

Fall Convocation 2008 Greenfield Group
Forgiveness and Reconciliation:
Nations, Communities and Congregations
A Dialogue paper between
Nannene Gowdy and Susan Suchocki Brown

Nannene, when we talked about doing this dialogical paper with the working title: *Reconciliation and Forgiveness: A Global Perspective*, I knew it would be thought provoking however I had no idea that it would involve such heady and deep concepts. Concepts such as justice, hope, redemption, forgiveness, amnesty, guilt, vengeance, truth, covenant, healing, transformation, repentance, sin, grace, atonement, to name just a few. Heck when we first started to talk about this I could not even remember if reconciliation was spelled with one l or 2 l's. However, I did like that it give us the opportunity to dialogue like we do when we are driving somewhere together and talking about those topics that used to engage us in divinity school; a way to keep our minds sharp without boring our parishioners and friends as we engage in some heavy duty topics. So are you ready to dig in? Because we are not going to be able to dialogue without some in-depth digging into those concepts and without clarifying some of those terms and discussing how they influence society.

I have become aware through the reading I did though that I am not what you would call a Christian. But that the culture that we are a

part of is both deeply and subtly influenced by Christianity, so much so as to make it difficult to do an adequate critique of many of the concepts surrounding reconciliation without going back to revisit those Christian concepts. A real issue for me though is that we live in a world that is more complex than Christian focused. Thus, reading Schreiter's book was both frustrating and informative. On page, 55 he writes "the abused body of Christ, both beaten and crucified, and then exposed on the cross, becomes the vehicle of reconciliation for those who have had their own bodies abused." ¹

So, this is supposed to help- I'm abused, Jesus was too, so this is okay? And, through some sort of vicarious atonement brought on by the suffering Jesus endured, my suffering is redeemed? I could go on even more about his view "that reconciliation is indeed the work of God, to which we are invited." ² What of human agency and the desire to be in right relationship with others is this something that only comes from God. I am having a hard time here and I would guess that a Humanist, atheist, would too. I suspect the book will be one that our Greenfield Group colleagues will talk about either because they agreed or disagreed with his concepts.

Anyway, I am trying to find concepts from his book to learn and understand this huge topic. It was illuminating and helpful when he wrote in the final chapter of the power of the church to offer a ministry

¹ Schreiter, Robert J. Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order. Mary Knoll, New York. Orbis Books. 1992

² Schreiter, P 59

of reconciliation – by offering rituals, by providing social analysis, by putting forth political strategies, and helping people build a faith and spirituality that deals with worldly reality. Because most of his approach was Christo-centric it did not speak to me and it sure brought home my first point that retranslation of the Christian message is something that I engage in very frequently. So one of the questions I wondered about is what rituals can we non Christian UU's engage in a church that will foster reconciliation and forgiveness? For sure, I liked his discussions about narrative theology and about memorial services. He reminded me that whenever I conduct a memorial service I always say that whenever and wherever people gather to remember and pay respects to one who has died that place is sacred. In spite of all my arguments with Schreiter's book it drove home the point that reconciliation is a sacred concept.

Susan, I agree that reconciliation is a sacred concept. It is a process that calls forth the best that is in us. But the Christian ministry of reconciliation doesn't speak to me either, as I am sure it doesn't speak to many peoples around the world.

In taking on the topic, I had hoped, naively, that THE answer would be uncovered. Silly me. I should have known better, but I can hope. I am glad that the Christian ministry of reconciliation worked for South Africa, but I don't think it is a model that can be used universally. I had hoped that Rupert Ross' book, Returning to the Teachings, would be a non-Christian method that could be used with

everyone, but again I was disappointed. It is hard to see how aboriginal justice, as he presents it, could be used outside of a small, homogeneous group. In our reading, did you see a method that could be used widely, or is each method destined to be site specific?

Nannene, I think what you might be asking us to do here is to get into the concept of restorative justice. I have a colleague who has been working with the Latino population, the schools and the police on crime reduction and gang affiliation. They have been attempting to find a way to get the youth back into right relationship with the community after they have had a brush with the law. So far using the sacred circle method such as Ross' book outlined has been surprisingly effective in building bridges between the Latino youth and the police. Crime levels have dropped and the youth are staying in school. But you are right, it is a homogenous group. I think maybe that each situation might be site specific. Yet I do think there are some common methods or do I want to say steps and themes? Let's come back to them later though because you have led me to think of the larger concepts of justice including reparation, restitution, revenge and vengeance.

Christian Century magazine had a short article in the August 2008 issue about The Parent's Circle Family Forum. This group has brought together more than 1000 Israelis and almost 5,000 Palestinians who have lost children in the conflict. One woman named Robie Damelin, who had had a son killed, said that telling her

story and hearing the story from those on the other side helped her deal with her own grief and to reexamine her country's actions.

I think she is saying that for reconciliation to occur the victim and the perpetrator must hear one another, must enter into some sort of relationship. Pretty noble ideals aren't these? The perpetrator must tell some truth, must answer some questions. But, Nannene what constitutes "the truth?"

I thought it was interesting that in his book Tutu was clear that there were many different versions of the truth. If we remove THE from truth and substitute A, I think there is more latitude for accepting what a person says happened.

I assume, Nannene, you are saying that it helps both the victim and the perpetrator to speak their truth? The victim to speak and tell how the incident has affected them and it gives the perpetrator an opportunity to what - confess, ask for forgiveness, cleanse their soul, or just get it off their chest even if they don't assume any responsibility for their actions?

In the readings I learned that most of the fact finding commissions survive and succeed not because they were after the truth or even striving for individual forgiveness, which was often a side benefit. The primary goal seems to be the return to some sort of "normalcy" for that nation and its people. Often the goal is to usher in a new government or governmental structure while establishing the

truth, as much as is possible, often by granting amnesty. An assumption is that by granting amnesty information that would never surface in trials comes forward because of the veil of protection that amnesty provides the perpetrators. In fact, amnesty is often granted even before the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions get started, such as in Chile. Supposedly granting amnesty before hearing testimony, which is much different than the court/litigation motivated hearings our justice system uses, has the advantage of allowing the perpetrator to tell the truth without fear of self implication. However, it is also pointed out that for many granting them amnesty prior to testimony does not lead to accountability and responsibility. A question I have is; can forgiveness come about without knowing the truth or having someone own responsibility for the actions that lead to loss of life, property and physical, spiritual, emotional trauma?

I think it can. How else can a person reach forgiveness with a person who has died before reconciliation can take place? It is important, however, to remember that in South Africa, just because a person appeared before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; it wasn't automatic that they would be forgiven, just that they wouldn't be prosecuted. Some people, even when given an opportunity to unburden themselves, are unable to face their own truths. Or they hold onto their atrocity as a form of self-punishment. This is certainly an example of why the perpetrator shouldn't decide their own punishment.

I got a lot out of reading Amstutz's book; he had a great chapter about Northern Ireland. I was intrigued with the story of how peace was achieved there. One of the interesting pieces of information that he shared is about Truth Commissions. Normally he emphasized the need for truth telling and accountability in the pursuit of political reconciliation but he did not think this was the path to take in Northern Ireland. He wrote, "... when distrust and enmity are deep and pervasive, the pursuit of truth not only may be impossible but may impede the process of political healing."³ In other words, memory and history were so deeply a part of the problem that to attempt to hear and speak truths would have "intensified political rivalries and disputes."⁴ Instead the Good Friday Agreement opted to focus on peace making, and building a new governmental/political structure that involved all parties.⁵ So much for truth telling as a straight path

³ Amstutz, Mark. The Healing of Nations. p 178

⁴ Amstutz. p 91

⁵ *The Report of the Healing Through Remembering Project*, June 2002.

Foreword

Healing Through Remembering has sought to identify and to document possible mechanisms and realisable options for how remembering should occur so that healing can take place for all people affected by the conflict in and about Northern Ireland. The project was grounded in a search for answers to the question "How should we remember the events connected with the conflict in and about Northern Ireland so as to individually and collectively contribute to the healing of the wounds of our society?"

Our work has been premised on the view that remembering is an important part of social and

psychological healing in the context of conflict. It recognizes that as individuals and communities we are and live out our histories—what we remember is what we are. At the same time, we need to ground this in a genuine appreciation of the fact that addressing our conflicted past is a long-term, complex and difficult task. We need to be aware of what remembering can and cannot deliver. That said, remembering is inevitable. For individuals and groups affected by the conflict forgetting the past is not an option, the wounds of the past will simply not heal by ignoring them. The challenge for us therefore as individuals and as a society is not about the need to remember, but rather how to find creative ways of remembering that enable us to go forward as a society. While remembering and attempting to deal with the past can be, and are, often divisive, they remain an important part of reconciliation.

Context

The work of the project has been energized and inspired by the many initiatives within society. There is hope and encouragement in the work of communities as they too come to terms with their histories. Paradoxically, the greatest possibilities for moving beyond our histories reside within our differences. In a peaceful society our difference and diversity should be our strength. This does not mean that we can simply leave the past behind, but rather we need to find ways to acknowledge difference and build on it. In so doing we need to develop our own locally owned solutions and ways to remember. No model can be imported from the outside, nor would it be advisable—we need to find our own unique ways of dealing with the past.

Project Work

It has been my privilege to be a member of the Project Board, to witness the efforts, commitment and sincerity of each and every member as we struggled to understand ourselves, and our own histories, while pursuing the work of the project. The membership reflects a broad spectrum of views. While the goal of the project provided a justification for coming together, at the outset there was little else to hold us together. There was no history of trust, rather a legacy of memories and experiences that—as for the rest of our society—has tended to alienate us from one another. We have spent many hours together over the past 18 months—itsself a source of inspiration. Through the very process of joint working, our disparate group gradually bonded, achieving a level of trust and commitment that has made the project possible. It has demonstrated that through engaging together a meeting of minds is possible— discovery of shared histories, acceptance of difference and valuing of that difference.

to reconciliation, though I guess I err more on the side of truth telling than not. I mean would South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission have succeeded without truth telling?

But I digressed again, and what I really wonder about is -once the truth is told what constitutes justice? Is it that which Ross writes about of telling the story while being a part of the sacred circle and being held in the community instead of being ostracized? In his restorative model justice is served because peace is returned to the community and the victim and the perpetrator have each had the opportunity to speak and listen.

But what about restitution and reparation and our tendency toward revenge and a desire for retribution, which is a process of justice that we are led to believe is impersonal because it is carried out by institutions. Martha Minnow writes, "Retribution can be understood as vengeance curbed by intervention of someone other than the victim and by principles of proportionality and individual rights".⁶ "Vengeance", she says "is the impulse to retaliate".⁷ Though Minnow points out the fascinating fact that the danger in vengeance is that it leads people to seek to exact more than is equal to the act. It leads she says to "a downward spiral of violence, or unquenchable desire that traps people in cycles of revenge, recrimination, and escalation."⁸

⁶ Minnow, Martha. Between Vengeance and Forgiveness. Boston, Beacon Press. 1998, p 12

⁷ Minnow p 10

⁸ ibid

So who gets to determine the moral ethical principles which determine proportionality? Is it based simply on the need to provide for an orderly society with provision for the rights of individuals? Is there something more important such as the common good and a unified nation? What is the appropriate moral ethical response to Apartheid, to the Holocaust, to genocide?

Excellent question! Jews have been clear that they think only those directly affected by the Holocaust have the right to forgive or even call for forgiveness. But in South Africa, some blacks who opposed the commission later felt it had promoted some healing. Too bad we didn't know to try this process in Germany.

I would like to know more about the Jewish concept of forgiveness? It is interesting that only those directly affected can forgive how can a community find reconciliation then?

Anyway you bring up the process in Germany and we know the Nuremburg Trials didn't work in part because they were based on a system of law which had no precedents. Would it have been different if there was an International Military Tribunal? What difference would that make now?

Probably none as I suspect the "international" tribunal would be made up of judges from the Allies, and the military aspect would

mean justification for the winners, as in Nuremburg, instead of reconciliation.

I remember clearly when dealing with the murder of my sister and the conversations with family members and others about the proper punishment for her murderer. The conversations focused around their need to hear me and my family say that I wanted her murderer to have his eyes plucked out of his head, to have his hands cut off and to have him tied and stabbed twice as many times as she was. None of this was helpful in healing from the profound pain and loss. I have always been opposed to the death penalty and even after living through this personal experience I know that the death penalty is not the way to reconciliation and healing. I also witnessed that even when those who thought seeing those who harmed them get hurt in return they did not find that this retaliation brought them a sense of relief or closure. So some questions I found myself wrestling with are; what is it about human nature that leads to the escalation of violence through vengeance under the guise of seeking justice? Does the fantasy of getting relief through revenge bring back some sense of power and control to the traumatized person? For we both know that part of the way to forgiveness is to regain semblance of control, to not feel powerless or victimized.

I think we are hard wired to get even with those who have hurt us. Even on the small level of a verbal insult, we can spend hours

hashing over the remark, making up snappy come backs that would sting more than the remark that hurt us. The bigger the hurt has been, the bigger some people feel that the pay back needs to be. Revenge is about power - or the false assumption that we can regain it in that situation. The very wise realize that revenge doesn't make us feel better - some people learn wisdom from the experience of exacting revenge and still feeling angry/sad/hopeless, while some people think these feelings just mean that they haven't gotten enough revenge.

How then do we bring together personal reconciliation, civic reconciliation and communal reconciliation? Mark Amstutz, in The Healing of Nations, writes that “communities, like individuals, have the capacity to both grant and receive forgiveness. The ethic of political forgiveness is problematic, however, not only because the concept is elusive and difficult ... but also because it changes individual’s claims to corrective justice”. I guess I am getting around to answering your earlier question, “Did you see a method that could be used widely, or is each method destined to be site specific?” I believe I am saying that the process to reconciliation is unique to each situation.

I think of Ireland who has had an incredibly long history of fighting. When reading the various historical accounts and especially the report from ‘The Report of Healing Through Remembering Project, June 2002’, I was amazed at the numerous accords, truces

that have been proposed. Each one broke down at various points because of the complexity of the culture, religion and governmental influence or lack of. Yet the most recent peace proposal worked because it acknowledged that there is not one plan, not one party, not one group that is leading the vision toward a new government. This is in such contrast to the vision that South Africa had with a stated goal of promoting national unity and reconciliation.

Yet, that sounds a bit like the realization in South Africa that there is no ONE truth. Perhaps the answer is that people have to come to the point, as they did in South Africa and Ireland, where they are willing to give up sole possession of THE truth and accept that other people have other truths. You see this process happening in the aboriginal community, too, as victims hear about the realities of those who have abused them. It is amazing how people can connect with "the other" once there is a face and a story to attach to that other. How else do we account for the election of Barak Obama in this racist country?

There is a little known story about South Africa that bears telling. Nelson Mandela knew that the Commission alone would not bring his country together. Improbably, Mandela chose rugby as the uniting vehicle. Rugby was a religion to Afrikaners. Blacks thought it was "the brutish, alien pastime of a brutish, alien people."⁹ The anti-

⁹ Carlini, John, Playing the Enemy: Nelson Mandela and the Game That Made a Nation, Penguin Press, 2008

apartheid movement had caused a global boycott the Springboks, the South African rugby team. Both sides had little respect for the other.

Mandela was elected in 1994 and agreed to host the rugby world cup the following year. In gratitude for being able to play on the world stage once more, the 26 all-white members of the Springboks learned to sing Nkosi Sikelele iAfrika, the anti-apartheid national anthem. Mandela did such a good job promoting the rugby team that blacks cheered team members on the street by name. And when Mandela walked into the stadium, the nearly all-white crowd chanted Nel-son! Nel-son! Nel-son! The nation was united behind a sports team. It almost makes me believe there is a viable reason for organized sports. But then I remember the Yankees Suck bumper stickers.

That is a great story. I would cheer just to be in the presence of Nelson Mandela or Tutu, wouldn't you? Not so sure about cheering for rugby though. You mention the Yankee bumper stickers, there is something about us that so loves to find a target isn't there?

Anyway I would like to look at the process and the requisite pre-conditions that Mark Amstutz outlines for political forgiveness to occur. In case you can't tell, I got a lot out of his book and if I had read it first I would have recommended it for our required reading. He says that first there has to be a consensus that wrongdoing has occurred, and then a decision is made to establish truth commissions

or to hold trials, tribunals or hearings. I would like us to come back at some point and address a question that keeps popping up for me – who gets to call the commissions, the tribunals, the hearings?

But once the process is set and decided upon there has to be the admission of wrongdoing. When reading Tutu's book, I was surprised to learn that there was opposition to establishing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Call me naïve but it seemed clear to me that there was a whole lot of wrong doing that needed to be brought out into the open to heal the wounds of the country and the people so that a new nation could be built. Amstutz calls this part of the process or precondition the step of accountability and truth telling.

Yet as you pointed out even with amnesty being granted the whole truth was not always forthcoming. Maybe that is because he thinks the next step in the process is that someone needs to express remorse. It was great to see it in writing, though I knew from my own experiences, that sometimes just providing a place for the victim to tell their story and be heard without interruption and for someone to acknowledge that a great wrong was done is a huge step in the healing process. This is an apology for doing wrong.

Question, does an apology have to come directly from the perpetrator to the victim or can an apology also come from those chosen to represent a system that has allowed others to commit acts of horror?

Interesting. Never one to see justice as clear cut and easy, I'd say it depends. If I had been a victim of the holocaust, I would be prefer an apology from those who planned the extermination before hearing one from the prison guards who carried it out. But as the victim of a rape, I want to hear from the rapist, not some promoter of female domination. Again we are confronted with the fact that there is no one answer or that reconciliation must occur at multiple levels.

Maybe this is how we forgive those who have died even though we have not reconciled with them. Someone somehow hears our story, acknowledges that it was a wrong against us and this solidarity paves a way. What do you think?

Having someone else affirm your truth always helps. My mother never apologized for her mental and physical abuse of me as a child, but many other people have told me I did not deserve that treatment. That has helped me see her abuse as her problem, and to forgive her for being a flawed person. My break through came when she told me that her father spanked her bare bottom with a wooden hair brush when she was sixteen. She parented the only way she knew. Violence does indeed breed violence. However, I can still get angry at the injustice of abusing a child.

Nannene you say that have you forgiven your mother but how about reconciliation, or have you developed a resigned acceptance of her failings and behaviors?

I know I am diverging again, but I am still struggling to come up with a good definition of reconciliation and any example we use reminds me how elusive that term is. Now I will get back to the process and steps that Amstutz has identified. He writes that the next steps are repentance, restitution, and reparation. Next he says there has to be an expression of compassion and empathy with the victims which can occur by letting the victim reclaim their voice and tell the stories that are embedded in their memory. However, the victim must tell the story without interruption and be in an environment that lets them recount the events as they perceive them in all the detail they need to go into. The trauma story which is so crucial for the victim to tell is denied in courts of law, in tribunals and in trials were the keystone to TRC and even effective in Ireland. It did have the potential to lead to healing for the victims and perhaps to reconciliation but it also opened old wounds, re-traumatized the victim in some instances and certainly affected those who heard the horror stories. There was more than one time that I wept when reading what the Commission members heard and saw. I think another wisdom teaching and model for others is to follow is that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established with three committees within its structure. I have a feeling that without these three distinct groups the process of reconciliation would not have occurred as

frequently as it did. The first committee, Committee on Human Rights Violations, was established to set up the procedures for testimony. They were concerned with where, and how, who, and what issues needed to be addressed so that the Commission could proceed and succeed. A second and separate committee was the Committee on Amnesty. Individuals wishing to apply for amnesty had up to twelve months once the testimonies started to apply, though sometimes they were granted amnesty prior to the victims testifying. Tutu did explain that this occasionally set up some strange and hurtful dynamics. The third committee was the Committee on Reparations and Rehabilitation. It was established last because it had to wait until the societal and communal needs were known such as what is needed in terms of offering long term counseling or treatment for those suffering from PTSD. This same committee also dealt with the requests from the victims such as providing for memorial or grave stones, monuments and generally offering healing after testimony had been given.

Having different committees on the Commission is a good example of why more than one approach needs to be used. We all have different talents and shouldn't try to do it all. On a small scale, those of us in the UU Trauma Response Ministry understand this. Some of us can deal with a crisis, some of us can support those on the front line with supply preaching, etc., and some of us can use talents such as book keeping, etc. to keep the organization going.

TRC of South Africa had a task to reestablish a baseline of right or wrong, to humanize the perpetrators and to obtain and disclose previously hidden information about what happened to whom, who gave orders and where the missing persons ended up. All this could help to bring closure to the nation. Did it bring about forgiveness and reconciliation sometimes yes and sometimes no?

Let me tell you about de Gruchy and the fascinating story he told about the use of art for offering a path toward reconciliation. John de Gruchy, is a theologian and author of the book, Reconciliation: Restoring Justice, he expressed a thought that helped me to begin to peel away the layers of cultural thinking that had previously informed my views of reconciliation and forgiveness. He says there is a process that must be taken in order to be engaged in the act of reconciliation “there is no such thing as reconciliation in the abstract. If and when it occurs, reconciliation always does so within a particular context and with regard to a particular set of interpersonal or social relations.” ¹⁰

An image that de Gruchy shared about the value of artistic works has stuck in my mind, I want to share it with you as it helped me to understand so much of what reconciliation is and a major piece that

¹⁰ de Gruchy, John. Reconciliation Restoring Justice. Minneapolis Minn. Fortress Press. 2002. p 159

we as ministers, theologians, healers, pastors must provide in order for forgiveness and reconciliation and justice to take place.

Oh, before I get to the art work he wrote about, let me tell you that we have to have some dialogue later on which is first - justice then reconciliation or reconciliation then justice. But Nannene I wrote this side bar just to frustrate you for I know that you are a more linear logical thinker than I and you will be pulling out your hair saying, “why did Susan go off on this tangent about justice first or peace then justice, when she was just talking about the value of artistic works to help frame the process?” I did it just because that is how my mind works, a jumble of sometimes disassociated thoughts and ideas that might come back together into coherence.

de Gruchy told about Sue Williamson, an artist, who wrote “By mediating through art the myriad images and information offered for public consumption... I try to give dispassionate readings and offer a focus of new opportunities for engagement. Art can provide a distance and a space for such considerations.”

This is the context for her art show, “Truth Games”.

de Gruchy explains a piece of her art, “One of the paintings is divided into three vertical panels. In the left hand and the right hand panel Williamson has captured the photographic images of a victim and of the perpetrator of the crime against the victim. They are looking, as it were, at each other face-to face but over or through the middle space. This space is filled with images of the crime committed. One painting shows Winnie Madikazela Mandela in the right hand

panel, the abducted and murdered young black activist Stompie Sepai in the middle and Stompie's mother in the left-hand panel. There are several wooden rails fixed across each painting. Each rail has a groove along which a narrow board can be drawn by the (outside) observer from one side of the picture to the other. A pertinent quotation from the TRC hearing is written on each board. So by moving the boards from one side to the other you have a sense of the conversation that is taking place over and about the person or event in the middle panel."

Nannene let me pause and make sure that you grasp how this art work works. I am going to attempt to explain what hit me so powerfully about the description of the art work and has given me a new understanding of one of the key sacred components that must be part of all reconciliation. "...by moving the boards from one side to the other you have a sense of the conversation... "How could one mother do such a thing?' Asks Stompie's mother. 'It was a horrible mistake', confesses Winnie Mandela." de Gruchy goes on to report that he is not sure if the two hear each other or not or even respond to each other or not, however "the observer is drawn into the center into the conversation, identifying with the victim on one hand and with the perpetrator on the other." ¹¹

¹¹ de Gruchy, 148-149

I find it interesting that the artist portrays a conversation between two women. I got to musing on the role of women in the process of reconciliation. In South America, the women held vigils in the plaza seeking answers about their "disappeared" loved ones until the government had to respond. In Ireland, Protestant and Catholic women marched together, demanding an end to the violence and peace talks began, and in the aboriginal community, the women, asking for a say in restoration of community, set up councils to hear both sides. Perhaps the women in a fractured community are the best place to start the reconciliation process.

Reminds me of something that MT Davila, an Ethics professor at Andover Newton said the other day in class, "injustice over a long period of time will lead to a revolt". And, didn't Tutu call for a march when F.W. deKlerk took office? I believe, or at least the author John Allen, who wrote Rabble- Rouser for Peace: The Authorized Biography of Desmond Tutu, believes that Tutu's action led to Nelson Mandela being freed from prison within months of the peaceful protests that then broke out all over the country.

What I found so powerful in the art work description is the overwhelming sense that in order for reconciliation to be possible both the victim and the perpetrator need to move. There must be a willingness to enter into relationship. This of course is the most terrifying thing for both parties. The victim has lost a tremendous amount. They may have lost spouses or children as in Chile, Ireland,

South America, Germany, South Africa. They may have lost land, property or their health. The idea of entering into any relationship with the perpetrator perhaps feels like another loss.

Also how about the shame, guilt from the perpetrator, where does one go with that? Seems overwhelming and remarkable that any reconciliation can occur at all.

However, Bishop Tutu in relaying his stories from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings told of being “moved by the resilience of the human spirit. People who by rights should have had every ounce of life and spirit knocked out of them refused to buckle under intense suffering and brutality and intimidation. People refused to give up on the hope of freedom, knowing that they were made for something better than the dehumanizing awfulness of injustice and oppression, refusing to be consumed by bitterness and hatred, willing to meet those who have violated their persons and their rights, willing to meet in a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation eager only to know the truth, to know the perpetrator so that they could forgive them.”¹²

The only explanation that I have for this is that perhaps there comes a time when it is more painful for the victim to continue to hold on to the acts done to them and their loved ones. And, by meeting the perpetrator and telling and hearing the story, which may include some facts or truth or provide some answers and maybe seeing some sign

¹² Tutu, Desmond. No Future Without Forgiveness. New York, NY. Doubleday. 1999, p 165

of humanness from the perpetrator then they will no longer have control over them. I have to say that Bishop Tutu is extremely optimistic about this. A couple of the writers tried to resolve this by putting forth the idea that the European Enlightenment has led to the rejection of the notion of original sin and a belief in the inherent goodness of humanity.

So Nannene, I have a problem here. I don't believe in original sin and even if I did I can't imagine original sin responsible for the Holocaust, Apartheid, the genocide in Rwanda, throwing bodies out of airplanes over the ocean, as they did in Argentina, the disappearance of thousands in Chile, the killing in the name of God in Ireland. Are we really a society that functions only by oppressing the "other"? Are we a sin sick people subject to the lure of power, prestige and mob thinking as in many of the military abuses and tortures that we would give up our humanity? Is there any humanity in evil systems and how do they get so big without intervention?

That is exactly the point of how they get so big. Good people don't intervene soon enough. It was hubris for the United States to hold the trials at Nuremburg when our own anti-Semitism encouraged support for Hitler, Chamberlain to appease Hitler, two boat loads of Jews to be turned away from the shores of the United States, etc. This type of inaction gets repeated through out history. Early intervention could head off massive injustices, but our inaction means

we have to resort to war to keep the injustice from spreading further out of control.

Are you suggesting that our Unitarian Universalist social justice lens and our propensity to address systems of evil and oppression need to be fine tuned so we can be more vocal and respond sooner? Is our search for justice, equity and compassion an area that we could expand on to bring a distinctly Unitarian Universalist model of reconciliation and healing about?

Speaking of compassion, can you imagine what level of compassion and surrender it must have taken for victim after victim to hear the perpetrator tell what they had done and then to be able to forgive them? I know I was struck by the little that the victims wanted in return- gravestones, money for burials, some truths to bring closure to a horrible past.

The fact that it took so little is what gave me hope that effecting reconciliation is do-able.

Do we have any other distinctive UU characteristics that can help bring forgiveness and reconciliation to a hurting world?

We certainly have the principles that support it. We also have a tradition of living out our faith. But do we have the will? I have always been impressed by the passage in Christian scripture which

says of the early Christians, "Behold how they love one another". That couldn't be said now. How was it lost? How can we find it again? We have more than enough examples - Gandhi, MLK, etc., - of visions of how the world could and should be. As the song says, "We don't need another hero". Few people would say they disagree with these examples of good visions that we already have. So what is keeping us - UU's included - from accepting the fact that continued strife is hurting perpetrators and victims, from seeking truth and reconciliation on a global level?

Are we back to the question of what is the nature of humanity? And, are we back to the most simple and most difficult concept of living, one my mother tried to teach me – to always put myself in the place of the other. But this is so difficult because conversations can break down so easily and it is so challenging to hear the others point of view, and it can be threatening and frightening if the other causes me to feel the least bit vulnerable and that I might not have control or worse I might have to give up some of my personal control or identity to them. Plus, if the other acts in ways that violate what has been established as ethical and social norms and I want to believe I would never do those things I can keep the other a lesser being and then not have to engage in the deeply spiritual work of reconciliation.

Do you agree or disagree?

We're back to the Golden Rule. And if any of us think that we're not capable of murder, we're delusional. Without realizing what we ourselves are capable of, without some glimmer of how evil can happen, we will always be unable to forgive.

Tutu said it well when he said that without forgiveness there could be no future for the nation of South Africa. Let us hope we can all learn something from a most successful foray out of turmoil into hope for a nation and its people.