

The healing of memories

an interview with
Fr. Michael Lapsley¹

Fr Michael Lapsley was born in New Zealand and trained as a priest in Australia before moving to South Africa. He was expelled from South Africa and went on to become an ANC chaplain while living in both Lesotho and Zimbabwe. In 1990, while in Zimbabwe, he opened a letter bomb and lost both his hands and one eye in the subsequent explosion. He now lives and works in Capetown as the Director of the Institute for the Healing of Memories. The following interview took place in Capetown. Cheryl White, Jane Speedy & David Denborough were the interviewers.

Your work with the Institute for the Healing of Memories seems to offer an example to other nations in relation to ways of coming to terms with the ongoing effects of past events.. Can you say a little bit about how you have come to be doing this work?

For those outside South Africa to understand the work that we are now doing in relation to the Healing of Memories, I think it is important to consider what life was like in this country during the apartheid years. I think it is relevant to ask 'If I had been born white in South Africa, what would I have done?' And equally, 'if I had been born black in South Africa, what would I have done?'. During the apartheid years, to be a decent human being in South Africa required heroism, and most of us are not heroes. When I look back, the situation often reminds me of the Brecht quote: 'Woe is the land that has no heroes, nay woe is the land that needs heroes'.

The apartheid system required heroism to resist it, the only decent thing to do was to resist, and yet most of us are not heroes. And so, when apartheid was finally overthrown, it was hardly surprising that so many of us, both black and

white, struggled to find ways of understanding how we acted towards others and how others acted towards us during those years.

Over the last eight years we have been offering healing of memories workshops throughout every part of South Africa and there's one issue which is brought to the table by the participants more than any other, and that is the issue of forgiveness. What is forgiveness? How do you do it? Is it possible? Should we forgive? Can I forgive myself for what I did or did not do during those years? We are a nation still trying to come to terms with all of these questions. We are a nation trying to heal our individual and collective memories.

As you know, I came to this work after being a chaplain for the ANC and after losing my hands through a letter-bomb. Within the work that I now do, having no hands can almost be my greatest asset as no-one can say to me 'but you haven't suffered'. The visibility of my personal suffering can make possible conversations that otherwise would never take place. It is as if there is a community of suffering that at times can transcend other differences. I work within many different cultural and

racial communities here in South Africa and, due to the permanent injuries I sustained, me being a white man is not a primary issue. It's the fact that I have visibly suffered which frees others to share how they too have suffered – even if their suffering is invisible. In a sense, a major physical disability can be a sign to the rest of the human family of our collective frailty. In the case of South Africa my physical presence can be a reminder of the legacies of the past and the need for us to come together to find healing in relation to our memories.

Can we ask you more about memory? It seems that South Africa is a country that is talking about memory differently than any other. Whether in bookshops, museums or even the name of your institute there seems to be a way of talking about honouring memory or thinking about memory here that is very different than other places. We'd like to ask you why you think this is and what it is making possible ...

As a country, as a people, we decided we couldn't take the historical option of forgetting and forgiving. Nor was it realistic to opt for Nuremberg process in which all those who had perpetrated great wrongs were brought to trial. Instead, as a country we are taking the option to remember and to heal. And I think that in some ways this decision, this commitment, has captured the imagination of the world.

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission by its very existence challenged countries around the world to come up with their own ways of dealing with their country's past. There are important parallels between the experience of people in South Africa and people in the United States, in Australia, in Canada, in New Zealand, in the sense that all these countries have indigenous minorities as a consequence of colonialism and racism. There's an interlinking of issues that we share. This is a time in the world of confronting the genocidal effects of colonialism and racism. This confrontation is happening during our generation, our time on earth. I think it calls us to be part of acknowledging the truth of what happened, and to find ways to heal the memories and to create something different for future generations.

There is much about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and our commitment to memory in this country that is worthy of celebration. There is, however, also a key element of our process that has stalled. This is in relation to reparations. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission

recommended the distribution of reparation payments to victims of apartheid and this has not occurred. Accordingly, thousands of victims have become embittered and cynical and in this way a kind of moral tragedy is unfolding. It is a tragedy that could still be redeemed to some degree if the state was to act, and act decisively. But at present it seems the Government is prioritising other commitments, including major military purchases, over reparations and I think this is a terrible mistake.

Despite this, throughout the country there are extraordinary signs of healing and reconciliation. The generosity of spirit in the land is at times very moving. I think it's fair to say that in South Africa most black people know they were damaged by apartheid and that processes of healing are required. I'm not sure that most white people know that they were damaged and also need to seek and play a part in healing, but there is no doubt that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission helped considerably in bringing to light the effects of apartheid on individuals, families and communities and the need to remember and to heal.

Can you say a little about how you see memory as linked to healing?

There are, of course, many forms of memory, some of which are constructive, some of which are destructive and some of which are redemptive. In the work that we do in our workshops we are interested in the healing of memories through story-telling. We try to create a context in which a group of people, all of whom lived through the same era in South Africa, can share some of the stories of their experience of those times. This is different than individual therapy as everybody has a story to tell, including me and any other facilitator.

We work hard to make it possible for these stories to be told and heard in ways that transcend the extraordinary barriers that have been placed between people in this country for so long. There have been very few opportunities for people to tell and witness each others' stories and that is what Healing of Memories Workshops are all about.

This involves creating a spiritual space where we can begin to look at our lives. One of the places where we begin is to look at that which is destructive in our lives and ways of changing our relationship with this. Often this involves discussions about 'hatred' or legacies of 'bitterness', the effects these bring to people's lives and ways of altering this.

We also look to that which is redemptive in the past and how this can be carried forward. We talk about the certain qualities that people have demonstrated in the past, such as commitment and courage. We share stories about these and discuss how they might be carried on into the future.

A part of this process is to try to invite people into a different sense of time. Many people who have experienced trauma feel as if they are prisoners of a particular moment in history and they've never had the opportunity to have this acknowledged. We create the opportunities to explore the effects of these particular moments in time. We do so in ways that link these events to the past, the present and the future so that people can be freed from that sense of being captured in a single moment.

Throughout these workshops we are involved in story-telling, and often the stories that people wish to tell involve journeys of forgiveness. These are not stories about glib, cheap and easy forgiveness, but about journeys of forgiveness that are often costly, painful and difficult. They are stories of struggle – both with others and themselves.

Can you say a little more about your understandings about forgiveness?

My own personal experience in relation to forgiveness has been very interesting. Often when I've presented about my life story and journey, at the end of the presentation someone will stand up and say 'you're the most extraordinary example of forgiveness I've ever seen', or words to that effect. Now, what's interesting is that in my presentations I never mention the word 'forgiveness'.

While I may be clear that I'm not full of hatred and bitterness, and that I don't want to spend my life focusing on what I cannot now do, forgiveness is not yet even on the table for me. In my case, I lost my hands due to a letter-bomb. I know that this letter-bomb was sent by the proponents of apartheid, but no individual has ever claimed responsibility. No-one has said 'I did it'. Without someone acknowledging responsibility, I cannot even consider whether forgiveness is something I can or cannot grant.

Of course, this could change at anytime. Perhaps when I get home this evening someone will ring my doorbell and when I meet them at the door they will say 'I'm the one who sent you the letter-bomb and I have come to seek your forgiveness. Will you forgive me?'. If this occurred, I think my first response would be to ask some questions of my own,

the first being, 'do you still make letter-bombs?'. And if the person concerned said 'no, no, actually I work at the local hospital', then perhaps I'd respond by saying, 'Yes, of course I forgive you. I would prefer that you spend the next 15 years working at that hospital rather than locked up in prison, because I believe in restorative justice rather than retributive justice'. Perhaps over tea I might also say 'While of course I've forgiven you, you can't give me back my hands. They've gone forever and I will need to employ somebody to assist me for the rest of my life. Of course, you will now help pay for that person.' And, you see, this would be a part of reparation and restitution. These are the sorts of reciprocal acts that become possible as part of a journey of forgiveness. And these are the sorts of stories that are shared at the Healing of Memories Workshops. They are not easy, glib or cheap stories. Journeys of forgiveness are costly, painful and difficult. At the same time they often involve God's grace. Journeys of forgiveness require a generosity of spirit and this, to me, is what is often meant by grace.

As white people from Australia and England, we are very much in the midst of trying to come to terms with the ongoing effects of the history of the lands in which we live. For white people living in South Africa, the work that you are doing must offer a chance to come together and to talk about these issues and to find some way to play a part in redressing history and contributing to healing. Can we ask you about the sort of responses that white South Africans have to the work which you are doing, and to you as a person?

Well I think there is an ambivalence. For those white people who want to say 'we never knew' what was happening in this country, then people like me are a problem, because we suggest that this may not be quite the case. I am at times a reminder to them of the truth – that we did know what was occurring, that there was a choice, and that there were costs to the choices we made. My physical presence acts as a constant uncomfortable reminder of all of this and I believe this is shaming for some people. My very existence is problematic – which I guess is why the letter-bomb was sent in the first place. At the same time, others seem to feel a sense of identification and perhaps my life can be a source of connection and hopefulness. It is a strange combination.

But this is simply representative of the South African situation. There were those of us who were white who joined with the millions of black South Africans to be a part

of the struggle *against* apartheid. And there were those black South Africans who were co-opted by and fought *for* the apartheid regime. Though the numbers of whites who fought apartheid and the numbers of blacks who supported apartheid may not have been large, the existence of both groups proclaimed 'in the end, it's the system'. If every white South African had supported apartheid, and if every black South African had opposed it, then I believe we would have had a race war in this land. People could have justified that goodness and badness were tied to pigmentation. But once you have people who cross in either direction, it becomes possible to look more broadly and to say 'No, we're talking about a system here' – a sophisticated system of oppression in which some people choose to participate and others choose to resist. Of course the real effects of this system were very different depending upon the colour of one's skin, and there were many more blacks than whites who resisted.

Still, as a white person, I think it is important to acknowledge that in every generation in South Africa there were some whites who didn't just talk about the struggle but who joined it, who suffered, who went to prison, who were shot, who were tortured. They were a small number, but they were there and all South Africans knew this. They died for the future of South Africa just as thousands upon thousands of black South Africans died for their people and for this country. And this meant that when white people like myself joined the ANC, black South Africans didn't look at the colour of our skin, they looked at our actions.

Of those who were involved in the struggle against apartheid, even those who have suffered as a consequence of their resistance, many still ask themselves, 'Why did I not do more?'. As I said at the beginning of this interview, to be a decent human being during the apartheid years required heroism whether you were white or black. Most of us are not heroes. But all of us can play a part in the healing of memories.

Note

1. Fr Michael Lapsley can be contacted c/o The Institute for Healing of Memories at email: healing@mindspring.co.za
Tel: (27) 21-696-42230/4231 Fax: (27) 21-697-4773

*Of those who were involved
in the struggle against apartheid,
even those who have suffered
as a consequence of their resistance,
many still ask themselves,
'Why did I not do more?'
To be a decent human being
during the apartheid years
required heroism
whether you were white or black.
Most of us are not heroes.
But all of us can play a part
in the healing of memories.*