LISTENING TO YOUR STORY

A Narrative Approach to Spiritual Direction in the South African Context

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THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT is one in which centuries of oppression under colonialism culminated in the systematic dehumanisation of apartheid. We cannot naively work in the field of spiritual direction in this country without an awareness of its traumatic history and the effects of that history on ourselves and on the people we encounter. South Africans of all backgrounds have been and, I would argue, continue to be formed by this history to different degrees. Apartheid's destructive history is not my primary focus, yet it is the backdrop against which much of our work in spirituality has been done.

History

Therefore it is necessary to look a little at some of the common features of South Africa's history in order to illuminate of the problems and the desires of the people with whom spiritual directors in South Africa work. We are all aware of the gross inhumanities of the apartheid system: limitations on movement, on access to land, on education, on work opportunities, on marriage and family life. The legal structure of apartheid is open to our gaze. However there were other, more hidden, evils perpetrated by the system. Much of the damage from apartheid cannot simply be undone by changing the law. It was damage done to people's very beings. It is on this that I shall focus here.

To a large extent we are who we think we are. In the words of the Soweto Students' Representative Council in 1976:

> We shall reject the whole system of Bantu Education whose aim is to reduce us, mentally and physically, into 'hewers of wood and drawers of water'.[1]

[1] Khotso Seatlholo, president of the Soweto Students' Representative Council, press release, 29 October 1976, available at http://www.aluka.org/action/showContentImage?doi=10.5555%2FAL.SFF.

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The agenda of Bantu Education was to miseducate, to limit the horizons of an entire people. What is remarkable is the resilience of African society in rejecting, to a great extent, the Bantu Education agenda. Yet, as all those involved in spiritual direction know, the formation of a positive and healthy image of self is a tentative business, and is often damaged or limited even in the most free societies. In a country where the government and the educational authorities had as their stated aim the non-development of peoples' sense of self and of the possibilities of their lives, it is not surprising to see profound wounding on the level of self-identity.

Another significant area of wounding for people living under apartheid was that their stories were silenced in a variety of ways. The African people's own history was not taught, or it was erased from the written record, or was not acknowledged as being 'real history'. The role of the censorship laws, with the limitations they imposed on the press, was a suppression of current stories: the hidden stories of people who were detained or tortured, or who had vanished and been murdered. Finally there was an attempt completely to devalue the oral tradition. The apartheid state expended great energy in undermining and attempting to erase the stories that existed in African society.

A related area of trauma was the systematic brutalisation of communities and the conscious efforts of the state to sow distrust and suspicion in them. For example, at the University of the Witwatersrand, state bursaries were dependent on students reporting the 'suspect' activities of staff and other students to the state. In townships, other incentives were used to encourage the poorest people to become state spies. The knowledge of such strategies and their execution over many decades fostered a profound attitude of suspicion. These are only three examples of the ways in which South Africans were damaged by apartheid. But they are particularly significant for the work of spiritual direction. In my view storytelling is intrinsic to South African life.

I would like to touch for a moment on the process of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The Commission and its report are still extremely controversial topics in South Africa, and yet the

DOCUMENT.pre19761029.032.009.795&p=2, accessed 13 May 2013. The phrase 'hewers of wood and drawers of water' was infamously used by Hendrik Verwoerd, one of the originators of apartheid, to describe the government's education plan for black South Africans. The Bantu Education Act (1953) enforced racially segregated education in South Africa, which included different academic standards and, more importantly, highly unequal distribution of education budgets.

fundamental option for its work as a way forward, and indeed much of the distress caused by its implementation, speak to me of the deepest desires of the majority of South Africans.

Truth and Reconciliation

The TRC was the approach taken to a number of problems caused by the negotiated settlement that ended apartheid. As Graeme Simpson writes:

> Most of the legal and jurisprudential dilemmas presented by the TRC process are actually rooted in its almost bi-polar roles as both a 'fact-finding' and quasi-judicial enterprise on the one hand and as a psychologically sensitive mechanism for story telling and healing on the other.[2]

The anger and distress that the TRC evoked, especially among the victims and among ordinary people who were appalled by its findings, speak profoundly to me of the deep-seated desires that this process carried with it. The reality was that the TRC did not have the time or resources

Session of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

[2] Graeme Simpson, 'A Brief Evaluation of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Some Lessons for Societies in Transition', paper delivered at Commissioning the Past Conference,

to do anything significant by way of reconciliation. The perpetrators of human rights abuses for the most part did not come willingly or openly to the TRC, and even when they did come they were often unwilling to acknowledge or take responsibility for their actions.

In addition, the TRC was also not capable of offering victims much more than the act of storytelling. Yes, their stories were broadcast, and have been heard and archived, but the lives of many who attended remain devastated by their experiences. The commission failed to help them to heal or find redress. For many of those traumatized under apartheid, the experience of telling their stories risked renewing the trauma without offering an appropriate way of processing what they told. To add to the complexity, some of the perpetrators of human rights abuses were also victims.

Much of the criticism of the TRC focuses on its failure as a judicial enterprise. But here I would like to explore the other side of the commission: its role as a psychologically sensitive mechanism for storytelling and healing. I believe that the notion of the TRC as a mechanism for dealing with the past and for moving into a new future says a lot about the South African context. It is significant that this way was chosen and not some other. For instance, we did not have a general amnesty without a truth-finding project. Nor did we have a process of reparation trials where victims had to prove their claims. Nor did we have a process of trials like those at Nuremburg—which would have been impossible anyway, given that the African National Congress (ANC) did not achieve a military victory.

Instead we had something unique. The TRC developed into a quasi-judicial process, but unlike any seen before. Witnesses were not required to swear an oath and were not interrogated; commissioners cried; sessions mostly began with song; and witnesses were supported by comforters. All this speaks to me of a profound cultural belief in the

[illegible], accessed 15 May 2013.

importance of storytelling, of hearing and listening to the other. In its final report the TRC uses poetic rather than legal language in speaking of its function:

> However painful the experience the wounds of the past must not be allowed to fester. They must be opened. They must be cleansed. And balm must be poured on them so that they can heal. This is not to be obsessed with the past. It is to take care that the past is properly dealt with for the sake of the future.[3]

Despite its limitations, the idea of the TRC remains illuminating, speaking of a deep desire for healing and reconciliation. This desire, profoundly expressed at different moments by both Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, as well as by other leaders, in the highly volatile years after the unbanning of the ANC, provides a narrative that the country followed more closely than it did the narratives of the civil war which was also a key part of those years.

As we move further and further from the time of the TRC I think its success will be seen as providing an open platform, a special time in which stories were shared which otherwise were unlikely ever to be told or to be collected together. The organic way in which listening happened in the TRC resonates with my experience as a spiritual director and as a facilitator of group-retreat processes. It recalls the profound experience of facilitating a group retreat for highly traumatized young adults from Katlehong Township in the early 2000s. All of the youngsters had been exposed to extreme violence. They had witnessed loved ones being murdered, they had been raped and gang-raped. In the opening session, somewhat naively, we asked them what it was they desired from the retreat. This unleashed a process that took hours, in which many of them poured out their hearts to each other and to us. As one person spoke, often a companion would come and sit beside him or her, touching a shoulder, offering tissues or bringing a glass of water. The cathartic effect of this disclosure was clearly the primary way the young people had of processing what had happened to them. It was also reminiscent of the TRC hearings. To what extent had these youngsters been formed by the TRC and to what extent was I witnessing a normal cultural way of proceeding?

[3] *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, volume 1, 7, available at http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/finalreport/Volume%201.pdf, accessed 13 May 2013.

Anti-apartheid rally, Johannesburg, 1985

What is the role of spiritual direction? Classically it is to help others to deepen their relationship with God. In our context, where so many carry such deeply wounded images of self and images of God, I believe that healing holds a central place in most experiences of spiritual direction.

Apartheid was not just an external system that imposed oppression. It sought to get inside people's minds and hearts. In Steve Biko's brilliant and dangerous critique of the effects of apartheid he points out how it systematically damaged African people's sense of self.[4] Spiritual directors know that our sense of self and our relationship with God are intimately interwoven. In order to become free, to be the person God desires us to be, we need first to have a sense of ourselves as loved creatures created by a loving God.

Praying Our Faith Histories

I would like to explore some of the themes that I have drawn both from my own years of doing this work, and from a series of reflective, qualitative interviews with people who have either been participants or facilitators in the process of praying and sharing faith histories.

[4] Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like: Selected Writings*, edited by Aelred Stubbs (Johannesburg: Heinemann, 1978).

For many who have prayed their faith histories, there has been a simultaneous shift in how they view themselves and in how they view God. One participant tellingly summed up this experience by saying:

> *I used to be so sad and see God as distant—but now there came the idea God was always with me …. I forgave God and I forgave myself.*

In her work on narrative, Janet Ruffing emphasizes the importance of allowing people to develop and name images or symbols that help them to work with their faith histories.[5]

From my research I think that this process of praying, of taking a story into the presence of God and looking at it there, achieves two related results. The first is to allow people to begin to think about themselves and their lives from a new vantage point. As a directee said,

> *God was looking with me at my life and now it was looking different.*

Secondly, in the South African context many people come to spiritual direction primarily because they are seeking healing, normally emotional, sometimes spiritual and occasionally physical. From my experience this is true right across the differing cultural groups within South African society. While the primary aim of spiritual direction is to help people to grow in their relationship with God, and to be able to name and reflect on that relationship and to live a life congruent with it, in this context healing seems to be an essential part of the journey.

I do not wish to imply that this is not true for other contexts. I have read enough to know that healing is often part of the spiritual direction journey. Yet one of the criticisms that has sometimes been levelled against the work we have done in South Africa is that we are too conscious of the healing role of spiritual direction, that perhaps we overemphasize it. Our work began in the aftermath of apartheid and I believe it was profoundly affected by the dominant narrative of that time—one of healing and reintegration. It is not surprising for me that in our context spiritual direction is one of the places where people seek healing and restoration after the evil of apartheid.

A number of years ago a documentary was produced about the Centre for Christian Spirituality in Cape Town.[6] In it this emphasis on

[5] See Janet Ruffing, *To Tell the Sacred Tale: Spiritual Direction and Narrative* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2011)

[6] South African Broadcasting Corporation, documentary, *When God is Gone,* produced by Sally Smith, 11 July 1999.

healing was also evident: whether it was the spiritual healing that Willem Verwoerd[7] sought as he attempted to come to terms with the legacy of apartheid and with the version of Christianity taught by the apartheid state; or the emotional healing of some of the victims of state abuse; or healing in the wake of the violent crime that overwhelmed the country in the years immediately after the fall of apartheid. Although our work and the development of the Centre for Christian Spirituality took place quite separately, I was struck that they also seemed to be highly aware of this need for healing and reconciliation.

Among those whose faith was formed under apartheid, it is likely that many people's image of God was severely distorted, and the fall of apartheid exposed that distortion. For those whose faith was clearly in opposition to the apartheid state, images of God were still damaged profoundly by apartheid. As one directee put it, 'how can I trust a God who caused me to be born in a land where I have no rights?'[8] In addition, the damage that the state caused to people's lives and sense of self may still remain. In the words of Sr Liz Albert, 'before you can lose yourself in God, there must be a self to lose'.[9]

Healing and reconciliation are for me part of the spirit of the age. It is striking to think of the Exodus story, in which God offers us a scriptural reflection on the process of leaving slavery behind. I often think of the providence of God. After leaving Egypt, the Hebrews could not immediately enter into the land of milk and honey. The forty years in the wilderness form a significant narrative for the present experience of South Africans, trying to find our way in this new environment of freedom. We make mistakes and get lost, but God never abandons us. Nor does God place the burden of unrealistic expectations on a new society.

In almost all of the interviews I have done the theme of healing has played a central role. This is a particularly moving extract from a woman who prayed her faith story some time after the death of her son:

> *There was a pain and a wound that needed to heal and I felt I needed something to heal inside. I was just crying, now I still cry, but if I cry I will have this relief because God is my consolation. My son was the first gift; his life and death, and then this way of praying bringing insight and meaning to that experience.*

[7] Willem Verwoerd is a grandson of President Hendrik Verwoerd.
[8] *When God is Gone*.
[9] Unpublished retreat notes, 2006.

So what happens? Why is this process healing? What does it do to help people to heal and to grow in their relationship with God? There are a number of important elements that happen in these processes.

Providing a Context That Had Been Lost or Was Inaccessible

One woman told her facilitator at the end of an experience of sharing her faith history in a group:

> *For the first time in my life, I am over fifty years of age, and today I managed to look at my inner self in prayer.*

It is not that traditional African society lacks mechanisms for processing and dealing with life and meaning-making. But industrialisation, the migrant labour system and the disruption of communities and families that are all part of South Africa's history, have separated many people from traditional contexts for processing their interior lives. One facilitator I interviewed emphasized how hard it was for many people to return to their rural roots often enough to meet with elders or to perform appropriate rituals.

> *People live in the townships, but home and their elders are far away, in Lesotho or the Eastern Cape. It is expensive; they cannot go home. They do not meet. They do not have the rituals they need.*

Discovering I Have a Self Separate from My Experience

I can remember inviting people in a township in Soweto to pray their faith histories and to write down their experience as they prayed. I was struck by the initial resistance from many.

> *Why did you want us to write this down? Who would look at it? Who would own it?*

And then as we talked about that a little more, a deeper fear emerged.

> *Why is my story important? Who is it important to?*

Here we come face to face with the centuries of an overarching colonial narrative culminating in apartheid, which devalued and/or silenced African stories. (With the exception of those narratives that 'justified' the ruling establishment.) That narrative has been discredited and rejected. Now, clearly, there are some stories of some people—heroes of the struggle and great leaders—that are important. Yet what about a grandmother who has worked all her life as a domestic servant, or a miner, or someone who has mostly been unemployed? Are their stories also important? To pray my faith history is consciously to look at my life story with God, and to ask God to look at my story with me. It is to give my story shape, to discover its form and imagery. All of these are important exercises for people which also help them to develop their sense of self. To a large extent we are formed by the stories that, consciously or unconsciously, we tell ourselves about ourselves.

We are formed by the stories that ... we tell ourselves about ourselves

Being asked to look at your life through God's eyes gives a different perspective and opens the possibility for neglected or new narratives to emerge.

Externalising the Story and Not Being Overwhelmed

Telling their stories offers people who have suffered greatly in their lives the possibility of gaining some distance between themselves and their experience. They are better able to externalise the experience and in that process not to be as overwhelmed by it.

A middle-aged woman expressed herself like this:

> *I poured my heart out and somehow I felt relieved, some of the pain was going out of me …. Before I was just living, but afterwards I realised there was a deeper meaning to life than my pain …. I didn't think I could have*

big dreams, I was just going through pain after pain, but this opened my world to something else …. I started healing by opening up, it changed my life. This is a new world I have discovered, a world of love. It changed my whole life.

Providing Insight and Meaning

To seek meaning is an essential part of the work of being human. In order for us to live and thrive we need meaning and purpose in our lives. Insight and meaning add a richness to our lives. Empowering people to discover and explore meaning in their experience and to reflect on their experience helps them to become more fully alive, more fully human. This is the insight of an older man:

Saying my faith history, digging up and getting in touch with what has taken place in my situation and in my relationship with God, was a profound experience and that has stayed with me for a long time. Even years later I still go back. Experiences have happened after and I find myself filling in the gaps. With new experiences I find myself going back to it, without it I would be the poorer.

Meaning-making is a key function of faith. To quote *Nostrae aetate*,

> We expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which deeply stir the hearts of human beings: What is a person? What is the meaning, the aim of our life? Why suffering and what purpose does it serve? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going?[10]

It is not surprising that this exercise of meaning-making, of reflecting on our lives, comes from a foundation of faith, or indeed that people look for it from such a foundation. What is more surprising for me is how often we, as people of God, fail to help others as they grapple with these questions. The traditions of spiritual writings in the Church hold much wisdom, yet they remain relatively unknown to ordinary parishioners.

Deepening Relationship with God

This is the reflection of a middle-aged woman on her experience of praying her faith history, interviewed two years after the experience:

[10] *Nostrae aetate*, n. 1.

> *It's like I have been given a new page, the old one I can still remember with compassion but the new me is in so much joy …. My daughters can see that I am different. Before I used to be so angry at anything, now I can still be angry, but I am also at peace. I can scold, but I am at peace …. For me it was important to tell the whole truth, all the sadness. There was freedom.*

The process of storytelling allows a new insight to emerge into the relationship with God. In the process of telling our stories, and of being listened to, something deep is healed. How we perceive ourselves and God changes, and we experience this as an increase in interior freedom.

Another participant was deeply affected by listening to other people's stories:

> *Listening to the other, it has been quite humbling. You have to tell your deepest relationship to God …. It is a gift that people open up, and are being carried in the spirit of the group and can trust. Really it is work which I acknowledge of the Spirit. You find the most introverted coming to the fore and they trust and can talk deeply. After all that listening to each other's collective experience, everyone has just shifted …. We have been touched. That process creates a shift closer to God. Especially because we maintain values, each one's story is sacred, in an honoured environment quite unique in itself. God does talk through stories. God created us because He likes stories. Really if you have been listening to stories you see it is a rich opportunity for faith, just listening.*

Finding Solidarity

An important part of the healing that many participants have talked about is the discovery that they are not alone, that other people in their communities have also suffered, and are suffering. The mask of 'everything's OK' is allowed to fall and people can be vulnerable, sometimes for the first time. In this process for many there is a deeper sense of freedom, a sense of normalisation and of unity. We are not different, we share our common human experience of suffering.

One participant said:

> *Listening to others, feeling deeply with them, praying for them. Before I thought I am the only one suffering like this.*

The suspicion that apartheid engendered among South African people cannot just be addressed by new legislation. I believe it is in exercises such as these of deep sharing with each other that a society that trusts, that dares to be vulnerable, will slowly be born.

Bridging Divides

Finally—and this may sound banal, but I believe it is of great significance—apartheid, as its name tells us, was about separateness, about separating people from each other, emphasizing differences and ensuring that we were never to see the other as fully human. The work we have done seems insignificant in the ocean of fear and distrust that apartheid created, yet there have been profound cross-cultural exchanges that have brought a depth of healing. A young white woman directs an older black woman on a retreat, and is told at the end of the retreat how angry the directee was to have to tell her story to a white, and how her anger has been lessened because she was listened to.

There have been groups of people of different races sitting, listening and sharing in depth their faith stories and their lives, and discovering in the telling the humanity of the other. I have images of young Xhosa and Zulu men sharing their inmost lives with an Afrikaaner woman, of the effect on her and on them. Of a white man finding healing and solace in being listened to by a black woman. Many of the people who seek out these ways of praying and listening are older people, people whose youth was formed by apartheid. Something is healed in the spaces that allow us to share and to hear, to listen to one another at depth. Especially to listen in this special way to people who were actively taught and encouraged to see their compatriots as utterly other.

I have looked here at the some of the damage caused by the apartheid state to the interior lives of South Africans. Focusing on the Ignatian tool of praying and sharing one's faith history, I have explored the themes that emerged from a series of qualitative interviews. I have considered how this tool has brought healing and solace. We live in times of great violence, in which people are accustomed to defining themselves in opposition to others. This mechanism of reflecting on our lives in prayer with God and of sharing our stories promises to help people who are hurting, both

in South Africa and elsewhere, to discover a new sense of self, and a deeper sense of a shared humanity.

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