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TOWARDS INCLUSIVE REMEMBRANCE AFTER THE “TROUBLES”: A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

Wilhelm Verwoerd

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TOWARDS INCLUSIVE REMEMBRANCE AFTER THE “TROUBLES”:
A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

This paper is a reflection on an underlying moral dynamic of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), namely inclusive moral remembrance. The TRC strove to provide an inclusive forum for many of those harmed and those responsible for harming on all sides of the conflict, in contrast to the exclusivist, ethnic remembrance characterising Afrikaner nationalist remembrance after the Anglo Boer War. Examples from the TRC process highlight the tension-filled balancing acts required to remember the horrific suffering of many, without forgetting the humanity of those responsible; to celebrate our ability to transcend the horrible, without denying a shared potential for evil. These philosophical reflections are hopefully of some relevance to current debates on these islands about appropriate, creative responses to the hurt and harming associated with the “troubles”.

Publication information
This is the revised text of the fourteenth annual John Henry Whyte Memorial Lecture presented at University College Dublin on 20 November 2003.
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INTRODUCTION

It was a few years ago, on a cold, windy midsummer’s evening in Cork city, at the junction of Grand Parade and South Mall, when I stumbled upon these chilling words:

If I could grasp the fires of hell in my hands, I would hurl them in the face of my country’s enemies.

This embittered cry for the wrath of hell to be visited on his beloved country’s enemies came from a Mr John Mitchell, one of the “gallant men of 1798, 1803, 1848 and 1867 who fought and died in the wars of Ireland to recover her sovereign independence”.

I could identify with the desire for political freedom underlying Mr Mitchell’s vengeful curse: as a young, white Afrikaner nationalist in South Africa during the 1960s and 1970s my political consciousness was deeply influenced by the thousands of women and children who died in British concentration camps during the “Anglo Boer War” (1899-1902), as well as the subsequent struggle of “my people” to overcome English political and economic domination in South Africa. During the 1970s and early 1980s my political and moral vision was further blinkered by the tragically successful systematic separation of different racial groups (universally known as the system of apartheid), a separation that was deepened by a pervasive cultivation of fear that our Afrikaners’ hard won freedom would be lost if the “Communist inspired” black liberation movement achieved its goal (Verwoerd, 1997; Goodman, 1999).

To some extent I could also relate to Mr Mitchell’s call for vengeance. My recent work with the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has taught me to respect the legitimate demand for vindication behind (some) victims’ desire for vengeance (Govier, 2001).

Still, I was deeply disturbed. I was alarmed by the fact that Mr Mitchell’s statement was inscribed on a “National Monument”, erected through the efforts of the Cork Young Ireland Society, not only to perpetuate the memory of past hero’s but also “to inspire the youth of our country to follow in their patriotic footsteps”. How deep must the anger, the sense of historical injustice be when an image of utter destruction of “the enemy” is used to inspire the youth? How can “the youth of our country” gather the fires of hell without burning their own hands to the bone? And will these young warriors and their children be able to put out the fires that continue to smoul-
der underground, long after the wars of liberation are over, if they have forgotten to see the face of their former enemies?

As I struggled to sleep that night, these questions mingled with vivid memories of “enemies of the people” being “necklaced” during the dark days of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. I saw again the nauseating images of another impimpi (suspected informer) or black policeman dying a horrible, slow death, with a burning tyre around his neck and a group of young people cheering on the ring of fire consuming his face (TRC Report, Vol. 2: 387-9). And I was haunted again by the testimony of former security police captain Dirk Coetzee before the TRC amnesty committee. He confessed how he and his colleagues in the security police would burn the body of an activist they have killed, and while they waited for the fire to destroy “the enemy”, they would drink beer and have a barbecue (Krog, 1998: 60-1).

Implicit in all these violent images of the fiery destruction of political enemies is a disturbing forgetfulness, a moral forgetfulness which undermines individual or collective efforts to respond constructively to gross injustices or being deeply harmed. To appreciate the destructive potential of this moral forgetfulness and to highlight the creative potential of its opposite, which might be termed “inclusive moral remembrance”, I want to reflect here on an underlying moral dynamic of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). While my emphasis will be on the South African TRC process, I do believe that a clarification of the moral “genre” of this process will be of some relevance to current debates on these islands about appropriate, creative responses to the hurt and harming associated with the “troubles” (Villa-Vicencio and Verwoerd, 2000: 156-7).

TOWARDS REMEMBERING THE HURT AND HARMING ON ALL SIDES

The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, no. 34 of 1995, mandated the TRC to (a) get as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of politically motivated gross human rights violations (i.e. acts of torture, killing, abduction and severe ill-treatment) which occurred during the period of March 1, 1960 to May 10, 1994, (b) help restore the human and civil dignity of victims by granting them an opportunity to relate their own accounts of the violations of which they are victims, (c) grant amnesty to those individuals giving full disclosure of politically motivated crimes during this period of resistance to and defense of the apartheid system, and (d) make recommendations to the President and Parliament on reparation and rehabilitation measures to be taken, including measures in order to prevent the future commission of human rights violations. Under the chairpersonship of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, these tasks included making findings on more than 36,000 alleged gross violations of human rights contained in 20,300 statements taken from victims or survivors of these violations. A comprehensive report was handed to the President on October 28, 1998 (see Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998, hereafter referred to as the Report). The above tasks were divided between three statutory committees, the Human Rights Violations-, Amnesty-, and Reparation and Rehabilitation Committees, which, in turn, were sup-
ported by an Investigation Unit and a Research Department. The amnesty part of
the process was only completed in late 2001, with two additional volumes added to
the TRC Report in April 2003.

To appreciate the kind of moral remembrance promoted by the TRC I find it very
useful to compare this process with the life and legacy of what has been described
as the first Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Snyman, 1998: 327) on South
African soil. In 1998, as I completed my time in the TRC (Verwoerd, 2000), prepara-
ations were under way to commemorate the centenary of the outbreak of the An-
glo Boer War in 1899, a war which saw 26,000 Afrikaner women and children
(amongst others) die in British concentration camps.

Many people remember Emily Hobhouse for her passionate condemnation of the
British government for abuses committed during the Anglo Boer War, especially
against Boer women. She is widely respected for the selfless relief work she under-
took in the concentration camps. It is a less well known fact that after this war she
organized food, clothing, ploughing and harvesting for the Boer families returning to
their farms, which had been devastated by Kitchener’s scorched earth policy. Hob-
house went further than these concrete reparation measures and thus

on her own started the first Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. She
collected sworn statements by survivors, and had them published, first in *The brunt
of the war and where it fell* in 1902, and then again in *War without glamour, or
women’s war experiences written by themselves, 1899-1902* in 1924. Her aim was to
impress on the British public the need for some form of requital or at least some
compensation for the survivors and a public condemnation of the colonial officials
and military officers who were responsible for these transgressions (Snyman, 1998:
327-8, 334).

The vital point highlighted by Snyman is that for Hobhouse the human suffering of
these Boer women had a universal significance beyond narrow ethnic borders. Her
speech at the 1913 inauguration ceremony of the Women’s Memorial in Bloemfon-
tein contained these words:

Your visible monument will serve to this great end—becoming an inspiration to all
South Africans and to the women in particular...For remember, these dead women
were not great as the world count greatness; some of them were quite poor women
who had laboured much. Yet they have become a moral force in your land...And their
influence will travel further. They have shown the world that never again can it be
said that women deserves no rights as Citizen because she takes no part in war. This
statue stands as a denial of that assertion... (Hobhouse, 1984).

For Hobhouse the suffering of these Boer women formed part of a worldwide strug-
gle for recognition; their sacrifices contributed “towards a greater solidarity of hu-
mankind against the indifference to suffering.” It is this message—speaking across
the political divides between Boer and British and between white and black—that
gave the suffering of the Boer women and children such moral force. It was this
message that was literally censored in subsequent decades as Afrikaner national-
ists increasingly monopolized the meaning of the suffering of the Boer war for
themselves. This selective remembrance is vividly illustrated by the following omis-
sions from Hobhouse’s prophetic speech (Hobhouse, 1984: 406-7, quoted in Sny-
man, 1998: 329) in later commemorative issues (censored passages in italics):

In your hands and those of your children lie the power and freedom won; you must
not merely maintain but increase the sacred gift. Be merciful towards the weak, the
downtrodden, the stranger. Do not open your gates to the worst foes of freedom—
 tyranny and selfishness. [Are not these the withholding from others in your control,
the very liberties and rights which you have valued and won for yourselves?…

We in England are ourselves still but dunces in the great world-school, our leaders
still struggling with the unlearned lesson, that liberty is the equal right and heritage of
man, without distinction of race, class or sex. A community that lacks the courage to
found its citizenship on this broad base becomes a ‘city divided against itself, which
cannot stand’.

…Does not justice bid us remember today how many thousands of the dark race per-
ished also in the Concentration Camps in a quarrel which was not theirs? Did they
not thus redeem the past? Was it not an instance of that community of interest, which
binding all in one, roots out all animosity?…

It was, of course, not only Emily Hobhouse’s speech that was censored. None of
the many Afrikaans books on the war I read as a child, nor any of my history books
at school, contained any reference to the 13,315 Africans that according to official
figures also died in concentration camps (Hobhouse, 1984: 350-5; Spies, 1977).
Never did I learn about atrocities committed by the Boers themselves. I grew up
with a perception of myself as a member of a minority victimized by British imperial-
ism. I was only reminded of the horror done to people I saw as “my people”. Infused
with this narrow, exclusivist remembrance it became more difficult to see the many
horrors done by “my people”—during what is more appropriately known as the
South African War (1899-1902), but especially during the apartheid years.

This moral forgetfulness of Afrikaners, induced by a selective, ethnic remembrance
of past suffering, highlights the nature and significance of the TRC process. This
institution was the outcome of an extensive, democratic process, receiving its man-
date from the legislative arm of the new state, representing in a real sense the peo-
ple of South Africa. This highly public and transparent TRC was not the lonely effort
of a single woman, struggling to get her government’s attention. Furthermore, given
the remarkable inclusivity of this TRC process, it has a much better chance of get-
ing across the kind of message advocated long ago by Emily Hobhouse. Anyone
who attended a victim hearing, or read transcripts of these hearings, or read the re-
port, will attest to the fact that the violated from all sides of the conflicts of the past
were included in the process, with more than 20 000 of them making use of the op-
portunity “to relate their own accounts of the violations of which they are the vic-
tims” (TRC Act, 3(1)(c)). Similarly, the amnesty part of the process has succeeded
in drawing out those directly involved from all parties to the conflict. The violent ac-
tions of white agents of the apartheid state, and racist AWB supporters, as well as
the suffering of those who bore the brunt of the brutality of the “Boers”, indeed fea-
tured prominently in the TRC process. But the actions of many MK operatives, SDU
and SPU members, APLA cadres, Askaris, IFP activists, UDF supporters, homeland security forces, and black policemen also came under the spotlight (TRC Report, vol. II & III).¹

In addition, the series of special hearings, looking specifically at for example the experiences of women, children, and white male conscripts, and sector or institutional hearings, focussing amongst other things on the mostly indirect contributions to past violations by the media, the health and business sectors, faith communities, the judiciary—all these hearings allowed the commission to throw its net of remembrance wider than any previous truth commission in other parts of the world (TRC Report, vol. IV).

Of course, there remains much to be criticised about these aspects of the TRC process and the relative inclusivity is no guarantee that the temptation to or existence of selective remembering has been entirely overcome or will be avoided in future. The point is that this TRC has been a vast improvement on the “first TRC” nearly a hundred years ago. It will now and in future be much more difficult for certain groups to monopolize the meaning of past suffering to the detriment of all the people in South Africa.

TOWARDS REMEMBERING THE HORRIBLE, THE HUMAN AND THE HEROIC

There is a further, less obvious layer to the inclusivity of the moral remembrance promoted by the TRC. To help me articulate this layer I want to focus briefly on one of the most painful and inspiring amnesty hearings during my time in the TRC.

On 25 August 1993, Amy Biehl, an American exchange student who was deeply committed to the struggle against apartheid, was dropping off a friend in Gugulethu township. She was seen by a group of young men returning from a political rally, during a time of intense political unrest, where they were encouraged to see all whites as settlers who took away their land and who deserve to be killed. She was wrongfully identified as a settler and became the tragic victim of a mob attack. Four of her killers were convicted of murder and imprisoned during 1994. In June 1998 they were granted amnesty by the TRC.

Amy’s political commitment and her South African friends helped her parents to understand the context within which their daughter was killed. They decided not to oppose amnesty being granted and managed to transform their sadness and deep loss into a whole range of grassroots projects in Gugulethu and other townships, sponsored and facilitated by the Amy Biehl Foundation.

¹ The following are fuller descriptions for the series of acronyms used in this paragraph: AWB—Afrikaner Weerstands beweging (Afrikaner Resistance Movement); MK—mKhonto we Siswe, military wing of the African National Congress (ANC); SDU—Self Defence Units, ANC aligned youth vigilantes; SPU—Self Protection Units, Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) aligned youth vigilantes; APLA—Azanian People’s Liberation Army—military wing of the Pan African Congress (PAC); Askaris—members of liberation movements turned state informers; UDF—United Democratic Front.
“I never personalised Amy’s so-called killers. As the information came to me in the beginning it was a mob,” said Amy’s mother, Linda, in a recent interview, “a mob without faces”. During the trial she struggled “to put faces to their deeds…I didn’t feel anything…”.

In May 1999, almost a year after the four applicants were granted amnesty, Amy’s father, Peter, was contacted—through a trusted intermediary—by two of them: Ntobeko Penni and Easy Nofemela. They wanted to set up a youth group in the name of Amy Biehl.

This was the start of a gradual process of reconciliation that involved Ntobeko and Easy first joining a training programme in making bricks and construction, run by the Amy Biehl Foundation. They then became deeply involved in the bakery started by the Foundation.

According to the late Peter Biehl it was very gratifying to see Easy and Ntimbeko really serving in our bakery business in important ways. They have pride in what they bring to the party and what they bring is very, very significant. It is great to see them be able to be aspiring, natural human beings. And yet we know that what they carry with them is more than any of us can know because none of us has been involved in the taking of life. That has got to be very, very difficult. They are still tormented about how they are perceived in the community. But somehow they seem able to rise above all this.

Peter believed “they can do it because they feel purposeful, because they feel that they are serving their community and because we seem to relate to one another on a very human level” (Haupt interview, 27 March 2001).

Personally, I still find it impossible to forget the horrifying detail of her merciless killing that was vividly recalled on that day in the amnesty hearing room in Cape Town—“She was running across the street, blood streaming from her face. Stones were thrown and then Manqina tripped her. I had a knife and with seven or eight others we stabbed at Amy”. But mixed with this disturbing memory, is a growing wonder at what a newspaper heading described as the “amazing grace of Amy’s parents” (Sunday Independent, 30 August 1998). And I feel a sense of hope inspired by a racist, brutal murder’s legacy of reconciliation.

What is one to make of this heady, uneasy mixture of the horrific and humaneness (ubuntu)? To start with I find it useful to recall the following statement by Paul Ricoeur:

We have learned from the Greek storytellers and historians that the admirable deeds of the heroes needed to be remembered and thus called for narration. We learn from

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3 Interview with Paul Haupt (see note 2).
Verwoerd / Inclusive remembrance after the troubles

It seems to me that the Biehl amnesty hearing provides us with a story in which both these lessons are contained. We are reminded of the horrible, but also of truly admirable deeds; we are prompted to recognize the human potential to commit horrific deeds, but while doing so, to hold on to our potential to transcend the horrible.

It is this kind of inclusive moral remembrance that the TRC also promoted with its facilitation of the telling, translation and recording of many stories—accounts by those termed “perpetrators” and “victims” of gross violations of human rights, but also testimonies by those who can better be described as victors over these violations.

REMEMBERING THE HORRIBLE

To explain more fully this layer of inclusive remembrance, in which the horrible and the heroic is remembered, let us begin by taking a closer look at the TRC’s attempt to help rescue the horrible from forgetfulness. This rescue attempt was described as follows by Antjie Krog:

For me the Truth Commission microphone with its little red light was the ultimate symbol of the whole process: here the marginalized voice speaks to the public ear, the unspeakable is spoken—and translated—the personal story brought from the innermost of the individual bind us anew to the collective (1998: 237).

Krog referred to the so-called victim hearings where the trauma of survivors of specified categories of gross human rights violations were given centre stage. But her description can also be applied to the public hearings of the Amnesty Committee, where the little red light continued to flicker much longer and probably more loudly, where often “the unspeakable” was spoken, translated and recorded, as was the case on that day in Cape Town at the hearing of Amy’s killers. By providing a table, chairs, a microphone and a translator to, for example, Mongesi Manqina, Vuzumzi Ntamo, Easy Nofemela and Ntobeko Penni, the TRC contributed to “establishing as complete a picture as possible of the causes, nature and extent of the gross violations of human rights” that occurred within the mandate period (TRC Act, 3(1)(a)).

There were obvious and important historical, legal and psychological dimensions to this truth-seeking activity. Some of the facts and the findings emerging from these victim and perpetrator hearings have already and will continue to be challenged by lawyers and historians. Given the higher standards of evidence they should work with (under fewer time and resource constraints), one would expect some of these criticisms to help us move closer to more reliable factual and historical truth about particular aspects of the period covered by the TRC mandate.
However, the limitations of the TRC’s search for factual truth should not obscure the vital moral truths gathered by this process—truths about past injustices, about gross human rights violations. If evil is roughly understood as “denying someone his or her right to be fully human” (Todorov, 1999: 289), then the TRC’s facilitation of thousands of oral and written testimonies of those whose dignity were grossly violated, can also be interpreted as a remembrance of many individual and institutionalised expressions of evil.

Why was it important that the TRC thus helped to rescue some of the horrible aspects of the recent South African past from forgetfulness? I share the position of Ricoeur, Wiesel, Todorov and others that this kind of moral remembering is not about a macabre fascination with the horrible per se. An important way to remember moral evil is to allow those who were dehumanised to tell their stories, or if the victims are no longer alive, to continue to tell and retell what happened to them. In doing so, we prevent forgetfulness from killing the victims twice; in a “tiny way” we thus “repay the debt we owe to the victims” (Ricoeur, 1995: 290); we help to “restore the human and civil dignity of such victims by granting them an opportunity to relate their own accounts of the violations of which they are the victims” (TRC Act, 3(1)(c)).

But rescuing the horrible from forgetfulness is not only about helping to restore the dignity of those against whom the horrible was committed; this respectful remembrance of evil is not only about ensuring that at least the memory of past victims live on. This remembrance is also of potential significance for future victims.

For by highlighting the plight of those who were killed, abducted, tortured and severely ill-treated the TRC process promoted a “morality of the depths”, a sensitivity to “the line beneath which no one is [should be] allowed to sink” (Shue, 1980: 18-9); through a sustained public focus on gross violations of human rights the TRC process stressed minimum protections for human dignity and underscored minimum standards of decency (Bhargava, 2000: 60-7). By giving a prominent public space to what happens if human rights are not respected, the TRC process thus gave South Africans, amongst others, some of the tools to build probably the most effective bulwark against future violations. That is, the TRC window on some grievous wrongs of the past provided us with invaluable raw material for nurturing a culture of human rights. In this regard Allen (1999) confirms the significance of the TRC’s focus on past injustices by referring to Wolgast’s important point that “the sense of injustice is prior to any particular conception of justice that we may articulate; a conception of justice is a response to and more or less successful articulation of our sense of injustice” (1987: 125-8). And I concur with Susan Mendus’s interpretation of human rights as primarily “bulwarks against evil” and not “harbingers of goods,” and agree that “the political impetus for human rights comes from the recognition of evil as a permanent threat in the world” (Mendus, 1995: 23-24).

An important component of this raw material is the humility that accompanies an honest facing of the horrible, a humble recognition of the ongoing need to counter the forces of dehumanisation, given the potential for inhumanity inside all of us. As former president Mandela put it in a response to the work of the TRC:
All of us, as a nation that has newly found itself, share in the shame at the capacity of human beings of any race or language group to be inhumane to other human beings. We should all share in the commitment to a South Africa in which that will never happen again (quoted in TRC Report, I: 134).

In other words, an important goal of rescuing the horrible from forgetfulness is to help restore the dignity of past victims, but remembering the stories of past victims’ suffering is also a means of public education, awareness raising, human rights training. Using past victims’ stories as a means is consistent with the goal of dignity restoration because (a) survivors of past violations and the loved ones of those who did not survive are included in the category of (potential) future victims, and (b) to the extent that past victims’ suffering contributes to the prevention of future violations, their suffering was not in vain, i.e., highlighting a connection between remembrance and prevention can be a source of healing for past victims and their loved ones, and may assist the restoration of their dignity.

**REMEMBERING THE HUMAN**

However, for this commitment against inhumanity to be realised, for the TRC’s rescue attempt to fulfil its potential, it is important to be aware of the tensions that accompanied its remembering of the horrible. One of these tensions is graphically alluded to in the following cartoon by South Africa’s most famous political cartoonist, Zapiro. This powerfully portrays a tension between moral remembering and forgetting: when one is engaged in rescuing the horrible from forgetfulness, it is tempting to refrain from remembering the humanity of those responsible for the horrible; when faced with the gravity of the inhumane, it becomes rather difficult to rise above a sea of victims’ skulls—if a heavenly parent seem to be in two minds whether the culprits retain their status as “God’s children”, how are ordinary mortals suppose to remember their shared parentage with “the people who did this”? 
In this regard, the TRC Report expressed a concern about the apparent inability of "ordinary South Africans" to follow Mandela's lead in recognizing those who committed inhuman acts as "one of us", as fellow human beings. The Report acknowledged that

the greater part of the Commission's focus has been on what could be regarded as the exceptional—on gross violations of human rights rather than the more mundane but nonetheless traumatising dimensions of apartheid life that effected every single black South African. The killers of Vlakplas [a farm outside Pretoria, used as a covert base and torture centre by the security police] have horrified the nation. The stories of a chain of shallow graves across the country, containing the remains of abducted activists who were brutalised, tortured and ultimately killed, have left many South Africans deeply shocked. The media has understandably focussed on these events—labelling Eugene de Kock, the Vlakplas commander, "Prime Evil" (TRC Report, I: 133).

It then went on to state:

This focus on the outrageous has drawn the nation’s attention away from the more commonplace violations. The result is that ordinary South Africans do not see themselves as represented by those the Commission defines as perpetrators, failing to recognise the "little perpetrator" in each one of us. To understand the source of evil is not to condone it. It is only by recognising the potential for evil in each one of us that we can take full responsibility for ensuring that such evil will never be repeated (I: 133).

The Report suggests that this inclusive recognition of the potential for evil, and the hoped-for accompanying sense of shared responsibility, can be enhanced by giving
more attention to the “mundane but nonetheless traumatising dimensions of apartheid life”—to, in effect, the banality of evil (Arendt) beyond the actions of a “Prime Evil”. I agree that this wider focus provides a promising route to bridging the moral gap between ordinary South Africans and those who “horrified the nation”, between those who became publicly known as “perpetrators” and the often elusive “little perpetrator” in each one of us. The TRC itself attempted to counter a focus on the outrageous through its wide range of institutional and sector hearings (TRC Report, Vol. IV). By highlighting the various ways in which faith communities, the media, the judiciary, the health sector, the business sector—through acts of commission and omission— contributed to a climate in which violations took place, the TRC process challenged a convenient criminalization of those engaged in political violence, i.e. it exposed the temptation to shirk various levels of shared responsibility by scape-goating those who directly bloodied their hands in the course of political conflict. In this regard it is also worth stressing the rather disconcerting message of an important chapter on the social psychology of gross human rights violations in the TRC Report. The main thrust of this chapter is that we should move away from individual pathology as the explanation for why people commit these gross violations, and give much more weight to social identity and “situationalism”, thus appreciating the power of various binding and blinding forces that enable an ordinary person to kill or torture another human being (TRC Report, Vol. V: 259-03).

Inclusive moral remembrance thus involves the recognition of a certain moral equality, a constant guarding against the denial of the potential for evil in each one of us. Despite the Report’s shortcomings, I agree with the following assessment of its promotion of this difficult, painful kind of remembrance:

The final report could be described as the founding document of the new South Africa…. The term “founding document” is more commonly used to describe a country’s Constitution. And there are grounds for pride in the South African Constitution…. But, for all that, the Constitution is a theoretical exercise, in large part the product of intellectual effort in the ivory towers of academia. The final report, in a very real and immediate way, defines us. With all its horrors, it is the earthly product of the blood and tears attendant on a difficult birth. It is a testament to the equality of man, if more in the disregard for the tenets of humanity than the observance of them (Mail & Guardian, November 6-12, 1998).

REMEMBERING THE HEROIC

With all this talk about remembering “the horrible”, and “evil”, one may well ask: What about the inspiring human potential for goodness? What about remembering “the admirable deeds of the heroes” (Ricoeur, 1995)? Indeed, for some critics there was not enough room for Greek style storytelling within the TRC process. For example, appearing under the heading “Tutu’s Report tells the truth but not the whole truth”, anti-apartheid veteran Jeremy Cronin criticized the report for focussing too much on “the little perpetrator” inside each of us. He is concerned that not enough room was given to celebrate the struggle, the “‘little freedom fighter’, the collective self-emancipator that we all could be” (Sunday Independent, November 15, 1998).
It is true that neither the Report, nor, more broadly, the TRC process, allowed much space for a conventional, Greek style celebration of the struggle, in the sense of allowing heroes to tell stories of bravery and victory, of risking life and liberty on the battle fields of past conflicts. But given the limitations imposed by its mandate, I am not sure that the TRC can fairly be criticized for this omission, and, furthermore, there are obvious risks involved in the insensitive glorification of military (masculine?) heroism which might downplay the human costs of these actions.

In this regard it is significant that Cronin expanded on his concern about the TRC Report's apparent overemphasis on “the potential for evil in each one of us”, by asking why the Report did not give more attention to “the ‘humanist’, ubuntu-filled ways of crossing the bridge” from past injustices to a truly democratic South Africa. While there is some truth in Cronin’s criticism as far as the Report is concerned—most of it is indeed devoted to a historical and statistical overview of violations within different regions, by different parties and so on—his question in fact draws attention to a further aspect of the inclusive moral remembrance within TRC process, namely its emphasis on the potential for goodness in each of us. It is important, however, to be clear in which way or ways the TRC process exhibited this potential and/or encouraged its realisation.

A lengthy chapter in the Report (V: 350-435), highlights some of the many examples from the TRC process where individuals (and communities) provided concrete evidence of the human potential for goodness. One might see this chapter, entitled “Reconciliation”, as a celebration of admirable deeds—showing the potential of those harmed to move beyond victimhood, and even survivorhood, to becoming victors over evil. The above-mentioned chapter also includes a range of examples where individuals and institutions were brave enough to acknowledge responsibility for wrongdoing or harm and express remorse or moral sensitivity towards those they violated—thus demonstrating the human potential for moral transformation.

But do these examples really provide evidence of the potential for goodness inside each of us? The Biehls and many others might not be conventional military heroes, but are they not exceptional moral heroes? After all, how many of us “ordinary people” would be able to embody an “amazing grace” which helped parents to treat as grandchildren some of those who mercilessly murdered their daughter? Unless this concern about the representivity of the examples mentioned above is addressed, the TRC and myself remain open to the criticism that, by using these examples to promote inclusive moral remembrance, we are exerting unrealistic and inappropriate moral pressure on, amongst others, ordinary South Africans.

I would concede that the examples of understanding, mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation highlighted by the TRC process have an extraordinary quality to them. However, this extraordinariness is compatible with the promotion of inclusive remembrance of the admirable for the following reasons. Firstly, though the Biehls’ grace was “amazing”, they and many others were ordinary people, unlike say a Nelson Mandela. Very few of them are the kind of people that would be expected to adorn the front pages of newspapers or make headline news; they are, for exam-
people, moderately successful businesspeople (Biehls), a junior officer in the prison
service (Irene Crouse), an administrative officer at a gold mine (Zenam Papiyana),
a university teacher (Ginn Fourie), and a political activist turned administrator (Ash-
ley Forbes).

It is true that some of these people received more media attention than others, the
obvious example being the Biehls. The fact that they are Californians, coupled with
the dramatic, archetypical features of the tragedy that befell their activist daugh-
ter—an attractive, young white woman being brutally murdered by a group of black
men—certainly encouraged a lot of media interest and even sensationalism. These
factors also influenced my interest in the case. However, I do not accept that be-
cause the Biehls come from a white, middle class, liberal, American background,
that their mercy towards and friendship with some of those who killed their daughter
therefore have little to say to other people. Lyndi Fourie, a beautiful, young, white
woman was also killed by a group of black men, and her mother, a middle class,
English speaking South African woman, was willing to engage in a unilateral for-
giveness initiative; Irene Crouse, a white working class, conservative, Afrikaner
woman also showed mercy, to name but a few. Therefore, the examples in the Re-
port represent a range of people from different racial, cultural, class or gender
backgrounds. All these people exhibited an ability and willingness to forgive and/or
show mercy. The point is that there is not a simplistic causal relationship between
background and a propensity towards creative, healing responses towards pro-
found hurt. I therefore see no reason, apart from a media-induced, false sense of
exceptionality, why the American background of the Biehls should disqualify their
admirable actions from being interpreted, carefully, as pointers to a widespread
human potential to show mercy or to forgive, even when faced with an extremely
difficult situation.

The difficulties of the situations faced by the people mentioned above draws atten-
tion to a second reason why their extraordinary deeds may legitimately be used to
articulate and promote inclusive remembrance of the admirable in, for example,
post-apartheid South Africa. This reason emerges from the extra-ordinary moral
challenges posed by this transitional context to all citizens—a time for the estab-
lishment and consolidation of a stable, sustainable democracy after many years of
apartheid.

Tzvetan Todorov formulated the moral challenge I have in mind as follows:

While it is true that ordinary virtue can be found everywhere and that we must rejoice
in this fact and speak it loud for all to hear, there can come a time in the life of a soci-
ey, as in that of the individual, when ordinary virtue is not enough. In such moments
of anguish and despair…the heroic virtues, courage and generosity, become as nec-
essary as the ordinary ones (1999: 295).

Todorov drew this conclusion from his reflections on the moral behaviour of people
faced with the extreme conditions of concentration camps. While people like the
Biehls were not faced with the desperate conditions of concentration camp inmates,
they were certainly confronted with a time of deep anguish when faced with the bru-
tal death of a beloved child. With the *Report*, I am rejoicing here in their display of courage in not succumbing to anguish or bitterness, and their generosity in showing mercy. And given the deep wounds we as a South African society carried over from the past, and the vulnerability of trust in goodness after the 1994 election, I would argue that it was indeed an urgent necessity for the TRC process and *Report* to name out loud, for all to hear, some of the examples where ordinary people displayed those “heroic virtues”.

The TRC’s facilitation of the telling, recording and remembering of admirable deeds by ordinary people thus need to be located in its extraordinary context—a transitional time which demanded and still requires the courageous and generous kind of deeds, which the Biehls and others demonstrated to be possible.

This emphasis on the courage and generosity that helped to make those acts of forgiveness and mercy possible draws attention to a third way in which one may bridge the apparent gap between *extraordinary* examples and *inclusive* remembrance of the admirable. In explaining what he means by these heroic virtues in less extreme conditions than the camps, Todorov acknowledges with sadness that “the just, those righteous men and women” who combine courage and generosity with ordinary kindness “are few in number”, but he continues to hope that people can at least, when the moment comes, take the risk to “meet the gaze” of the stranger in need (1999: 295-6). A number of ordinary heroes within the TRC process were willing to take the considerable risk of “meeting the gaze” of a stranger who was not only in need, but who also killed a loved one; many of them went further and were prepared to forgive, or show mercy; some even engaged in a process of deep, interpersonal reconciliation. But the point is that the willingness to look beyond the boundaries of family and tribe and, in effect, remember that strangers (former political enemies) are fellow human beings, lies at the root of what these heroes did. Even if the rest of what they did is too much to swallow, at least the minimal “meeting” advocated by Todorov could and should be pursued by all those that need to learn to live together, peacefully. Put differently, admiring the actions of such people as the Biehls does not imply that everyone should blindly follow in all their steps, it does mean that everyone should at least follow them in their sensitive seeing of strangers.

**WAR-THINKING VS. TENSION-FILLED BALANCING ACTS**

The preceding discussion of the inclusive moral remembrance underlying the TRC process demonstrates that while trying to “rescue the horrific from forgetfulness” (Ricoeur, 1995), we dare not forget the humanity of those responsible for the horrible. For if we don’t rescue *this* moral remembering from forgetfulness, we may well be accused of joining their deeds in the moral gutter. If we demonize or animalise “perpetrators”, then we also become guilty of a dehumanisation, which typically was a crucial step in making it possible for them to commit the horrible against faceless victims. If the horrible, and the suffering arising from the horrible, blind us to the faces of the “perpetrators”, then we fail to promote that respect for human life and
dignity which is so desperately needed after decades, if not centuries, of systematic dehumanisation in South Africa.

Instead of contributing to a spiral of dehumanisation, the TRC process challenges us, in the words of another mother who lost a child, Cynthia Ngewu, “to demonstrate a humanness [ubuntu] towards [perpetrators], so that [it] in turn may restore their own humanity” (TRC Report, Vol. V: 366). The potential of this humanizing dialectic is illuminated by Ntobeko Penni’s response to the Biehls’ mercy—their respect for his humanity has not only helped to restore his own humanity, he has also embarked on a process of seeing Amy Biehl’s humanity. On that fateful day in 1993 she was a faceless white “settler”. Now “he wants to know more about her,” related Linda Biehl. “Amy’s spirit really has a grip on him. Recently he spent an hour just chatting with Amy’s older sister, Kim. At the end of that Kim came in the office and she just grabbed me and started to cry. It was as if Ntobeko was planning Amy’s week this year on his own and he wanted to know who Amy was”.4

The preceding discussion furthermore makes it clear that promoting inclusive moral remembrance should not be confused with striving after tension-free unity, with a romantic hankering after heavenly harmony. The TRC process included many “difficult, sensitive, perhaps even agonising, balancing acts”5—between moral accountability and equitable amnesty, between the rights of victims and the well-being of perpetrators, between respect for past victims and the protection of future victims.

The focus here has been on the further challenge of balancing “shame at the capacity of human beings of any race or language group to be inhumane to other human beings” (Mandela, quoted in TRC Report, I: 134), with pride in the potential we all have to be humane to other human beings. If there is too much remembering of the horrible, individuals and communities run the risk of getting bogged down in badness; if the encouragement of, say, mercy and forgiveness receives too much attention, this promotion may easily come across as insensitivity to the consequences of dehumanisation. Looking the reality of evil in the eye may blind one to the faces of those behind the evil, thus the cycle of dehumanisation is continued; making too much room for the humanity of perpetrators downplays the horrific and may undermine the restoration of victims’ dignity through vindication.

Recognizing the various tension-filled balancing acts that are involved in the TRC process not only militates against a monistic desire to absolve all tensions and conflicts in a dangerous conception of unity (Berlin, 1969: 167-72). The moral inclusivity that underlies the remembrance promoted by the TRC also stands in opposition to a Manichean attraction to moral “apartheid” and the accompanying discomfort with ambiguity. (Within an apartheid mindset, to put it crudely, “blacks” were typically seen as bad, and “whites” as wonderful, while within an anti-apartheid mindset

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4 Interview with Paul Haupt (see note 2).

5 Mahomed; see AZAPO and others v the Pres. of the RSA and others, 1996 (8) BCLR 1015 (CC) at 1029F.
it sometimes became tempting to just reverse the roles—black became beautiful
and whites were often branded as “Boers”.) The lure of adopting a sharp dichotomy
between pure black “victims” and polluted white “perpetrators” seems to be particu-
larly strong in a post-apartheid context, as demonstrated by the relative neglect of
equity regarding amnesty applicants. In this regard I am reminded of Paul Russell’s
vital insight:

> If truth is the main casualty in war, then ambiguity is another...One of the legacies of
> war is a habit of simple distinction, simplification and opposition...which continues to
do much of our thinking for us” (quoted in Krog, 1998: 99).

Through its promotion of inclusive moral remembrance the TRC process provided
us with invaluable raw material and role models for the formidable, ongoing task of
challenging “war-thinking”, of uprooting the seductive “habit of simple distinction,
simplification and opposition”. A striking feature of, for example, the Biehl amnesty
hearing was that “Amy’s killers” did not “confirm to the familiar plot-lines of Hollywood
films such as Richard Attenborough’s Dry White Season [or Cry Freedom], where
the police figure as evil-looking Nazis with thick Afrikaans accents” (Cape Times,
August 6-7, 1997). Neither was the person killed a black victim of those “Boers”.

By recognizing, amongst other mitigating factors, the victimhood of (many) perpe-
trators, a commitment to equity helps to paint a more complex picture of those
granted amnesty within the TRC process; by acknowledging the “little perpetrator’
in each one of us”, and recognizing how interchangeable the roles of victim and
perpetrator often are, it becomes more difficult to adopt an exclusive, morally supe-
rior, counter-productive position of victimhood. Thus, *mutuality* in terms of mercy
and forgiveness and understanding are encouraged (Govier and Verwoerd, 2002b:
153-155). In particular it should be stressed that the mutuality and humility arising
from a more complex picture of hurt and harming in apartheid South Africa does not
amount to a moral equation of those who fought against and those who defended a
crime against humanity (Verwoerd, 2003).

More generally, the notion of inclusive moral remembrance gives a deeper meaning
to the official language of “Truth and Reconciliation”—with “truth” standing also for
the need to remember the horrible, while the linkage with “reconciliation” beckons
us to move creatively beyond evil. And in thinking about “national unity and recon-
ciliation”, the tensions between “truth” and “reconciliation” brought to the fore by the
TRC process prepare one not to expect easy, warm embraces, but an ongoing, dif-
ficult series of balancing acts. In other words, the Truth and Reconciliation Com-
mission might not have been very successful in bringing large numbers of individual
“victims” and “perpetrators” closely together, but at least a careful reading of the
process allows one better to appreciate the nature of the challenge described as
“promoting national unity and reconciliation”.

An important part of this challenge is coming to terms with the painful truth that not
only amnesty within the TRC process, but national reconciliation itself involve an
ongoing series of difficult balancing acts. It is, however, important not to overstate
the unavoidability of tensions associated with inclusive moral remembrance and national reconciliation.

Take for example the difficult balancing act between the rights of victims and the well-being of perpetrators, or put differently, between justice and mercy. With the benefit of hindsight it is clear that much of the agony could have been taken out of this balancing act by a different institutional design of the TRC, such as giving the Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee more power to implement tangible reparation, giving the Human Rights Violations Committee more resources for immediate therapeutic support, or by timing the release from prison of those granted amnesty to coincide better with tangible recognition of victims’ suffering.

Or take the general tension between the two arms of inclusive moral remembrance—between remembering the horrible and remembering the admirable, between “truth” and “reconciliation”. If a separate committee or even sub-committee was given the time and resources to promote the kind of actions brought together in the Reconciliation chapter, then the Commission would better have lived up to its name of being a “Truth and Reconciliation” Commission, instead of mostly being described as the “Truth Commission”. Furthermore, I know from personal experience that many admirable actions that took place within the TRC process failed to be recorded due to a lack of time and resources—if more than one researcher was given the opportunity and support to focus on recording creative responses to evil within the TRC, we could easily have ended up with a full volume devoted to reconciliation, instead of one chapter, thus providing a better balance in the Report between remembering our potential for evil and celebrating, carefully, our potential for goodness.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: TOWARDS HUMANIZING REMEMBERANCE

The destructive consequences of the moral forgetfulness encouraged by and supporting the system of apartheid loudly proclaim the vital importance of a remembering that looks beyond the skulls of those harmed, without overlooking the gravity of the harm; an ability to see the inherent dignity of the harmers, despite what they have done; a willingness to recognize the humanity of the bystanders and beneficiaries, despite what they have not done; the courage and generosity to resist the reduction of fellow human beings to “enemies” that deserve to be burnt to ashes.

Nurturing this kind of remembrance, I believe, is central to the sustainability of peace in, for example, post-apartheid South Africa (I am, of course, not suggesting that inclusive, humanizing moral remembrance will provide a sufficient basis for sustainable peace; elsewhere I have addressed additional requirements, such as more tangible, practical reparations and creative socio-economic redistribution—see Govier and Verwoerd, 2002a; Verwoerd, 1999). Although it might not be my place to say this, I therefore wish that Archbishop Tutu’s prayer in the Zapiro cartoon, Linda Biehl and her now deceased husband’s vision, as well as the moral sensitivity of a Ntobeko Penni, could be added to a different kind of “National Monument” than the one standing at the junction of Grand Parade and South Mall.
in Cork City. I hope that soon there will be a national monument—in an agreed island of Ireland, in South Africa and in other societies struggling to overcome deep divisions—that will inspire our youth to honour their often neglected moral hero’s from the past, and to respectfully acknowledge the suffering of survivors, including those victims on the “other side”. And last but not least, may this monument also help us and our children to remember that our enemies are also “children of God”. A “God” who lives in the clouds might have the luxury to doubt the need for this inclusive remembrance. Few of us sharing the same island or planet have this choice—we simply have to learn to see our enemies, at least figuratively, face to face.

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