**TRAUMA**

*Moving through our collective “woundedness”*

By Sarah Crawford-Brown

With freedom, many are calling on us to put aside the past – to forgive, reconcile and move into the future. Given the cumulative socio-economic damage and the emotional trauma, is this possible? South Africans have been trapped in traumatising cycles of violence, exploitation, brutality and dehumanisation over generations. Have these experiences left enduring scars on the victims, perpetrators and bystanders, and on us as a nation? Many South Africans have experienced military service, border warfare, detention, torture, racist bombings, forced removal and devastated family life. The daily indignities of pass laws, uncaring education and extensive exploitation were more mundane, but perhaps more hurtful, particularly when linked with the ugly arrogance or ignorance promoted by families, church, education and state. This short essay considers the impact of the violence of Colonialism and Apartheid on individuals and on our society as a whole, offering some ideas for how we can live together more caringly.

People who have experienced life-threatening violence may respond with “posttraumatic stress”, a state where present-day experiences are polluted and irrationally taken over by the emotional memories and anxieties of what has happened. Despite trying to forget or avoid the past violence, small reminders trigger memories that seep into everyday life. Survivors may feel as if the danger is continuing, hence their bodies and minds remain on high alert exhaustingly ready to react to danger. With haunting historical wounds, survivors irrationally over-react to current situations that hold reminders. Not only does this damage relationships; but survivors may feel out of control and unsafe. These symptoms of remembering, forgetting and hyper-arousal usually ease as the shock passes, with most people recovering after three or four months. About 15% people exposed to violence are badly affected for years, not feeling themselves as they work to make sense of an unsafe world where people are not always good and life does not seem fair. Some people may become depressed, losing interest and energy for life. Trauma affects everyone differently with reactions saying little about strength or weakness, but rather the significance and meaning of the event in their lives which will be different for every person. Given the extreme violence of Apartheid we know that many survivors remain burdened by past experiences that keep creeping back to influence their current lives. Children who witnessed their parents being arrested, young men who quelled unrest in townships, people who participated in unrest may have memories that continue to feel real in the present; triggered by the sight of a police man, a person representing another group, or the noise of a crowd.

Trauma is usually thought of as an individual experience. Yet as I witness day-to-day life in South Africa I see the wounds of multiple humiliations and threats replay, affecting our present relationships with each other and with ourselves. We seem not to believe that the struggle is over. We seem to be unconsciously re-enacting the pain and anger that we experienced, within our politics, churches, media, schools, universities and communities – where-ever we have the courage to engage with each other. The reminders of Apartheid continue to shape our ways of being, relating and engaging even as we try to forget our past. Are we a multiply-wounded, traumatised nation? If so, where is the “trauma” situated if not within a person’s psychological well-being? And what does this mean for us as people trying to find a different future? What will it mean for our great-grandchildren? Wrestling with these questions, I offer a few ideas followed by some suggestions of how we may find each other, to start healing.

The trauma of our South African past is embedded in our relationships with each other, just as the indignities and trauma of Apartheid legislation were structured within the relationships between groups of people. People were targeted with violence because of their identity and their association with a community. An event that initially involved a victim and a perpetrator was quickly understood as an injury to “us” perpetrated by “them”. Traumatic stress rippled to those witnessing, for they knew that it could have happened to them. Added to this, Apartheid placed communities into the roles of victim, perpetrator and bystander with only a few people finding agency to move apart. Once placed in this inescapable relational triangle there is a human tendency to cycle between the positions. In order to regain the lost sense of power, victimised people often move to hurt others, becoming perpetrators. Those watching may rescue or blame, often causing more harm in their clumsiness. Perpetrators justify their actions in victimhood. These are human responses that we all share. But when played out at societal level with the power of a security state the consequences are enormous.

This raises a controversial question: are perpetrators traumatised by their actions? I believe that when a perpetrator has been forced to abuse, or is re-enacting the victimhood of their own history, post-traumatic stress may be very real. Stepping out of this violent triangle requires a real connection with our deeper selves connecting with our values, agency and emotions as full humans; separating out our response to current situations from the ghosts of the past. Traumatic events become linked in our memories and life narratives, bypassing normal structures of time and place. Survivors may start to talk about a current traumatic experience, and quickly time travel to all the previous times that they felt vulnerable, humiliated or out of control. Meanings are quickly drawn and offence easily taken. Stuck in the cast roles we are likely to re-enact and re-play the past violence in the present, continuing to cycle between victim, perpetrator and helpless bystander. Yes, it may not be rational, yet these feelings are real. Just think of the time when your name was casually mispronounced, when you were overlooked in a queue or you walked into a situation with entitled power. And we are likely to pass the burdens of our past on to our children.

The psychological wounds of violence shatter our deepest and earliest needs for comfort, safety and trust. These are assurances gained as babies that enable us to relate to the world and to people. The shattering of safety and trust in other people and the world may be devastating, where trust in the goodness of other people, the justice of the world and in our own capacity to cope with challenges may have been eroded, requiring us to quickly rebuild ways of thinking that can keep our lives intact. One of the easiest approaches is to divide the world into us and them, and then to link all that is good and safe with us, and all that is dangerous and suspect with them. When forced to commit violence it is easier to avoid seeing the full wonder of God’s presence in the other.

Similarly it may be difficult to see the full humanity of former perpetrators, with these realisations painfully taking us back to times of feeling less than human. Familiar patterns and stories about the others allow us to remain protected from the past hurts and future possible pain. Freeing ourselves from our patterns is made all the more difficult by the fractured discussions of our past, reflecting the conflicting symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Speaking quickly of forgiveness and reconciliation, some people seek to avoid, forget or move on from the past. Others are caught in the memories and bitterness, needing to hold on to the memories until this pain is acknowledged. A third group are scared it may happen all over again. Healing lies at the sacred place where these dividing forces meet, to integrate and bring wholeness where all three groups feel heard. Stepping out of the cycle of violence requires that we fully recognise the wonder and splendour of each person, made by God in God’s image.

Are we a traumatised nation? Certainly I think we are multiply wounded[[1]](#footnote-1), with this pain being held and reproduced in our relationships with each other. I suggest that we as individuals need to each reflect carefully on the pains and hurts of our personal histories; examining how our past experiences of being a victim, perpetrator or bystander affect us and our relationships today. Apartheid pain and anger is often mixed with our personal histories or childhood injuries. Telling our life stories allows us to work through our hurt, thereby making peace with our shadows. Deepening our understanding of our complex identities allows us to understand the meaning of these identities in our lives and our place in South Africa’s complex inter-community relationships. As we relate to each other we need to be sufficiently self-aware to recognise the irrational moments when past pain enters the conversation from their side or ours, and to humbly and gently step away. And we need to find the sacred meeting points where we can be fully human together.

Let us tell the stories about South Africa that we want our grandchildren to live as our love poem to each other; finding new inclusive narratives that hold our past, our present and our future within which we can all thrive.

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1. Cabrera, M. (2002). Living and surviving in a multiply wounded country. Envivo No 257. http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/1629 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)