre for Forgiveness and Reconciliation at Coventry University, provides here a brief overview of the main options facing regimes seeking to deal constructively with the legacy of past abuses.

Introduction

I had a colleague who paid regular visits to a therapist. He had been caught in the suffocating mass of football fans at the Hillsborough football stadium in Sheffield on 15th April 1989 when 96 were killed. By his own admission he had been unable to come to terms with that traumatic experience. It still haunted him. Whilst proclaiming himself a 'survivor' who campaigned for a formal acknowledgement of the true causes of the tragedy, he remained a victim and his victim-hood was one of his core identities.

In April 2002 I had the opportunity to spend some time with another survivor, this time of the Rwandan genocide of 1994. Her husband and other members of her family had been slaughtered. She escaped by hiding in the bush. Since then she had become active in the support network for the widows of genocide victims, but had been criticised by some of her friends and colleagues who could not understand why she had not attempted to find out who was responsible for the deaths of her loved ones. For her this would serve no purpose. Nothing would bring them back. It did not mean she loved them any the less. The important thing was to work constructively to help the survivors, not focus on those that had been lost.

Unlike my friend from Rwanda, many people in Cambodia find it difficult to talk about the pain of the past, particularly of the terrible years of 'auto-genocide' between 1975 and 1979 under the revolutionary regime of the Khmer Rouge. There are many reasons for this, but one significant factor is that Cambodian culture deems it inappropriate to discuss personal matters in any kind of group setting. Therefore people deal with the pain of the past in a privatised fashion, whilst focusing on the challenges of surviving the present.

The purpose of these three stories or observations is to illustrate just some of the myriad ways people can choose to deal with the pain of the past, according to their personality, circumstances and culture. The awareness of such a plurality of modes of adaptation should

cause us to treat with considerable caution the claims of those who seem to believe that 'one method fits all' when dealing with individual and collective trauma. Typical of such an approach is the following statement:

'In order to heal, members of victimized groups, like victimized individuals, need to engage with their experience. They need to re-experience the pain, sorrow and loss under safe conditions. They need to receive empathy, support and affirmation from each other and, ideally, from people outside the group.'¹

Just as individuals can pursue different strategies to cope with the painful memories of loss and bereavement, so collectivities have before them a range of options for dealing with the divisions and the destructive conflicts of the past. But before moving on to review some of these options we need to ask the basic question: What do we mean by 'dealing with the past'?

Dealing with the past?

The 'past' is not something fixed with an independent existence, a once and for all set of events. The 'past' is the remembered past, and as such it is something that is constructed and reproduced in a multitude of ways. In other words, what we refer to as the 'past' is our historical *memory* of a particular period of the past, and our particular memory is just one of a range of alternative memories (or interpretations) that it is possible to hold.

From this it follows that from the perspective of conflict transformation people can have too much of the wrong type of memory, one such that the pain occasioned by the divisions and conflicts of the past never dies. As a consequence the hurt and the resentments are reproduced from generation to generation into the future – a future that is over-determined by the remembered past.

For the bereaved and dispossessed everywhere, that which they have lost can never be restored to them. But, particularly in the case of societies emerging out of division with a bitter legacy of human rights abuses, it is vital for the sake of peace that people manage somehow to come to terms with their loss and prepare to move on. This capacity to let go of a particular memory of the past, to forge another memory or interpretation that allows people to relinquish the quest for revenge is at the heart of what many understand by forgiveness. Unless people manage to forsake their determination to 'get even', there can be no new beginning, no transformation of relationship; everyone will remain imprisoned in a particular history (or mythology), recycling old crimes and hatreds – with the lived present dominated by a particular collective memory of the past.

So, by 'dealing with past' we are referring to a process comparable to that of forgiveness. Forgiveness can be at the interpersonal level – forgiving identifiable perpetrators. It can also be at the more anonymous collective level of 'forgiving history' – coming to terms with the pain of the past in such a way as to free oneself from the determining force of a particular collective memory, forming a new memory that creates the symbolic space for people to orient themselves towards a new future which allows for the possibility of reconciliation with past opponents.

¹ Ervin Straub, 'Genocide and mass killing: origins, prevention, healing and reconciliation', *Political Psychology* (v 21, n 2, 2000, pp. 367-382)

The manner in which such a memory can be constructed is illustrated in this observation from a Rwandan government official in 1995 when asked by Priscilla Hayner 'Do you want to remember or to forget?':

'We must remember what happened in order to keep it from happening again. But we must forget the feelings, the emotions, that go with it. It is only by forgetting that we are able to go on.'²

The necessary conditions for 'dealing with the past'

Despite reservations about over-generalising about such processes across cultures, certain elements seem to be conducive to laying the past to rest in a constructive, future-oriented manner.

i) Peace/security

One clear and necessary precondition for people to 'move on' is the experience of a clear break from the painful past. A key element in this is an end to the bloodshed, violence and abuse. To begin to have hope for the future, a core constituent of any reconciliation process, people must experience a significant degree of personal and collective security. The experience of political and identity-driven violence must become a memory, rather than a lived experience in the here-and-now.

ii) 'Justice'

In addition to personal and collective peace and security, always a matter of degree, many would argue that people also need to perceive some degree and form of 'justice' being implemented in order to experience a break with the past and lay it to rest. At the heart of most common-sense notions of justice is the idea of 'making things right' through some combination of punishment of perpetrators and/or the compensation of victims.

iii) Truth

In the growing body of literature relating to reconciliation in societies emerging out of violent, destructive conflict and gross human rights abuse there is regular reference to the significance of unveiling and acknowledging the truth about the criminal acts and wrongs of the past as a necessary condition for people to 'move on' individually and collectively.

Managing the tension between the values of peace, justice and truth

These constitutive elements or values of peace, justice and truth that help people forgive the past do not rest easily together. Too great a concern with ensuring peace and security and avoiding a resumption of violence can mean that truth and justice are forfeited. But too active a pursuit of justice in societies emerging out of division can result in a return to violent conflict and bloodshed. Moreover, if the value of truth is prioritised above all else, then this can come at the cost of justice. After all, why should perpetrators disclose the full extent of their crimes if they will thereby incriminate themselves and condemn themselves to judicial punishment.

Which particular value or set of values is prioritised, and the consequent strategy for pursuing them by regimes of societies emerging out of destructive conflict and division depends to a

² Priscilla Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Facing the challenge of truth commissions* (London: Routledge, 2002, p.1)

considerable degree on the balance of power encountered by the new regime and the culture of the society.

Basically we can identify three 'ideal-type' modes for dealing with the past: forget it for the sake of peace and security, seek out the perpetrators in pursuit of justice, and acknowledge the suffering of the victims and their stories so that their truth might be known.

Amnesia and amnesty – for the sake of peace and security

In 1975 the Spanish dictator Franco died. He came to power through a military rebellion and subsequent civil war, and after his victory in 1939 his regime became infamous for its barbaric treatment of the defeated Republicans and the repression practised throughout the country. Yet after his death and the transition to democratic rule there was no purge, but rather an exercise in collective amnesia. Everything was subordinated to the peaceful transition to democratic rule – and this exercise in letting bygones be bygones would appear to have worked, the roots of democracy in Spain have deepened.

In the Spanish case this 'pact of oblivion' was made by elites in order to ensure political stability, fearing that any attempt to sully the reputation of Franco and purge the military and security forces would lead to a coup attempt. Moreover, during the period of transition civil society in Spain was underdeveloped. The result was that there was no significant pressure from sources outside the state for any kind of truth-telling exercise or the prosecution of the many perpetrators of human rights abuses.

However, the desire to cover up the past can also be the wish of people at the grassroots. This is particularly so if many of them share a past which they would rather forget because of their active involvement in, or complicity with, the evil that was perpetrated in their name. For people who have been involved in mass violence such as can happen in a civil war, it can certainly seem as if the past is best left where it belongs, in the past. To introduce it into the present might lead to further bloodshed, conflict and pain – the reopening of the old wounds. This has been the fear of many Cambodians concerned about the possible repercussions of attempts to hold trials of Khmer Rouge cadres implicated in the genocide of 1975-79. Writing in December 1998 one Cambodian journalist expressed his view with painful honesty, 'I know the Khmer Rouge are bad and criminals, but there are too many to convict and some remain strong. To safeguard the living it is better not to seek justice for the dead.'

Purging the perpetrators in pursuit of a kind of justice

At the opposite pole from amnesia is the active attempt to police the past and prosecute those guilty of perpetrating human rights abuses. Here the example comes to mind of the prosecution of Nazi war criminals and their collaborators that took place at Nuremberg and elsewhere in Europe after the Second World War. More recently there have been the purges and 'lustration' processes carried out in some of the former state socialist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe, and the International Criminal Tribunals for Former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda.

In general one can say that the path of retributive justice is likely to be followed when the new regime has come to power as a result of a comprehensive victory over those who are the potential targets of such a purge. In such circumstances where the new regime feels sufficiently confident of its power and ability to pursue justice without risking political and social stability, then the alleged perpetrators of human rights abuses are likely to be prosecuted. Many arguments can be put forward to support the active pursuit of justice in the

sense of punishing wrong-doers, but perhaps the most important one is that by such actions the culture of impunity within which so many abuses flourish can be challenged.

Such is the theory, but the practice invariably leaves some room for doubt. The debate over the Nuremberg trials is still ongoing. Was it due process or revenge? The accused were not prosecuted by their peers but by their conquerors, and as such many believe that it was a perverted 'victor's justice' that was served there. The more recent experience of attempts to punish those responsible for the abuse of human rights under the state socialist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe, to purge them and their collaborators from positions of influence and public office, leads to the conclusion that such efforts degenerate all too easily into witch-hunts motivated by narrow political considerations rather than a concern with justice.

One of the main criticisms of trials and purges as a means of laying the past to rest is that it presumes too simple a distinction between the guilty and the innocent, the perpetrators and the victims, an assumption that all too often fails to acknowledge the moral dilemmas faced by those seeking to survive under oppressive regimes and in times of violence. For example, in a recent publication from the Cambodian Documentation Centre the researcher Meng Try Ea has interviewed former guards, interrogators and gaolers who worked at the infamous torture centre in Phnom Penh, Tuol Sleng which was known as S-21. In his conclusion Meng Try Ea reviews the lives of these children who were removed from their villages and homes and indoctrinated to despise their parents and consider *Angkor* (the organisation) as their family:

'... the young comrades were indoctrinated to love their work, love the Communist party, and hate their parents. At the same time, they were trained to commit crimes. The young comrades quickly learned that they had to follow orders or be killed. But even so, one by one, group members working at S-21 disappeared, while the surviving comrades worked and lived in fear, waiting for their turn. It is inescapable that these young comrades became victims of the Khmer Rouge regime.'³

Karl Jaspers, reflecting on the holocaust, distinguished between four types of guilt: the criminal guilt of those who actually committed the crimes; the political guilt of those who helped such people get to power; the moral guilt of those who stood by doing nothing as the crimes were being committed; and finally the metaphysical guilt of those who survived whilst others were killed, thereby failing in their responsibility to do all that they might have done to preserve the standards of civilised humanity. Trials might be valid processes for determining criminal guilt, but they are not best suited to coping with all the different forms, shades and degrees of culpability.

Moreover trials have their limitations when it comes to unveiling the truth about the past. They are combative encounters where defendant and prosecutor compete to get their version of the truth accepted as authoritative. As such trials can serve as important morality plays, symbolic history lessons that show goodness can triumph over evil and the guilty cannot act with impunity. But they are not the best means for dealing with all the subtleties of the past. For that another approach seems best suited – that of the truth commission.

³ Meng Try Ea & Sorya Sim, *Victims and Perpetrators? Testimony of Young Khmer Rouge Comrades* (Phnom Penh: Documentation Centre of Cambodia, 2001, p. 46)

Prioritising truth, but whose truth and what about justice?

Whereas purges and prosecutions are aimed at punishing the perpetrators of crimes against their fellow citizens, the prime concern of the truth commission approach to addressing the pains of the past is with the victims. The aim is to identify them and to uncover and formally acknowledge the wrongs done to them. In a number of cases this exercise is implemented not only in pursuit of the value of truth but also as a necessary step towards the establishment of some system of compensation for victims. The intention is that through such a process of unveiling the past and receiving reparations former victims might be enabled to come to terms with their anger and bitterness. The pattern was set by the 'National Commission on the Disappeared' established in Argentina in 1983 which tried to uncover the secrecy surrounding the torture, killing and disappearance of the thousands of victims of the military regime. Chile followed its neighbour's example in 1991, and more recently there has been the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The advocates of the truth commission approach argue that they are central to the promotion of reconciliation in divided societies, healing wounds that trials and purges can deepen. In the literature one often comes across quotes from survivors to the effect that they will only be able to forgive and move on once they know the 'final destiny' of those they lost. Supporters also claim that some form of amnesty is necessary if perpetrators are to admit to their past crimes.

But the history that is revealed by truth commissions can only be a partial truth. The very process of uncovering a part of the truth and granting it the status of official, public and authoritative record can serve to cover up other aspects of the past. For instance, in the cases of the Latin American truth commissions there was no identification of the actual individuals responsible for abuses. From the perspective of those that survived this meant that the perpetrators continued to enjoy impunity and justice was forfeited, leading some critics to portray truth commissions as a relatively cost-free way to meet popular demands for an accounting, creating the impression that the past has been dealt with, so that people would be prepared to move on and face the future together – a future based on victims and survivors becoming *reconciled* to their loss.

It was because of such criticisms that the South Africans introduced the element of *conditional* amnesty into their model. To be free from the fear of prosecution perpetrators were required to confess their crimes and convince the Amnesty Committee that these had been 'political' in nature and were not committed out of personal malice or for private gain. Despite this innovation, there are grounds for believing that there is a growing sense of resentment amongst large swathes of the South African population at the manner in which so many perpetrators escaped punishment and the failure to implement the reparations system as a means of making amends to those who suffered under the apartheid regime.

Justice as 'putting things right'

The bitterness that comes from a painful past can be sweetened to some degree by offers of compensation and reparations. New regimes can try to compensate the primary and secondary victims of violence and human rights violations with cash payments, educational bursaries, access to health care, the construction of memorials and other forms of material and symbolic reparations. Whatever the material benefit that might accrue to the victims of the past by such means, as important is the symbolic recognition of their status. But how do you address the issue of reparations for the vast majority of people who were not immediately and directly affected by the violence and abuse – the people who were not forced out of their homes, raped, tortured, or dispossessed but who were denied the opportunity to fulfil their potential

as human beings because of the conditions under which they were required to live during the period of conflict and/or repression? How do you acknowledge their suffering? How do you compensate them for the impoverished lives they endured?

It is doubtful that the pain of the past can be left behind and reconciliation in any deep sense approached without addressing the structures of power, inequality and exclusion that constituted the framework within which the violence of the old order was perpetrated and endured. After all, how can people begin to orient towards a shared future if their everyday life reminds them of the pain of the past? For people to move together along the path of reconciliation it is crucial that a sustained effort is made to transform the structures and circumstances of everyday life that embody and perpetuate the old divisions between 'us' and 'them', between perpetrator and victim. Only when people feel that the evils of the past will not return and believe that 'things are moving in the right direction' will they be in a position to loosen the bonds of the past, relinquish the impulse for revenge and orient towards the future. In other words, reconciliation needs to be grounded in a sustained effort at restitution and 'putting things right'.

Andrew Rigby

Truth commissions: One option when dealing with the recent past in countries that have endured war or dictatorships

Roberta Bacic, a Chilean working for War Resisters International, provides more information about truth commissions as a way of dealing with the past.

'How can those who tortured and those who were tortured co-exist in the same land? How to heal a country that has been traumatised by repression and the fear to speak out is still omnipresent everywhere? And how do you reach the truth if lying has become a habit?'¹

Diana Francis' recent book *People, Peace and Power* appears at a moment when it seems almost impossible to stop the war machine. In it she encourages academics and practitioners of conflict transformation to acknowledge the need for dealing with the past if we do not want 'conflicts to grow from the seeds of past suffering and hatred'.² She courageously addresses the complexities and demands of justice, the realities of power, and the impact of social injustice – key topics in keeping the peace once hostilities end. Looking into any of the recent conflicts, this has been the reality: Kosov@, Chechnya, Afgahnistan, Irak, just to name a few.

Truth commissions represent an attempt to deal with some aspects of the problem of dealing with the past. They have been set up in countries that have endured violent conditions or where human rights have been systematically violated. The new administrations – whether following war, dictatorship, or a transitional government – lack a system of justice capable of dealing with the consequences of the past. The existing systems cannot be relied upon to

¹ A. Dorfman, *Death and the Maiden* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1999)

² D. Francis, *People, Peace and Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2002)

prosecute those responsible for human rights violations, because violence has usually been perpetrated by the state and its institutions, including the judicial system. At the very least, these institutions have been complicit in the violence by ignoring or denying its existence. We can also add the dimension that all of us who constitute society share responsibility in varying degrees for what has happened. In *Anil's Ghost* we read: 'We are often criminals in the eyes of the earth, not only for having committed crimes, but because we know that crimes have been committed'.³ Hamber agrees with this point: 'Responsibility needs to be taken not only for direct actions, but also for silence and covert support'.⁴

In the political discourse which accompanies the establishment of truth commissions, the individual needs of those who have suffered are generally subordinated to the interests and timetable of the new government. There is no acknowledgement that the healing process of victims may require a different timetable. Referring to the Guatemala Truth Commission, Beristain says: 'However, telling the truth and documenting it is not in itself any assurance. After the testimonies and the reports, it is crucial for the government to implement thorough structural changes to the institutions implicated in human rights abuses'.⁵

Truth commissions are established as independent bodies capable not only of conducting a proper investigation and but also of offering suggestions on how to proceed after the facts have been officially and openly acknowledged. They also aim at reaching some level of agreed understanding about the past. As we have pointed out, in most cases the legal system in the countries concerned has been part of the old order. Many of those who played a part in that system, and may continue to do so, supported the politics of the previous regime. We can not ignore the fact so well and clearly expressed by Ondaatje: 'Sometimes law is on the side of power, not truth'. In fact, I would add that this has been the case in most of the situations of this kind.

Truth commissions vary in terms of their degree of authority, legal capacity, moral acceptance and support from survivors, the size of their budgets and the number of their staff. The extent of a truth commission's authority will depend not only on the kind of people who serve on it, but on the strength of the new government and its acceptance by society as a whole. Usually the chair of the commission is a figure of moral stature who has struggled for justice, has international prestige and has managed to expose human rights violations in the past. A truth commission's legal capacity will depend on the mechanisms available to it to unearth evidence of human rights violations and on its ability to link up with the judicial system which is ultimately responsible for the prosecution of the perpetrators.

In my view – as someone not pretending to be neutral but standing beside those who have suffered the human rights' violations – dealing with the past means neither more nor less than learning to live / cope/ struggle with it in the present. Forgiveness and reconciliation may follow as a conclusion of the process. But they will not be my focus as generally the call for them constitutes a further demand upon those who have suffered human rights violations, made by those who have negotiated a political settlement to their own advantage and now exercise political power.

³ M. Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000)

⁴ B. Hamber, *Past Imperfect* (Derry: Incore, 1998)

⁵ C. Beristain, in R. Godley, C. Kee and R. Norton (eds.), *GUATEMALA: thinking about the unthinkable* (London: Association of Artists of Guatemala, 1999)

After having worked with relatives of the disappeared for about twenty-five years in my country, having been part of the investigation team of the National Corporation of Reparation and Reconciliation for four years – the follow-up of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – and having researched and lectured on the topic for several years, I would like to make a number of observations about these institutions in order to clarify how they can be extended and be as effective as possible at different levels of society. This is important in order to see how, when and where NGOs, grassroots groups, the educational system, professionals, individuals and social actors can act upon and be helpful in the healing process of both individuals and society as a whole.

1. Truth Commissions are capable of contributing to an acknowledgement of two substantial issues:
 - The institutions of the countries concerned are incapable of dealing with the human rights abuses that have taken place.
 - The violence and abuse have been known about all along by victims and perpetrators but have been ignored or denied by a large part of society.
2. Truth Commissions are set up to establish an accurate record of a country's recent past, to clarify uncertain events and to lift the lid off the silence and denial about a painful period of history.
3. They exist to respond to some of the needs and interests of those who have suffered abuses, and much of their time and attention is focused on these victims. However, as the president of the Association of the Disappeared of Chile stated when the commission was set up – 'It is crucial to understand that the Commission and what results from it are by no means a concession, but a minimal right and that we have nothing to be grateful for. It is fitting – that and nothing but that'. Storytelling, in relation to the input of both victims and perpetrators, is an important and substantial part of the commission's task.
4. Uncovering what happened can trigger a process of dealing with the past. But it is essential if this is to occur for grassroot groups as well as NGOs and state institutions to deal with the Commission when possible and make good use of the outcoming report and/or recommendations, and thereby contribute to the prevention of future violations.
5. The publication of facts makes it impossible any longer for the perpetrators and apologists of repression to hide behind euphemisms. So a 'crime' is a crime and not an 'abuse', 'torture' is torture and not an 'inappropriate and unnecessary use of force', and so on.
6. The existence of the commission and its subsequent report means that the topic that previously mainly engaged victims and perpetrators becomes the concern of society as a whole. Those who do not belong to either of these two groups have to take part in the discussion and take responsibility for what they previously ignored and for what they failed to do.
7. During and after this process there is a strong need for rebuilding social networks. Here active dialogue and the participation of individuals and social actors becomes relevant.
8. In the context of what is happening all over the world, the setting up of these commissions after war or dictatorship becomes a matter of aesthetics. It looks right to set them up and give them national and international importance.

9. In the realm of morality, commissions challenge society to face up to the necessity of deciding what is and what is not negotiable, and of balancing ethical demands against political constraints.
10. A few commissions have contributed to the achievement of justice and accountability. Others have argued the need for them to be linked to a processes of justice – a basic demand of the victims.
11. Commissions are supposed to make recommendations to overcome the problems of the past. They are expected amongst other things: to design a reparations programme and to propose programmes regarding the prevention of future wrong-doing.
12. They are well placed to assign institutional responsibility for abuses, and to recommend reforms. They can base their conclusions and recommendations on a close study of the records, whilst standing as independent institutions separate from the systems under review.
13. In many cases they have been thought capable of promoting reconciliation and reducing the tensions resulting from past violence.
14. They have contributed to establishing the right of victims, survivors and society as a whole to the truth.
15. In many situations, they have helped by allowing people to express what they have felt and known regarding the events under examination. This in itself has had a healing effect in many cases.

For those who have suffered violations and repression most directly, it is difficult and controversial to trust an institution set up by the government, since during the period of repression it was the state that was responsible for the violations, either because it perpetrated them itself, or because it allowed them to happen. They have no real reason to suppose that a new body created by the state will be trustworthy. On the other hand, those who supported the previous government will also be suspicious of this new body.

Over the past twenty years, many truth commissions have been set up (around 30 by now), the best well-known being those in South Africa and Chile. Of crucial importance is the way they are organised: how they select their staff; their means of co-ordinating with other organisations that are able to provide information and insights into procedures, and how long they have been allocated to fulfil their task. These factors will affect the way they connect with society as a whole and the extent to which they can help build a society where human rights are respected. As a result of the suggestions set forth by the Chilean Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a law – NR. 19.123 – was passed by parliament, article 6 of which reads: ‘It is declared that the location of the disappeared people, as well as the bodies of the executed ones, and the circumstances of that disappearance or death, constitute an inalienable right of the relatives of the victims as well as of the whole of Chilean society.’⁶

⁶ ‘Ley No.19.123’, *Diario Oficial* (Santiago de Chile, 8 February, 1992)

As these truth commissions get set up in countries experiencing political transition, following lengthy periods of repression and violence, their establishment has to be negotiated with the very people responsible for the oppression. Negotiated transition involves compromise. Perpetrators of human rights atrocities, many of whom still hold or seek positions of power in the new political dispensation, may refuse to submit themselves to justice. On the other hand, great numbers of victims demand accountability. The existence of such commissions is a result of the struggle of social movements which have organised around the concept of a right to truth, the right to end repression and the right to protest against an unfair and brutal society. These movements – often involving the relatives of the disappeared, victims of extra-judicial assassinations, the exiled and displaced – have been both a medium of resistance and a living testimony to what has been happening in their countries. They have drawn international attention to state-directed terror.

However, it is important to realise that, although these commissions may be said to have been established on behalf of the victims, it is not always clear whether or not they have in fact been helping them. In the majority of cases, the negotiation process and amnesty are likely to be of benefit to the perpetrators whose impunity will persist. As Gillian Slovo says through one of her characters – ‘And the fact remains: the Truth Commission amnesty seems to be a way of saying that the guilty can go free’.⁷ Often victims’ organisations play little or no part in setting up commissions or determining their procedures. Moreover, the granting of an amnesty may enable many perpetrators of human rights violations to stay in power. In Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, people accused of human rights violations have retained their jobs in the armed forces both during and after the transition period. As Rojas et al conclude: ‘... impunity constitutes in itself a human rights violation’.⁸

Zalaquett, who suffered political repression in Chile and had to come as an exile to Europe, and was later Director of Amnesty International, has stated: ‘Dealing with the past injustices and human rights violations is both an ethical and a political task. This is true not only for politicians but for human rights activists as well... In a transition one is dealing with a situation where meeting ethical requirements and political restraints creates dilemmas’.⁹

To give you an insight into what it means to have lived through the disappearance or execution of a loved one, I invite you to read the following short accounts and then consider what the Truth Commission in Chile could have done, what could not be achieved then or ever; what other social organisations have done; and what could still be done. At the Seminar we could look into these questions.

I. The Leveque family, an old family of workers from Osorno of Mapuche origins, was very involved with Salvador Allende’s Government of Popular Unity. Don Pedro had practically founded the Communist Party, in which he always participated publicly and actively. He had many sons and the eldest, Rodolfo, was 21 years old at the time of the military coup and about to finish his studies in Anthropology. The police took them away, together with a disabled younger son, Wladimir. Don Pedro survived three hard months of detention and torture but his sons are still missing. Uberlinda, Pedro’s wife and mother of the two who disappeared, was for years President of the Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos. She made countless trips to Santiago representing her Osorno group, looking for her sons and requesting medical help because the search was ‘upsetting her’ as she put it. In our meetings she kept repeating – ‘It hurts so much that they took my sons away. Rodolfo

⁷ G. Slovo, *Red Dust* (London: Virago, 2000)

⁸ P. Rojas et al, *Crímenes e Impunidad* (Chile: CODEPU-DIT-T, 1996)

⁹ J. Zalaquett, in A. Boraine, J. Levy and R. Scheffer (eds.), *Dealing with the Past* (South Africa: IDASA, 1994)

knew very well why they were looking for him, but Wladi could not have done any wrong because he was paralysed. They did not let me give him his crutches and I despair to think how he could have managed to go to the lavatory because he could not move without them'. Doña Ube, as we call her affectionately, lived with Don Pedro until his death a couple of years ago. She delegated the presidency of the association to her daughter in law Angélica and has not given up looking for her sons, concentrating on her disabled son because – 'He needs it more, he only has me; Rodolfo has his wife and his son, who is now a man'.

II. Carmen, a short, stout and kind country woman who lived in a tiny house in one of Osorno's poor neighbourhoods, always arrived at the meetings with a small basket filled with home made bread or biscuits. She prepared them with special affection, to share generously her scant resources. At the time of her son's detention, which she witnessed because the police came to the family home to get him, she lived in the country with her son Carlos and her small granddaughter. Carlos drove the farm tractor in those days. She could remember that they told her – 'We are taking him to ask him questions and he will be back soon'. She waited for him with an unlocked door for twenty years, his clothes always clean and ironed, leaving food ready for him in case he came by night dodging police vigilance in the first year of the State of Siege. Five days after his detention the farm owners evicted her from her small house and that is how she ended up in Osorno. She lovingly brought up her granddaughter, who eventually became a University student and secretary to the *Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos*. In 1992 she approached me at a group meeting and offered me a home baked roll, as usual. When I thanked her she said: 'I have been a very bad mother'. This categorical statement surprised me and I told her why I thought she was a very good mother. She let me take her to a corner where she told me the reason for her words. A few days before the meeting, shortly after the inauguration of the first democratically elected government after the dictatorship, the National Television channel had presented a programme about torture. It was in reference to this that she accused herself of having been very selfish. 'I always wished for myself', she explained, 'that my son was alive somewhere and that he would come back any moment. Seeing and listening to those testimonies about torture I wished instead that my son had died immediately, without having to suffer so much.' After that she did not wait for him any longer, but she demanded that his remains be found to be able to give him a 'Christian burial' next to her husband. This could not happen, as she died very recently. So, it is she who lies next to her husband.

Suggested further reading

1. A. Rigby, *Justice and Reconciliation after the Violence* (UK, Lynne Rienner Publishers inc., 2001)
2. B. Rolston, *Unfinished Business. State Killings and the Quest for Truth* (Belfast: BTP Publications Ltd., 2000)
3. B. Schlink, *The Reader* (London: Phoenix Paperback, 1998)
4. D. Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (London: Rider, Random House, 1999)
5. F. Fernández-Armesto, *Truth* (London: Bantam Press, 1997)
6. J. Eldestein, *Truths & Lies* (London: Granta Publications, 2001)
7. P. Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths, Confronting State Terror and Atrocity* (London: Routledge, 2001)
8. P. Pérez, R. Bacic, T. Durán, *Muerte y Desaparición Forzada en la Araucanía: Una Aproximación Etnica* (Temuco-Chile: Universidad Católica, Septiembre 1998)

9. R. Bacic et al, *Memorias Recientes de mi Pueblo 1973-1990 Araucanía* (Temuco-Chile: Universidad Católica, Marzo 1998)
10. R. Bacic, 'Dealing with the past: Chile – human rights and human wrongs', *Race & Class* vol. 44, 2002
11. S. George, *The Lugano Report, on preserving capitalism in the Twenty-first century* (London: Pluto Press, 1999)
12. T. Bell, *UNFINISHED BUSINESS. South Africa Apartheid & Truth* (South Africa: Red Works, 2001)

Roberta Bacic

Approaches to dealing with trauma caused by war and political repression

William Saa, 2002 International Fellow at Responding to Conflict, reflects on his experience of a Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Project following the Civil War in Liberia.

'There are not many warning signals, the pressure building up from the bottom is not visible. It just hits. The ground shakes and splits. The noise of crumbling emotions is great. And then, a deep silence settles over the destruction. Now nobody can trust the ground, and the clean-up appears impossible.'¹

This is how a woman at a seminar used the metaphor of an earthquake in a vivid description of her family conflicts. The metaphor applies just as well to the experience of the civil war in Liberia and the challenges it poses for dealing with the past.

Snapshots of the complex reality

For seven years, from 1989 to 1996, a dirty civil war took place in Liberia during which almost one in ten Liberians lost their lives. The rest of the population either became displaced several times over or fled for refuge to neighbouring countries. These horrors and sufferings have left an indelible mark on the psyche of communities in Liberia. Atrocities were perpetrated by neighbour against neighbour; friend against friend; family against family; community against community.

Attempts from the outside to resolve the problems have sometimes made matters worse. To quote from a paper presented at the West Africa Network for Peace Building: 'The misconception by the international community that elections constitute a major tool for conflict resolution has very often led to hastily organized elections as a means of settling political disputes. Experience from Liberia belies this theory. Instead, western-style elections have further deepened the rifts between already factionalised communities.'²

Today, five years on from the elections in 1997, which was won by one of the former warring factions, the country has a democratically elected government. There is peace, but it is a fragile peace and the physical and psychological damage wrought by the war remains a heavy burden on the country. The challenge now is to determine how traumatized individuals and communities can live side by side with the perpetrators of their sufferings.

¹ MCS Mediation Training Manual, *Understanding Conflict: The Experience, Structure and Dynamics*

² West Africa Network For Peace Building(WANEP): Mano River Basin Seminar Paper

Cross stitching

By cross stitching, I mean comparing the experience of dealing with trauma in different circumstances and countries.

In November 2001, I was as a guest in Bad Boll, Germany, at a meeting of over 50 elderly men and women who had come together to share their painful memories and experiences of the past. The meeting now takes place annually and provides an opportunity for the participants, many of them in their sixties or seventies, to talk about what they went through as children during the war – a war which ended nearly sixty years ago. I was invited to share my experience of working with the Trauma Healing Project in Liberia. Here is a passage from my talk.

‘In the aftermath of violent conflict, peace is not simply the absence of violence. Those who have experienced violence and war need also to experience healing. To remain unhealed is to remain traumatized. Healing in this case implies more than economic or political empowerment – it has to take place in relationships amongst both victims and victimisers. The earlier this takes place the better; but still, better late than never! Perhaps, this is why (sixty) years after the German experience, we are here today speaking still about the trauma caused by that war. Trauma is like a solid rock we swallow, and it is important to realize that it will not simply melt in there. But recalling the past can be frightening and painful and it is little wonder that some people don’t want to talk about it. However, if we don’t, we remain traumatized and stuck in the past; and as parents, friends, leaders, we intentionally or unintentionally transmit our traumas to other generations who then become victims of events in which they did not directly participate. If a parent or a caregiver suffers from post-traumatic symptoms such as aggression, bitterness, hate, lack of trust and confidence, the rising generation will learn these symptoms and exhibit them also. In this way a whole society can become traumatised.’

It was alarming the feedback I received from a number of people in this group during casual discussions. Many of them told me that their emotions had remained completely disrupted throughout all those years. They also had a sense of helplessness regarding their situation. There were other problems too, which I will not go into here. However, one question the experience raised in my mind concerned the right moment to intervene, given that healing takes place at a different pace for each individual. Should the process of dealing with trauma begin immediately the war ends? Or should the decision depend on the culture in the society concerned? And if we agree that trauma causes paralysis, when shall we intervene to help those powerless and helpless victims?

Two tied thinking : Which way?

Here, two tied thinking refers to the different schools of thought about how to approach dealing with trauma.

Some outsiders coming to visit Liberia have argued that the trauma of the war is so widespread, it is pointless to approach it from the perspective of ‘individual psychotherapy’. They argue that it is just not possible to conduct psychotherapy on an individual basis for a traumatized population of over 1.5 million. Again, I am confronted with another question – isn’t it rather presumptuous of us to think that ‘trauma healing’ is possible in a society where both the governors and the governed have been traumatized by the civil war?

The Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Program (THRP) recognizes, and indeed is based on the premise, that post-war trauma is a widespread problem in Liberia. Whole communities are traumatized and suffer from a kind of paralysis. Individuals and family members are estranged

from each other. Even the authorities and the general population fear and mistrust one another. The paradox is that civil wars are generally fought to redress grievances, but in the end these become submerged by new grievances generated by the war itself. And difficult as it is to deal with the resulting problems, if they are left un-addressed, they can ruin a whole nation.

I was myself a victim of the Liberian civil war and found myself at a crossroads where I had to decide how to respond. At first I was planning to return violence with violence. Later, however, I began the search for the strength and courage to face the past constructively. This is not easy when one is overloaded with ugly memories of what happened. I was struggling with my own trauma arising out of the pain and suffering I had endured during the war. Though I have not forgotten the past, I have learned to face constructively the realities of the present, and to develop some sense of the future. This has contributed significantly to my journey forward.

Working with both the offended and offenders in the Liberian civil war, I have found that traumatized people are often stuck in the past and become apathetic. They tend to forget the present and to disregard the future. Such people need help to accept the fact that yesterday has gone, that the present too will pass, and that it is vital not only to plan for the future but to do something concrete now in order to make it better.

To understand and deal with trauma, it is crucial to see it in relation to the particular cultural context in which it arises. This, however, requires critical re-thinking of many entrenched concepts and well-established practices. As Gene Hoffman comments in her book, *No Royal Road to Reconciliation*: 'New responses, radically different from those we have used before, must be made in this radically new situation. We must move beyond outmoded concepts into realms we have not yet considered or discovered, trusting that new divine possibilities will always open to us.'³

In April 2000, a guest counsellor from Germany visited Liberia for the first time. During her six weeks stay in the country, we had the opportunity to exchange experiences about Germany and Liberia, and to observe the work of the THRP. When she returned to Germany, she wrote a report and sent me some notes that have become a part of my learning tools.

'I am just trying to reflect on the ethical roots of my life and the experiences I have had in your country – especially the idea of Trauma Healing and Reconciliation. Reconciliation between Germany and Israel, between the German people and Jewish people, started very late, decades after the war. Trauma Healing and Reconciliation after a civil war – I really can't imagine. What I understood was that in your eyes trauma healing and reconciliation is the only possibility to interrupt this cycle of violence, or to avoid a new eruption of violence.'

At another meeting in Bad Boll in Germany attended by doctors, therapists, experts and victims, the topic under discussion was children who had experienced war, now and in the past. I joined the other participants a few days before my departure for Liberia. Increasingly doctors and therapists realise how early traumatic experiences in times of war and repression affect many elderly people. As their vigour diminishes, they display symptoms which reveal the psychic wounds they have hidden from their consciousness down the years. Immediately after the war it was not opportune to talk about the trauma people had suffered. Everybody was too

³ Gene Khudsen Hoffman, *Patterns in Reconciliation/2 (reflection on trauma)* 1994/volume 1/number 2

busy trying to settle down and avoided looking back at a disastrous history. In addition, there was a lack of experience and knowledge of how to handle the effects of traumatic shock.

Engaging with traumatised people requires not only individual therapy but the reconstruction of social networks which are often destroyed in the course of a war. When the two processes occur side by side, there is a reciprocal effect. This is the crucial lesson I learned from my experience in working in Liberia.⁴

The Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Program (THRP)

During, and soon after, the civil war in Liberia, several organizations tried to intervene, mostly by providing emergency humanitarian relief and other material assistance. The THRP was established in the conviction that unless the traumas and social wounds caused by the war were also addressed, and reconciliation encouraged between and amongst individuals and communities, Liberia stood little chance of recovery. In most respects THRP is a very traditional Trauma Healing and Reconciliation programme, its most valuable resource being a devoted local staff with good contacts in the wider society. Because the program has evolved in close contact with society, a multitude of different concepts and methods has been created. A fundamental aspect of the program is that it is community-based and inclusive, dealing with people irrespective of political, social, or religious affiliation. The inspiration behind the THRP is a belief in a moral and forgiving God. But the approach is essentially secular with a strong commitment to interacting directly with people and taking account of their own theories and values rather than imposing scholarly theories from the outside. This interactive approach probably accounts to a significant extent for the headway the programme has made.

The paramount activity of the THRP is creating awareness and facilitating processes of healing and reconciliation, concentrating particularly on key actors in local communities. The objective of the workshops and group meetings is to provide a forum for people who have usually been too afraid to meet in other situations because of their bad experiences in the war. The meetings thus create a starting point for the healing and reconciliation processes. The basic themes in the programme are understanding the conflict, and the benefits of forgiving and seeking forgiveness for the bad things that took place during the war, thereby enabling people to restart 'normal' life and put the past behind them.

One of the insights guiding the work of the THRP is that building peace and achieving reconciliation is a long process, not the result of a single decision; and that genuine reconciliation and healing require the active involvement of the people themselves.

Key aspects of the programme are that it is dynamic, flexible and responsive. It has been developed in response to felt needs, and to issues raised by community participants and others. Initially (1995/1996), the project focused mainly on work among refugees in Liberia's neighbouring countries – Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana – because of the difficulties of working in Liberia at that time. In 1997, when it became possible to return to Liberia, the THRP expanded its community-based work there. From activities which started primarily at the local community level, the THRP today engages various sectors of the population including post-war security personnel, Government officials, local organizations and groups.

William Saa

⁴ Sabine Forster, *Africa between laughing and crying*

Dealing with the past: seminar report

Report of a CCTS seminar held on 17th October 2002 at The Meeting Place, Drummond Street, London NW1

This seminar, organised by the Committee for Conflict Transformation Support (CCTS), was attended by 35 people and chaired by Michael Randle. The seminar began with presentations from the three speakers: Dr. Andrew Rigby, Director for the Centre for Forgiveness and Reconciliation at Coventry University, Roberta Bacic, Programme and Development Officer for War Resisters International and William Saa, International Fellow at Responding to Conflict.

Setting the scene

Andrew Rigby introduced the topic, first reminding participants of some of the many factors – personality, personal circumstances, culture, belief – that can affect how an individual or group chooses to deal with the pain of the past. Reliving the pain in a safe environment, a course frequently suggested by Western counsellors, *may* work, but may be unhelpful, or even counter-productive.

What is true for everyone is that ‘the past’ is not a fixed and independent entity but a construction – the way an individual or group remembers what has happened to them or around them. When people continue to relive the pains of the past they are unable to move on. Feelings of fear, grief, anger or revenge arising from past suffering dominate the present and over-determine not only their own future but that of their descendants. This excess of what Andrew called ‘the wrong kind of memory’ is one of the biggest obstacles to reconciliation. Removing this obstacle requires people to ‘reframe’ the past, to create a new type of memory that will allow them to come to terms with the pain and to move on – in other words, to forgive.

Andrew suggested that the conditions that facilitate forgiveness are essentially the same for groups as for individuals, and comprise:

Truth: an acknowledgement that wrong has been done;

Peace: a commitment that the wrong will not be repeated;

Justice: an attempt to make up for the wrong, by punishment and/or reparation.

These three conditions don’t combine easily, and in any particular situation one of them tends to dominate, and often to cause the others to be sacrificed to some extent. An emphasis on truth can re-ignite anger and prejudice; peace; it can also make justice harder to achieve (why should an aggressor tell the truth about what they have done if the result is that they are punished?). Too great a concern with peace can lead to a ‘collective amnesia’, in which the truth of past wrongs is never acknowledged and the perpetrators are not punished and may even continue to have power. The pursuit of justice can cause a return to violence and bloodshed and, perhaps because justice is inevitably meted out by ‘the victors’, often focuses on a rather one-sided version of the truth.

In his discussion paper Andrew explores further the conditions that are likely to lead to an emphasis on peace (often following civil war) and justice (generally only where the violence has ended with a decisive victory) and gives some examples of each. For a deeper understanding of the pursuit of truth in dealing with the past, he handed over to Roberta Bacic, who has first hand experience of the work of the Truth Commission in Chile.

The Truth Commission in Chile

Roberta’s paper considers the circumstances in which truth commissions are most likely to be established (generally where the successor government cannot take direct retributive action, either because of lack of power or

because they were implicated in the violence), and discusses the benefits that such commissions can bring, even when their terms of reference are quite limited. In her presentation, she concentrated on describing some of the problems and the outcomes of the Truth Commission in Chile, and on bringing to life some of the personal stories it recorded of the *desaparecidos*, the detained and disappeared victims of the Chilean *junta*. In addition to talking to the meeting she also played the recording of a poem written by a singer – Víctor Jara – who was arrested, tortured and executed by the junta, and showed part of a BBC documentary, *Caravan of Death*, that dealt with the *desaparecidos*.

The terms of the Chilean Truth Commission were certainly limited: the commission was active for only 9 months; no perpetrators were named; very few people have been prosecuted, and even fewer sentenced (not even Pinochet, despite the efforts of the Spanish Government and the promises of the current Chilean regime).

Even so, there have been some important consequences, chief among them being the acknowledgement of what was really done – after so many years of silence or denial. The presence of the name of each person who disappeared or was killed and a description (albeit brief) of their fate in the documentary record of the commission has done much to restore the dignity of their families and friends. The present Government has sent a copy of the commission's findings to the family of each victim, and the victims are commemorated on a national monument, as well as on more local and personal memorials. The remains of many of those who were killed have been discovered and identified, and have finally been buried and mourned by their families. New laws have been enacted that give the families of those murdered a number of rights by way of recompense for their losses, including immunity from military service, free health care and free education throughout their lives.

While these reparations are significant, and can even be seen as very progressive in a

strongly military society, they have not benefited everyone who suffered. The survivors – those who were imprisoned but not killed, the many who lost their livelihoods or were exiled – are excluded from most of the benefits. Support for Pinochet is still strong, and many of those who served him are still in powerful military positions, making the Government nervous to pursue them. Furthermore, they are far from repentant for what they have done, and it is difficult for people to forgive when they see no hope of justice or even of shame.

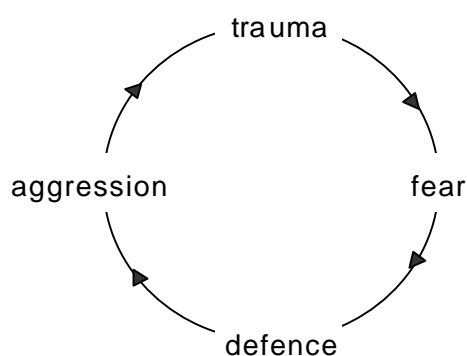
Trauma healing and reconciliation in Liberia

After a civil war, in which families and communities are divided, displaced or destroyed, the search for peace, justice and truth is particularly difficult. As we heard from William Saa, who was himself caught up in the 1989-96 civil war in Liberia, one tenth of the entire population was killed, leaving a population of over 1.5 million traumatised. How can peace be restored when so many people are affected, and so many important relationships have been damaged? Who can be brought to justice when so many people have taken part in the violence? And how can the truth about what has been done be told without provoking more violence? Faced with the enormous scale of the problem in 1996, a number of outside NGOs apparently gave up – traumatised themselves by the seeming impossibility of offering counselling to so many individuals.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, the trauma must be understood and dealt with, because unless people can begin to imagine a better future they become paralysed in the past. William gave as a very literal example a mining community that was disbanded during the civil war. After the fighting ended the workers returned, but left their streets dirty. Cleaning had been the mining company's responsibility before the war and the people waited for the company to return instead of taking the initiative themselves. Fear continues even after the fighting has stopped

– fear within families, between communities and between the governors and the governed
 – not only because of the grievances which ‘justified’ the war, but also because the atrocities of the war itself have generated new grievances.

In William’s opinion, coping – finding ways of accepting the situation and living with it – is not enough: the residual paralysis, fear and anger must be resolved or the trauma will perpetuate itself and be passed on to future generations. He described a ‘cycle of trauma’ (depicted below) in which *trauma* instils *fear* in people, making them act *defensively*; this produces more *aggression* and leads in turn to more *trauma*.



This cycle is evident not only after war, but also after acts of terrorism such as the bombing of the Twin Towers on September 11th last year, and it very important to find ways of breaking into it.

The presentations were followed by a plenary discussion, which was continued in groups during the afternoon (each led by one of the speakers) and concluded with a report-back plenary session. Plenary and group discussions are summarised together below:

Coping with trauma

At least one participant felt that *coping* was a more positive activity than William had implied, suggesting that we should not underestimate the effort survivors are making simply to cope day to day, that it can even be an empowering response to past trauma. Anger about the past can also be

positive if its energy can be turned to creative ends. Suppressed anger is much harder to deal with because it leads to depression and paralysis.

Participants involved in victim/offender mediation spoke of the *bereavement model of coping* in which the victim passes through a number of stages: from shock or denial (equivalent to the paralysis William described) through emotion and repair to adjustment. The right time for mediation is when the victim is ready to assimilate what has happened. If it is attempted in the first (paralysis) stage it is unlikely to be effective. It was also noted that, although mediation can have a positive effect on people’s feelings, it takes much time and effort for them to change their lives. Reconciliation projects typically don’t last long enough to assist the process through to completion.

William has been working with a group of elderly Germans who, even now, more than 50 years after World War Two, have not managed to work through the trauma of it. According to one participant, the trauma of WW2 remains a significant issue in the Balkans too. William was concerned that this generation will have passed their unresolved feelings on to their children. This passing of trauma from generation to generation was confirmed by a number of participants. Psychologists know how often the battered child becomes a problem parent. Many of the Palestinian suicide bombers of the 2nd intifada are apparently the children of bombers of the 1st.

Different societies have different coping mechanisms, and western NGOs don’t always pay adequate attention to this. It is always important for outsiders to remember that they are contributing help not solutions – the solutions have to come from within the traumatised community.

One participant formulated a new personal test as the result of the discussion: ‘The future is hard to face. Am I using the past as an excuse for my failure to address it?’

Truth, justice and peace

Participants with experience of working with truth commissions spoke of the healing power of talking about the past. Someone preparing to talk to a Truth Commission needs to tell their story many times. In doing so they find new ways of telling the pain which, while they do nothing to make the testimony less horrific, help the individual to assimilate what has happened. It should be remembered, however, that most truth commissions have a rather short duration. The majority, whose stories are not told, also need help. Much can be done before the truth commission gets underway – even while the atrocities are still happening. In Chile, for example, peace activists were collecting and clandestinely publishing evidence while Pinochet was still in power, with support from the Catholic Church and other international bodies.

Truth commissions have mainly been used in circumstances where the successor government is weak. But some participants felt they could be useful in other circumstances too, for example as a way of publicly acknowledging the past and creating a climate for further reconciliation. They can be dangerous when used inappropriately, however. In situations such as Liberia, where so many people were involved in the violence and so many relationships are damaged, encouraging and publicising ‘the truth’ can generate more pain and deepen the cycle of violence. In Greece, too, the civil war is still too painful to be discussed. When Greeks talk about the past they focus on the more distant (and therefore safer) Ottoman era.

And one participant reminded the meeting that history is a contested set of truths, not a single entity. The best that a truth commission can achieve is, as Ignatieff said, ‘to narrow the range of permissible lies’.

More than one participant wondered about the value of international courts or war crimes tribunals, both because the wrong people are meting out the justice and because such ‘show trials’ offer perpetrators

a platform from which, far from showing penitence, they can continue to ‘punish’ their victims.

Forgiveness

One participant related the three approaches of *truth*, *justice* and *peace* to a time when he had wronged his wife. He acknowledged his wrong (*truth*); he tried to put the wrong right (*justice*) and he promised not to repeat the wrong (*peace*) but his wife was still unhappy. Reconciliation also required a fourth approach, which Lederach called *mercy* but which can also be called *forgiveness* – the willingness of the victim to carry the burden of what still can’t be put right after the perpetrator has done all they can to make amends.

Forgiveness may not be easy. Roberta suggested that, from the point of view of the bereaved, it may even seem like an additional and unnecessary burden placed upon them, adding to their victimhood rather than relieving it. Others saw forgiveness as a benefit solely for the victim, not something for the perpetrator, and offered examples of how forgiveness and reconciliation can release victims from their victimhood. For example, a Northern Ugandan rebel, who wished to return to the village he had betrayed, came to a church service and confessed. The ability to give (or withhold) forgiveness gave power to his victims, and enabled them to accept him back with dignity. Similarly, a small community in Northern Norway reintegrated a young man who as a boy had murdered a toddler (in a case reminiscent of the Jamie Bulger murder in the UK). Of course, these two cases relied on the offender repenting. Forgiving is much harder when the offender is unrepentant. One participant contrasted forgetting, in her opinion a potentially dangerous thing to do, with forgiveness, which she regarded as a safe and necessary action connected to healing.

The British colonial past carries some of the blame for later violence in, for example, China and Africa. One participant has found it helpful, when working with these

communities, to understand and to apologise for these wrongs.

Some victims may not want to forgive or be reconciled, preferring to rely on the social and emotional support of a group for whom victimhood has become a fundamental identity. In such circumstances, someone who attempts to move on can be ostracised and accused of 'betraying the martyrs'. Perpetrators are also unlikely to repent because to do so would destroy all they had stood for. This is particularly true for leaders (such as Goering and Milosevic).

There was some discussion of whether forgiveness could be seen as a 'two-way street' – something which both 'sides' could or should seek. While most participants sympathised with the Chilean woman (from the BBC video shown by Roberta) who, having lost loved ones, was outraged that she should also be expected to ask forgiveness, some felt that a victim, asked not to continue to bear ill will, might benefit from apologising. Others pointed out the power of an un-asked-for apology. One participant remembered a workshop in which a Frenchwoman who had been active in the Resistance found it hard to work with German workshop members. Next day she asked their forgiveness for having hated Germans for so long, with powerful effect. Another participant felt that it could be an advantage to acknowledge that neither side in a war held all the moral high ground. Each side then needs to forgive in order to free themselves to move forward, though maybe at different times and in different ways.

Reconciliation and healing

If a new, peaceful future is to be constructed, it is important that communities move beyond truth commissions, war trials and collective amnesia to find some new way of addressing the future.

One participant working in community mediation spoke about the value of 'constructive reframing' in assisting reconciliation. People involved in the dispute are the best placed to find a solution; the mediator helps by reframing the problem,

focusing on the common interests and needs of the two sides.

William pointed out how even very small steps can make a significant contribution to breaking the 'cycle of trauma'. At the end of the civil war the violence did not stop instantaneously. Community leaders felt defensive when Government forces urged them to reduce the violence, even though they were already working to achieve this objective. When they understood the Government's needs and objectives more clearly, they were more accepting and better able to focus on reducing the violence. Similarly, trauma-healing workshops allowed people to understand something of the view of 'the other side' and thus created a possibility of change. Information must be presented in an acceptable way, however. When working with Liberian government officials, the workshops were renamed 'dissemination seminars', though the content was not changed!

Some participants felt that grieving is a necessary part of healing – almost a *physical* necessity – and that ceremonies and rituals assist this process. Others were unconvinced, pointing to the wide variety of ways in which individuals and societies react.

Roberta spoke about the importance of symbolism in healing, and gave some examples from Chile, where many communities have created memorials to the disappeared. In one village the names of 17 stone-workers who were murdered by the junta were carved on an enormous boulder that the whole community pushed to the top of a local hill. In another, a bus shelter constructed around the sculpture of a hand signalling 'stop' was built outside a house where people had been killed, simultaneously reminding survivors of the atrocity while offering shelter.

The difference between 'reconciled to' and 'reconciled with' was noted by one participant. It is important to achieve the former – to come to terms with the past sufficiently to stop feeling guilty that life goes on. The latter – with its implications of reuniting – is harder.

Seminar report...

Andrew suggested that true reconciliation required structural change, that urging people to 'love thy neighbour' was too easy. At least one participant disagreed. She felt that structural change was the easy part; the difficult (and necessary) part was to change the attitudes of the individuals who make up a society. Reformed social structures might assist the attitudinal change, but they were in themselves inadequate. At the same time, healing might be impossible if the structures of everyday life reminded victims of the past. Clearly both structures and attitudes must change.

Next CCTS seminar

Our next seminar, on 'Economy, Conflict and the Private Sector', will be held on Wednesday 15th January 2003 at the Centre for Reconciliation and Peace, St. Ethelburgas, Old Deanery, Dean's Court, London EC4V 5AA. Speakers will be Phil Champain of International Alert and Dr David Keen of LSE. You will receive a calling notice nearer to the date.

CCTS: Participating Organisations

International Fellowship of Reconciliation,
Alkmaar

War Resisters International, London

Richardson Institute for Peace Research,
Lancaster

Quaker Peace & Social Witness, London

Responding to Conflict, Birmingham

International Alert, London

Conflict Analysis and Development Unit, London

Conciliation Resources, London

Centre for Study of Forgiveness &
Reconciliation, Coventry

Moldovan Initiative Committee of Management,
Belfast

Community Development Action
International, London

Chair: Diana Francis

Treasurer: Paul Clifford

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