

“The trouble with memory work: reflections on the Mandela Dialogues”
Chandre Gould

In 2016 the Nelson Mandela Foundation and the Global Leadership Academy of the German Development Agency (GIZ) held two six-day dialogues with memory workers from nine countries. This was the second series of meetings of this kind, the first having taken place in 2013 and 2014.

Behind the first series lay a discomfort with the growing orthodoxy that past human rights violations (in conflict or war or through oppressive governance) should be dealt with through formal mechanisms, such as truth commissions. The discomfort gave rise to a range of questions aimed at generating new thinking about **how** to do memory work that is liberatory. These questions included:

- How is memory work enabled outside of formal transitional justice interventions, both before and after such interventions?
- How does memory work, both inside and outside formal interventions, avoid adopting new meta-narratives and modes of knowledge construction which exclude voices perceived as compromised by the past?
- Is it possible, or even desirable, to tell the stories of those responsible for or complicit in acts of violation?
- How do we ensure that transitions are documented in ways which will enable future generations to interrogate processes which will have shaped them profoundly?
- How do we use evidence that exposes the culpability of oppressors without legitimising new forms of oppression?
- How do formal state-sponsored interventions relate to the networks and energies of civil society, community action and social media? How do official archives relate to new forms of collective and real-time online recording of (unchecked) facts through social media, Wikipedia, WikiLeaks etc.?
- How is the human right to forget respected in the work of memory?
- How are the often conflicting imperatives for collective and individual healing reconciled?

The second series drew from the first and continued the ‘how’ questions, but this time with a much narrower focus, asking: how do we create spaces safe enough for former enemies to engage one another (peacefully) in and how should we be doing memory work with new generations that did not directly experience the harms of the past?

As a participant and documenter of the first series, and a facilitator of the second, the experience has prompted me to a deeper questioning both of the kind of memory work I have been engaged in myself, and of the premises of these two series. Perhaps, I feel, we should not be asking ‘how?’ but return to the much earlier questions of why we do memory work.

The most pressing question for me at the end of the meetings of the second series of dialogues is: does reminding ourselves of atrocity make us more or less likely to act peacefully and altruistically in the future? I feel a strong need to return to questions about what we are trying to achieve when we draw attention to past harms, and how best we can do that.

On one hand there is a very strong, and simplistic, dogma that runs through much of the memory work done in our own country and elsewhere. That is: if we forget the harms of the past we are more likely to repeat the violations we have experienced.

The opening quote of the general report of the Colombian Historical Memory Group of the National Commission on Reparation and Reconciliation: *Basta Ya! Colombia: Memories of war and dignity*¹ are the words of Tzvetan Todorov: “Evil suffered should be inscribed in the collective memory to give the future another chance.” Here quite clearly is an injunction to remember suffering and evil – not only to remember, but to burn it into the collective memory. Forgetting, from this perspective, is to deny the future a chance. A chance at what, we are left to wonder. But the assumption is that this must refer to a chance for greater social justice, more peace and less harm.

Later in the report is a powerful quote from an inhabitant of Trujillo, Valle de Cauca, who says:

“If one does not speak, does not write and does not tell the stories, one forgets and little by little it gets covered by fear. People who saw the dead body begin to forget and are afraid to speak, so that we wind up carrying around a darkness that has lasted for years and that nobody talks about [...] And since nobody talks about what happened, nothing has happened. So, if nothing has happened, then we continue to live as if nothing has happened.”

Here we catch a glimpse of another reason to remember – if we don’t, if we cover our hurt with silence, we cannot heal. We cannot heal if we do not acknowledge and understand our pain. This is a concern that has been expressed clearly in the work of Sabine Bode, a German journalist who has been working to break the silence of the war children and grandchildren, the descendants of Nazi supporters. Sabine, who participated in the first Mandela Dialogues series, shows through sensitively told human stories how silence within families about past harms committed - particularly the families that carry the guilt of having not suffered, or having been members of the Nazi party or having been civil servants - leads to all manner of emotional ills in future generations:

“We talk about a time in Western Germany when research and education concentrated on victims and perpetrators of the Nazi regime, a process started in the seventies. To be concerned with the Germans as victims was no longer mainstream. Not a taboo but not welcomed. There were strong efforts for coming to terms with the past – leaving behind an era when most Germans assured ‘We did not know anything’ and ‘We were all victims’, no matter how strongly they had been involved in Hitler Germany.

¹ Historical Memory Group, *Basta Ya! Colombia: Memories of war and dignity*, General Report, National Commission on Reparation and Reconciliation, 2016. Available at <http://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/descargas/informes2016/basta-ya-ingles/BASTA-YA-ingles.pdf>, last accessed 25 November 2016.

But refusing guilt and shame did not end the case. The feelings changed over to the following generation. This assumed guilt was very common in Germany. The crucial burden of the war children was not the violence of war but the holocaust. Shame and the feeling of being guilty blocked the access to their own trauma and mental disorders. 90 % of persons I contacted did not want to reflect on the after-effect of war events. (from Sabine Bode's autobiography for the Mandela Dialogues)

So, if the intention behind memory work is to prevent past harms from being repeated and to encourage speaking and sharing so that experiences of the past are not silenced and hidden, the challenge is whether we can do this without creating new silences, solidifying false binaries (such as good and evil; victim and perpetrator) and thereby enabling righteous victims and so too the opportunity for new harms.

Another way of putting this could be to consider Lionel Trilling's statement that, "it is possible that the contemplation of cruelty will not make us more humane but cruel; that the reiteration of the badness of our spiritual condition will make us consent to it."² This is the shadow side of memory work, and I believe the dilemma that those of us who assume the mantle of memory work have to consider, especially when we propose to act on behalf of people identified as victims and who are unable to speak themselves. We need to ask whether the kind of remembering we need to do is a direct remembering of harmful deeds and heroic deeds. I have come to suspect not.

These questions came to the fore in a particular way during the dialogue process. The first six day meeting took place in Cape Town. Like many of the participants, I have had a close, personal and political relationship with events in my country over the past 25 years or more. Over this time much of my work has related to violence, placing attention where violence is happening; and always with a view to preventing more violence, reducing the intensity of violence and working towards justice for those affected by violence.

This kind of orientation requires of me a self-awareness that as much as I might abhor violence, I am also drawn to it. The place where violence is taking place often seems like the most important place to be. I am also compelled to understand what allows us as individuals, states and societies to engage in violence and to examine the links between our individual, personal experiences as children and growing adults, and the later use of violence in our private and collective lives.

The context of the Mandela Dialogues offered me new insights into how activists, in very different settings, experience the power of violence and the unconscious way in which it calls us, and may even bind us in addiction.

In Cape Town we had the opportunity to experience memory work first-hand through immersive experiences. There were two such experiences that differed in almost every respect. During the one, participants experienced the sadness and tragedy of a community destroyed and then moved into a powerful, difficult and polarised meeting with young people who are justifiably angry and demanding social change.

² Quoted in Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*, 2001, New York: WW Norton and Company: 7.

The second was a slower, gentle process of inter-generational, inter-cultural storytelling. The young people involved in this process had rejected the lifestyle of hard drinking and hard living of many of their peers – and for the young men this was a difficult and sometime dangerous choice because they were rejecting the masculinity championed by many of their peers. That is what they told us anyway. The older people had all endured terrible hardship and tragedy in their lives. Yet despite our apparent differences of privilege or the lack thereof - we were joined across countries, continents and generations by our shared humanity, by humour and by our stories. Those who took part in this experience came back feeling invigorated, inspired, having felt generosity, warmth, acceptance and love.

Yet, when we came together again as the larger group the collective discussions that followed from our experiences were focused on the first immersion. It felt as though speaking about the warmth and love we had experienced was out of place, it was drowned out by the urgency of anger and violence and the need to respond and engage with it. In short, a language of peace was silenced.

Silencing came up several times during our meeting. Sometimes very passionately and with overwhelming emotion. It seemed that for several of the people in the group the closeness to pain, anger and violence, in combination with a powerful empathy for those victimised by systems beyond their control, meant that they needed to find ways to create an ‘other’ within the group: ‘An other’ that could stand for those seen to be in opposition to themselves. The emotions that were expressed included anger, rejection and frustration.

This experience opened my eyes to how essentially (‘in essence’) violence can overwhelm, infiltrate and dominate. Also how easily it can distract us from anything else and transform our relationships and engagements with others.

To return then to the question that we started with - why do memory work? It would appear that within the very broad sphere that is termed memory work, especially the kind of memory work that takes place outside of the constraints of formal process (such as truth commissions), those drawn to continue the work of preventing forgetting, in the name of peace, are mostly themselves affected directly by the harms that have been experienced. We carry that trauma, whether directly or vicariously into our work. And unresolved, unrecognised, it seeps into our interactions with others in ways that can be harmful and may even inhibit our ability to imagine alternative futures. Taking care of ourselves, being aware of our own trauma and biases, is essential, I believe, to what may be a liberatory memory work.

I am challenged to re-imagine the kind of memory work I want to do. This memory work should prompt questioning, exploration and the telling of new stories. It should not allow for easy, false binaries but let in multiple voices and interpretations. In working with young generations it should inspire, encourage imagination and listen actively and with care to new experiences, stories, fears and dreams. It should be light and should encourage and enable connection, kindness and empathy and be the opposite of that which enabled past harms.

About the author:

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