

# **What Does it Mean to be Human After Historical Trauma?**

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In December 1995, when I was invited by Archbishop Desmond Tutu to join the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to serve on its Human Rights Violations Committee, many strands of my life were coming together. As a child under apartheid, I had witnessed first-hand the brutality of a system that oppressed black, coloured and Indian people and made them feel second, and even third class citizens in their own country. As a student under apartheid, studying at a university designated for Africans, I was part of students' protests and demonstrations, both in my high school years, and throughout my years at university in the 1970s. As an adult and professional psychologists during the dying days of apartheid, my work with human rights lawyers who were defending anti-apartheid activists for their violent crimes and were facing the death penalty, brought me face-to-face with unspeakable crimes committed by my own people against their own. These were crimes known as "necklace murders," in which black people suspected of working with the apartheid police were burnt alive by putting a tyre doused with petrol around their necks and setting the tyre alight, and the accusing crowd dancing around the body in flames amidst the pleading cries of the victims.

In a way I understood how it was possible for the apartheid government and its operatives to exercise brutality against black people. Black people did not exist as

human beings in their eyes; they were dehumanised, invisible Others. The violence committed by young people like myself was not that easy to comprehend.

I spent a year at Harvard University’s Widener library, reading studies on perpetrators, which were mainly studies on men who had played various roles in the Nazi machinery of destruction. In all these studies I read, there seemed to be something missing in the explanatory frameworks that were developed for understanding what most of these studies called “evil.”

It wasn’t until I joined the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that I learned the important lessons about the human condition—not only the capacity for human beings to destroy life itself, but also the capacity for the repair of brokenness in the aftermath of mass violence—reparation at the level of individuals and society alike.

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In thinking about these lessons, I asked myself the question, what motivates the need to face the victim (as some perpetrators did), or for victims to seek meeting with persons who killed their loved ones? Granted, sometimes there are clearly stated motivations, (to find out “the truth”, to ask for forgiveness, etc.). Yet it seems to me that there is more at play. The “more” is a tacit recognition that healing must involve the “Other,” is dependent on the “Other.” While victim and perpetrator are separated by their pasts, at the same time, their past also connects them, opening up a potential space for the emergence of unexpected human moments. At the second

and third generation level, the dialogue about the past should be transformed into a facilitative environment, inspiring an ethical impulse that may open a window for expression of acknowledgement and facing inherited shame and guilt on the part of perpetrators' descendants, and acceptance and survivors' desire to rebuild new human bonds or to restore old ones.

The task then points to the importance of a deeper level of recognition, one that goes beyond acknowledgment (which may at times simply recognize the other as a mere object). Reciprocal recognition of the other's humanity, acknowledging the reality of each other's pain and suffering, whatever its source, is the kind of empathy that creates pathways to caring for the other as a fellow human being.

... let me then share a story that speak to this issue of reparation in the aftermath of voice of conscience. The story's origins are the chaotic times of apartheid.

Two years ago, the encounter between a young woman, Marcia Khoza, and her mother's killer, the apartheid government's chief assassin, Eugene de Kock, who was nicknamed "Prime Evil," led to her forgiving de Kock. What does it mean to sit in the same room as the man who killed your mother, to face him and to engage him with questions about the killing? What did forgiving de Kock do for her – and for de Kock? What does it mean to forgive a man known as "Prime Evil," who, in the collective consciousness of South Africans is the embodiment of the evil of the apartheid system?

“I had this deep void of emptiness,” Khoza said. “I carried so much anger to protect myself from falling into the abyss.”

Empowered by knowing the story of her mother’s killing, and finally finding “the missing puzzle in the jigsaw of my life,” as she described the experience, Marcia Khoza was able to mourn and to begin her healing journey. In recounting the story of her meeting with de Kock, she spoke about how meeting de Kock enabled her to empathise with him and his longing for his sons whom he told her he had not seen for more than twenty years.

I asked her what was most memorable about the meeting with de Kock. She described a moment towards the end of the visit when she became conscious of her knees were touching de Kock’s under the narrow table across which they sat from each other in the prison. She was drawing closer and closer to him with each response he gave to her many questions, listening to the words, yet also listening to his “inner voice.” At one point, she said, “I realised that our noses were almost touching, and that we were breathing the same air.”

Breathing the same air – an ordinary statement, yet the extraordinary meaning it conveys transcends Marcia Khoza’s story and enters the realm of the human universe. The statement brings into focus the emergent possibilities that are at the heart of these dialogic processes of restorative justice. In societies emerging from violent conflict, like South Africa, where victims, perpetrators, bystanders and beneficiaries of oppressive regimes live in the same country, and sometimes as neighbours, creating the space for such dialogue is an imperative.

As a metaphor, the notion of “breathing the same air” challenges the very concept of Otherness in the victim-perpetrator dialectic. In considering encounters between survivors and perpetrators of gross human rights violations, what is perhaps necessary is shifting the lens from a focus on forgiveness and reconciliation (concepts that imply a goal) to “experience” (complicated, enigmatic, muddy, elusive, and unpredictable), because I think that much of what happens in these encounters remains implicit, and the word forgiveness falls short of adequately capturing this complexity.

### **Empathic Repair and the Spirit of Ubuntu**

**The need to build a world in which the Other matters is at the heart of my exploration in this paper. The trauma induced by years of violence need not lead to repetition of violence, where victims and their descendants become perpetrators of new forms of violence that play out in endless cycles of repetition. The pattern can be broken, the violence transformed and the trauma transcended. The work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of South Africa reminds us that while it may not be possible to erase traumatic memory – “closure” after such violence and injustice is not possible – trauma’s power of repetition can be broken.**

**In the aftermath of crimes against humanity, individuals and communities of survivors, and perpetrators who dare to face their shame and their guilt, and transcend it, are searching for ways of being human, for reconnection to their sense of agency, which is vital for a sense of being**

human. Perhaps a word that best captures what is needed is not forgiveness, but rather empathic repair. The notion of “empathic repair,” points toward not only one’s healing, but also one’s responsibility to participate in the building of a society in which people could come together and be fellow human beings – “to touch the other, to feel the other” – sharing in the vision of a more humane society.<sup>38</sup> The TRC, the Rwandan gacaca process, and similar restorative justice processes – all are strategies established to create a space for testimony, a space for confrontation and listening, for moral reflection and for initiating the difficult process of healing.

These sites of testimony, of mutual recognition and shared experience, provide points of identification, entryways into the experience of others, which enable comparison across critical registers of difference. Appeal to the familiar and the familial creates a context in which it is possible to engage empathetic questions, such as “How old was your daughter/son when... ?” By grounding themselves in what is shared, they create mutual intelligibility. The shared experience of loss, for example, cuts across the distinction of black or white, Tutsi or Hutu, Israeli or Palestinian. On the terrain of a horrific past, certain statements resonate deeply: “My son was eighteen years old when he was conscripted into the South African Defence Force during apartheid; he was brought back in a body bag and I wasn’t allowed to see him.” “My son was eighteen when he joined the anti-apartheid struggle. He was abducted, tortured, and killed by apartheid security police.”

**It is ironic that the same factors that can ignite and perpetuate animosity, fear, and hatred – the love for those killed or maimed by “the other” – might also suspend those negative sentiments. By providing a way into the experience of the “enemy,” love and loss may provide a way out of violence. Ultimately, love and loss are what is common and thus in a sense is shared. Love and loss enable healing that opens new possibilities in the aftermath of violence.**

At the centre of this “love” is *ubuntu* – a deep sense of caring for the other that is embedded in most traditional African societies (see next two paragraphs for description of *ubuntu*). The concept of *ubuntu* is an ethic based on the understanding that one’s subjectivity is inextricably intertwined with that of others in one’s community. From the perspective of *ubuntu*, all people are valued as part of the human community and worthy of being so recognized. This entails not blind acceptance of others, no matter what they do, but rather an orientation of openness to others and a reciprocal caring that fosters a sense of solidarity. *Ubuntu* is often associated with the concept of self “I am because we are,” which stands in contrast to the Cartesian “I think, therefore I am.” While recognizing the role of the individual, *ubuntu* values a sense of solidarity with others – the individual always in relation – rather than individual autonomy.

It seems to me, however, that the meaning of *ubuntu* is best captured in the Xhosa expression *Umntu ngumntu ngabanye abantu*. Literally translated, this means, “A person is a person through being witnessed by, and engaging in reciprocal witnessing of other persons,” or “A person becomes a human being through the multiplicity of

relationships with others.” The meaning conveyed by the expression is twofold. First, subjectivity depends on being witnessed; the richness of subjectivity flows from interconnectedness with the wider community, and from the reciprocal caring and complementarity of human relationships. Second, the phrase conveys the kind of reciprocity that calls on people to be ethical subjects. Mutual recognition is fundamental to being a fellow human being, a relational subject in the context of community. A person with *ubuntu* “is open and available to others, is affirming to others. . . . My humanity caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours”.

These are precisely the ideas that were embodied in the TRC, which was nothing less than an effort to imbue the realms of law, justice and politics with a relational ethics that recognised the humanity of victims and perpetrators alike, “for the sake of a transformed conception of politics and society.

My sense is that how this relational ethics might be applied to an understanding of processes that lead to the emergence of empathy in encounters between victims and perpetrators, is that it is at the transcendence of vengefulness, where empathy, remorse and recognition of the Other as fellow human being are rendered possible albeit not inevitable.

Let me then end with the quote I referred to from Nelson Mandela:

No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than

its opposite Morality begins when trauma is transcended; when the desire for vengeance is arrested. This goal can be attained through the face-to-face encounter between former enemies, and through dialogue. Managed carefully, this kind of dialogue can help victims, perpetrators and the descendants of these groups to take first steps into the light of hopefulness – hope, not as an abstract concept, but as a moment imbued with the real possibility of deepening a sense of acknowledgement, understanding and respect for the Other’s pain and suffering in the pasts, and together participate in living reconciliation.

**The development of THE capacity for EMPATHY is, IN MY VIEW,  
AN urgent need of our HISTORICAL MOMENT.**