

Narrating Our Healing - Perspectives on Working Through Trauma

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Chris N van der Merwe and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela

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The book, *Narrating Our Healing – Perspectives on Working Through Trauma* – offers a brief foray, 106 pages making up five chapters, into South Africa’s violent recent past which spawned a plethora of perpetrators and victims of gross human rights violations. The authors (Van der Merwe and Gododo-Madikizela) posit, in this context, that narration, the telling of stories, is essential for South Africa, as a nation, to heal itself.

Their position is that stories are not only told but also lived. That is true. But then one must immediately ask the question what is lived when the story is told: life itself or an imaginative or even imaginary reconstruction of life?

In their opening gambit, the authors put it that “Trauma defies language; it resists being communicated.” They invoke Primo Levi, who referring to the Holocaust, which he had survived, said “Our language lack words to express this offence”. Here one is reminded of Joseph Conrad’s apt admonition, “Words, as is well known, are the great foes of reality.” But the authors are more hopeful and argue that only through language (words) can form be culled from chaos and can the process of healing commence. The task at hand, of all and of this book, then, is to find ways to tell stories meaningfully. There is more to this process than the meaning Viktor Frankl seeks (in *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 1946), they argue. They see narrative as restoring (or providing) structure, imagining new possibilities (beyond hatred and anger), and as healing a divided society by moving from the specific to the universal.

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Chapter 3, “Searching for Closure: The Crying Voice”, anchors and indeed centres the book. Here the authors ask of the reader to listen with empathy to the “crying voice”, because, they assert, individual and national healing is everyone’s responsibility – an admirable if unrealistic request. They acknowledge that sometimes wounds do not heal, but state that the voice of the person in pain should not be stilled. It should be acknowledged, dealt with, and then put to cathartic uses. Specifically, this chapter concerns the pain brought by a lack of closure. Ernestina Simelane, a grieving mother, has not found her daughter Nokuthula who had disappeared during the heady days of 1980s South Africa. That her daughter’s body has not been found and returned is exacerbated by the uncertainty about her (daughter’s) role at that time – was she a freedom fighter or a collaborator? Trauma here, the authors assert, cannot, for the absence of certainty, can only with extreme difficulty be turned into narrative. This scenario speaks to a wider SA problematique – that much of what led to trauma was started by *impimpi* (informers) and collaborators. It was not always a clear cut case of white perpetrators and black victims. The layer in between, wherein is found the shady machinations of informers, has not been addressed yet. So for victims to find healing through narration, the story would have to be fleshed out. Some perpetrators must come forward still or must be asked by the victims to come clear. This leads us, albeit tangentially, to necklace murderers. If the national healing Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela clearly strive for were to take place, both the perpetrators of necklace murderers and victims, especially the latter, must emerge from under the crushing weight of political deference and correctness. These aspects the authors do not address; but here too the crying voice must be allowed to be heard. Just as Nokuthula’s story could be constructed, albeit with some stretch, from relics held by the mother, other stories, inhabited by unknown villains, can similarly be put together. Such reconstructed and indeed re-imagined stories must of course be accepted as such.

They end this chapter (51) by putting it that “Forgiveness allows people to have a new relationship with their trauma; it is a liberating act, a choice for freedom” and that “The freedom from being captive to anger and hatred as a result of the trauma liberates people to embark on a new journey of healing.” Excellent.

The chapter next chapter, on “Literary Narratives and Trauma”, uses a translated text by an Auschwitz survivor, Charlotte Delbo, who cites moving examples of trauma and shows that memories emerge in fragments, as I do

in *Tangling the Lion's Tale* (Thomas, 2007), a narration of the police work of one Donald Card. To the credit of the authors it must be said that they accept such fragmentary evidence as useful.

The Theatre of Violence (Foster, Haupt, and De Beer, 2005) shows that there are different kinds of violence, including “horizontal violence within black communities” and recollections of such stories; *Tangling the Lion's Tale* again shows that stories are often constructed from faulty memory. Honest reconstructions are therefore called for if true healing is to take place.

I found the final chapter peculiar. Here the text of JM Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) is generalized. And it doesn't work for me. Using a white woman victim's trauma to arrive at understanding, narration, and belated atonement is rather inapt and it is far-fetched. Forgiving the rapist because he had, according to Lucy (or is it according to Coetzee?), committed the deed to avenge some accretion of historical wrongs, are clearly questionable. There is no “innocent scapegoat” here, only the perpetrator and the victim of a heinous crime. This is not forgiveness leading to reconstruction and personal and national healing; this is cardboard character bleeding heart liberal “understanding”, false magnanimity, and incredible and imagined self-sacrifice. Annie Gagiano in a review of *Narrating* for LitNet suggests that Bessie Head's novel *A Question of Power* offers a richer case for the study of trauma and working through it. I agree, but add that Head's own story as related by Gilian Stead Eilersen (1995, 2007) offers an even better case study of trauma. Head's story shows that trauma is not simply a white perpetrator-black victim affair. Often, as in Bessie's case, the violence of racism is inflicted by both white and black.

If the authors intend this study to reach beyond the particular cases studies to make a general point, I fear they might fail. The need for healing in South Africa stems from a much wider (horizontal) and deeper (vertical) experience than the few stories they relate. In fact, most South Africans have discarded the painful baggage of the past and are right now engaged in the pursuit of happiness. What to do with them?

The text acknowledges that we come to “the table of dialogue” with different kinds of trauma. And the answer to this, for the authors, is story-telling, or to “be bound by human sharing, by human moments that connect us”. The authors fear what will become to individuals if they don't work through their trauma (using story, one can suppose). They often alternate moments of hope (that healing is possible) with the envisioned scenario of “endlessly repeated

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conflict” (if healing is not achieved). This is dark stuff but they have merit.

One of the most important observations, near the beginning of this text (37), that “If victims continue to wear the cloak of victim-hood, it closes language and dialogue; but if they shed this cloak, the door is opened for engagement with others as fellow human beings”, would have been a fitting final sentence. In other words, those who continue to play the victim, those who use their hurt as a weapon, actually retard the emergence of community.

Narrating Our Healing offers us useful theoretical entry points for the study of trauma and its potential to bring about healing of the personal and private sort. The larger tapestry of national healing however cries out for repressed voices to be released from the suffocating gag of subtle political tyranny.

Sources

Don Foster, Paul Haupt and Marésa de Beer (eds.), *The Theatre of Violence: Narratives of Protagonists in the South African Conflict*. HSRC Press, 2005.

Cornelius Thomas, *Tangling the Lion's Tale: Donald Card, from Apartheid Era Cop to Crusader for Justice*. Donald Card, 2007.

Gillian Stead Eilersen, *Bessie Head: Thunder Behind Her Ears – Her Life and Writing*. Wits University Press, 2007.