



SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AND UNCONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS:  
THE LIVES OF SIX SOUTH AFRICAN PERPETRATORS

—MARLEEN RAMSEY  
WALLA WALLA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Servant-leadership practices are becoming increasingly more important as modern humanity makes desperate attempts to heal from the atrocities of war, interpersonal violence, and injustices that destroy the human spirit. Laub (1999) conceptualizes servant leadership in the following way:

Servant-leadership is an understanding and practice of leadership that places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader. Servant-leadership promotes the valuing and development of people, the building of community, the practice of authenticity, the providing of leadership for the good of those led and the sharing of power and status for the common good of each individual. (p. 83)

The broadening view of servant-leadership embeds holistic leadership practices not only in the corporate boardroom, but in social and political interactions that rely upon, even demand the need for people who are dedicated to making the world a better place for all to live (Ferch, 2005; Howatson-Jones, 2004; Spears & Lawrence, 2004).

The focus of the present study is on research I conducted with six political perpetrators of the apartheid era who were found guilty of gross human rights abuses, were then imprisoned, and finally applied for and received amnesty. It also explores how former South African president Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu modeled servant-leadership principles in negotiating a restorative justice process through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to deal with the atrocities that occurred during the apartheid struggle. The truth hearings gave victims the opportunity to



make public statements regarding the human rights abuses they experienced from state security forces and liberation combatants. It also allowed political perpetrators the opportunity to be truthful and to request amnesty. Finally, the truth hearings created an environment in which victims and political perpetrators could bestow and receive forgiveness.

The idea of servant-leadership is an ancient one and many of its themes are seen in the writings of Holy Scripture. Jesus made it very clear that servant-leadership was not about power, but about serving others. He stated, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (NIV Bible, Mark 10:43). The term “servant-leadership” has its modern origins in a 1970 essay by Robert Greenleaf titled “The Servant as Leader” (Spears, 1998). An executive at AT&T, Greenleaf originally discussed the concept within the context of a corporate or organizational leadership style. Although Greenleaf never actually defined servant-leadership, he identified some central characteristics that describe the servant leader. These characteristics reflect a universal ethic of empathy, forgiveness, honesty, trust, healing, community, and service that goes beyond the corporate world and adapts well to many different types of human environments (Bowman, 2005; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Smith, Montagnano & Kuzmenko, 2004; Tatum, 1995).

#### SERVANT-LEADERSHIP, FORGIVENESS, AND THE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION

An extraordinary example of servant-leadership practices was enacted in the restorative justice process of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa. It has been over a decade now since the first democratic elections took place in South Africa on April 27 and 28, 1994. At the time of these elections, South Africa was a deeply divided society tormented by a violent legacy. Hope for a peaceful co-existence amongst the people of South Africa seemed an impossible dream (Burton, 1998).



Apartheid had alienated South Africa from the larger global community; the threat of civil war and racial bloodbath was imminent. The social and political situation in South Africa was at a crisis (Sparks, 1994).

According to Greenleaf (1977), servant leaders are leaders who put other people's needs, aspirations and interests above their own. The servant-leader's deliberate choice is to serve others. In one of the most stunning examples of servant-leadership in modern times, Nelson Mandela, upon being released after twenty-seven years of imprisonment, made the deliberate choice to forgive his captors and refused to bring retribution upon his political enemies. As the newly elected president of South Africa, Mandela now had the power to punish those who had injured him, his family, and his people for decades. But being a truly great servant-leader, Mandela put the people's needs and interests above his own. He committed himself to end the violence, to heal the injustices, and to forgo the settlement of old scores. Mandela's approach was revolutionary in concept. The nearly overnight regime change from apartheid, or legalized racism, to a democratic society must be credited to the servant-leadership of Nelson Mandela and his fellow leaders within the African National Congress. Through negotiations with the apartheid regime, the National Party, a compromise was reached. The African National Congress, led by Nelson Mandela, wanted to reveal the truth regarding the atrocities that had taken place during the apartheid era, and the National Party wanted amnesty for the people who had perpetrated these violent acts. The establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was the end product of these negotiations (Sparks, 1994). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was created by the terms of the National Unity and Reconciliation Act 34 in December 1995. The Act focused on six main objectives:

1. To generate a detailed record of the nature, extent and causes of human rights violations in South Africa during the period 1960-1994.
2. To name the people, organizations, and political parties responsible for gross violations of human rights.



3. To provide victims of gross human rights violations a public forum to express themselves in order to regain their human dignity.
4. To make recommendations to the government on how to prevent the future occurrences of human rights violations.
5. To make recommendations to the government regarding reparations and the rehabilitation of victims of human rights violations
6. To facilitate the granting of amnesty for individual perpetrators of human rights violations. (Lax, unpublished paper)

In 1996 the Commission, chaired by Nobel laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu, began the arduous task of reviewing over 21,000 statements from victims and examining 7,000 applications for amnesty (Terrell, 2004).

Although truth commissions have been conducted in a number of other countries (e.g., Chile, Argentina, Uganda, Sri Lanka), no country has undergone the type of public truth-telling that South Africa underwent during the period of time that the Human Rights Violations Committee conducted their hearings (Villa-Vicencio & Verwoerd, 2000). The hearings were open to the public; they were televised, reported on the radio and in the newspaper. Every revealed secret, every disclosed atrocity, was made known to the public (Krog, 1998). The hearings gave voice to victims who had long been mute about the suffering they had endured during the long siege of apartheid. The permission to speak of their experiences and to share their pain was the beginning of healing for many silent sufferers (Amnesty International, 2003; Byrne, 2004). The Commission recognized that human beings live in a world where both victims and perpetrators must reside together. In the spirit of servant-leadership, the Commission not only empowered victims through giving them the opportunity to speak of their suffering, but gave political perpetrators a means by which they could bridge the crevasse of separation that their violent deeds had created (Tutu, 1999). The hearings gave transgressors against human rights the opportunity to be honest, to be filled with humility, and to come to the fountain of forgiveness where healing could begin. Spears (2004) states, "One of the



great strengths of servant-leadership is the potential for healing one's self and others. Many people have broken spirits and have suffered from a variety of emotional hurts. Although this is a part of being human, servant-leaders recognize that they have an opportunity to 'help make whole' those with whom they come in contact" (p. 33).

The world watched in amazement as the hearings progressed. How could a people so deeply divided risk so much in their truth telling, be so transparent with revelations of torture and brutality, and be so generous in their forgiveness? These are questions not easily answered. Indeed, there are many who challenge the ultimate success of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process. It may take generations before the impact of the Truth and Reconciliation hearings upon South African society completely unfolds. However, even for those who doubt the Commission's authenticity, there is little question that lives were changed forever, often in undeniably powerful ways, both for those who witnessed these events, and for those who lived the experience of giving and receiving forgiveness.

### *My Journey to South Africa*

Along with the rest of the world, I watched in awe as South Africa demonstrated the servant-leadership principles of empathy, forgiveness, and healing through the Truth and Reconciliation process. Did the receiving of forgiveness transform people, even perpetrators, in becoming healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servant-leaders? The search for the answer to this compelling question led me to South Africa. I chose South Africa primarily to investigate one of the primary principles of servant-leadership, the commitment to establish a sense of community among people. I wanted to see if this principle held true for amnesty recipients – if indeed they experienced a sense of acceptance, and community, even among the people they had deeply injured. Finally, I sought the answer to Greenleaf's genuine test of a servant-leader. He states, "The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser,



freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived?" (1977, 13-14).

### *Persons Interviewed*

Six political perpetrators were interviewed for this study. Of these six, five were found guilty of human rights violations, imprisoned, and then given amnesty after appearing before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and giving testimony to their violations. One of the six persons, a former Azanian People's Liberation Army (armed wing of the Pan African Congress) commander, was never taken to trial and withdrew his application for amnesty. All of these persons were male, ranging from twenty-six to forty-five years of age. Five were black South Africans and former members of the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA). One man was a white South African and a former police captain with the state security forces. These men each received empathy and forgiveness from their victim or victims, or from family members of their victim or victims. All of the interviews took place in Cape Town, South Africa, during September and October of 2002.

Making contact with political perpetrators was a difficult process. The nature of the violations committed by both state security force personnel and members of the liberation movements were such that most amnesty recipients were unwilling to expose themselves to further external or internal scrutiny. In addition, not all political perpetrators who submitted applications for amnesty to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission expressed a brokenness of pride and spirit, and it was such persons that were needed for the study. Through the cooperative networking of people involved in such organizations as Black Sash, Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, Institute of Justice and Reconciliation, and Cape Town Press Club, as well as courageous persons who willingly came forth to assist in this study, political perpetrators who had received empathy and



forgiveness from someone they had injured were located in Pollsmoor Prison, in Gugulethu, in Khayelitsha, in Langa, and in the Kwa-Zulu Natal.

Two of the four perpetrators who received amnesty for the 1994 murder of American Fulbright exchange student Amy Biehl agreed to be interviewed for this study. Although the story of Amy's death on August 25, 1993, and her parents' response of forgiveness to the four men tried for her death are well publicized, I have given these men the pseudonyms of Nepi and Khali to give them a semblance of anonymity. Stone is the pseudonym for one of three perpetrators tried for the December 30, 1994, Heidelberg Tavern attack in Observatory, Cape Town. Khaya is the pseudonym for one of three perpetrators responsible for the July 25, 1993, St. James Church massacre in Cape Town. More than 20 people were severely injured in this attack and 11 people were killed. Khaya was found guilty and sentenced to prison, where he applied for and received amnesty during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings. In September of 2002 he was again arrested as a suspect in an armored car robbery outside of Cape Town and incarcerated. I interviewed Khaya in Pollsmoor prison, where he awaited trial.

Letlapa Mphahlele (not a pseudonym) was the only political perpetrator I interviewed who did not receive amnesty. He was a commander of the armed wing of the Pan African Congress known as Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA) and gave the orders to attack the Heidelberg Tavern and the St. James Church in Cape Town. On October 21, 2002, I attended the Cape Town Press Club luncheon where Letlapa was invited to give a presentation to launch his new book, *A Child of the Soil*. Ginn Fourie also attended the luncheon. Her daughter Lyndi Fourie, a 23-year-old civil engineering student at the University of Cape Town, was slain in the 1994 Heidelberg Tavern assault. During this public forum, Letlapa revealed that he was the commander who had ordered the attack on the Heidelberg Tavern. He was initially unaware of Mrs. Fourie's presence, but when he became aware of who she was, he stopped his discourse and apologized for Lyndi's death. After addressing the press, Letlapa stepped down from the podium



and went directly to Mrs. Fourie's table where they embraced. The meeting between Letlapa and Mrs. Fourie was a profoundly moving moment, and through her tears, she said, "My tears are not for my daughter today, but for the realization that the man I thought so long was a monster, has shown me his human side. I am moved by his humanity."

The final man interviewed for this study was Brian Mitchell (not a pseudonym), a former police station commander in the Kwa-Zulu Natal Midlands, who ordered an attack on a house thought to be an African National Congress (ANC) terrorist cell in the village of Trust Feed on December 3, 1988. The wrong house was attacked and 11 innocent people, primarily women and children, were killed in this massacre. Brian was convicted and sentenced to eleven counts of death for ordering the attack. On April 24, 1994, President de Klerk commuted Brian's death sentence to 30 years, which opened the way for Brian to make application for amnesty.

Time and again, during the interviews and during the interpretation of these men's stories, I was struck by the enormity of the psychological pain that we often cause others and ourselves. I was also struck by the realization of how healing the experience of forgiveness can be to both victims and perpetrators. It is through the stories of these six men that greater understanding may be gained regarding the transforming powers of empathy and forgiveness. It is also through their stories that we can see how the practices of servant-leadership can restore community to people deeply separated by violence and brutality.

#### FINDINGS

The six men interviewed for this study perpetrated violent acts against other people, resulting in serious physical injury, maiming, and in most cases, death of victims. Each man believed at the time that his violence was merited in order to bring about justice and stability in the midst of a chaotic political situation. Initially, these men defended and justified their actions as necessary, but as the amnesty hearings went on, they began to experience confusion, doubt, and a sense of shame for their violent deeds. This



occurred only after experiencing an “awakening” or realization of the humanity of their victims, a concept that Gobodo-Madikizela (2004) discusses in her observations of Eugene de Kock.

Typically, the perpetrator starts off with rationalization, to convince himself of the legitimacy of his acts. . . De Kock knew that what he had done as commander of covert police activity at Vlakplaas was simply beyond what most human beings could understand, it was beyond what he could understand. . . the cloak had now been removed to reveal what had been hidden before, not only from the public eye but from himself as well. This presence of an inner stirring within de Kock is what marks the fundamental difference between him and his former colleagues who appeared before the TRC. (p. 23)

All six men received empathy and forgiveness from family members or loved ones of their victims. However, four developed close, warm relationships with family members of the people they had injured. In the cases of these men, they not only received forgiveness, but they even received an invitation to form a relationship with the very people they had harmed. Such unconditional forgiveness is difficult to grasp, but the invitation to become a member of the inner circle is astounding. Greenleaf (1977) believed that the servant-leader uses every opportunity to serve others and to help them develop to their full potential. Through the bestowment of forgiveness and the invitation to develop an inclusive relationship, these four political perpetrators were given the opportunity to live legitimate lives. These four men expressed a greater feeling of self-forgiveness and hope than the two who did not develop such close relationships with family members of their victims.

The study was conducted using hermeneutic phenomenological methods. Five themes emerged from the interviews: (a) violence harms both victim and perpetrator; (b) denial and arrogance are used to protect the perpetrator from shame; (c) empathy creates an environment whereby the perpetrator can ask for and receive forgiveness; (d) the gift of forgiveness increases the ability to forgive oneself; and (e) forgiveness is a bridge to the



future. The forthcoming section discusses each theme and explores the psychological experience of receiving forgiveness, its implications for healing, as well as for creating opportunities for reconciliation. I must point out that forgiveness, reconciliation, and the opportunity for political perpetrators to live legitimate lives were made possible through South Africa's decision to follow the practices of servant-leadership as embodied in the principles of restorative justice. Finally, I discuss the role of forgiveness in helping both victims and perpetrators create a more hope-filled future.

### *Violence Harms Both Victim and Perpetrator*

It is common for most people to assume that a perpetrator who commits an atrocity has a serious psychological abnormality or dysfunction. They may even describe the person who has committed an atrocity as being evil or somehow inhuman. Gilligan states, "Our horror can lead us to distance ourselves from violence. Many may already have concluded that it is only a few crazy, abnormal, and freakish people who are violent" (1996, p. 30). Social psychologists refer to this as the fundamental attribution error and define it as the "tendency for observers to underestimate situational influence and overestimate dispositional influences upon others' behaviors" (Myers, 1999, p. 83). Although there is little support for claims that psychopathology, dysfunction or deficiencies constitute useful explanations, the first reaction to an atrocity is often to vilify or demonize the perpetrator (Kressel, 1996; Staub, 1989). Some psychologists believe that this reaction may be a way of protecting ourselves from our own internal fears that we may have the potential to act in such horrific and heinous ways (Gilligan, 1996; Gobodo-Madikizela, 2002). However, labeling perpetrators as "evil" or "inhuman" simply describes the behavior, but does not give us a clear explanation or understanding as to why the person engaged in the violent deed. Gilligan states, "It is easier and less threatening to condemn violence (morally and legally) so that we can punish it, rather than seeking its causes and working to prevent it" (1996, p. 24). Foster supports Gilligan's views in his study of perpetrators of the apartheid era, stating:



The weight of literature on atrocities finds little evidence to support the notion that severe abnormality is the cause of bad deeds. Even regarding sadism, the general view is that while it cannot be dismissed, only about five percent of all types of perpetrators (serial killers, torturers, rapists) may be classed as sadists and furthermore even this motive is not inherent but gradually acquired over time; a consequence of serial acts of violence. (2000, p. 6)

Foster (2000) also suggests, “Perpetrators may experience severe stress and anxiety along with denial, disassociation, doubling, and other defense mechanisms” (p. 7). Several psychological reports that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission reviewed indicated that some amnesty seekers suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the atrocities they engaged in and witnessed. Other psychologists have indicated the need for further research on the effects of trauma on the psychology of perpetrators within the South African apartheid struggle (Foster, Davis, & Sandler, 1987; Fourie, 2000; Nicholas, 2000; Orr, 1998).

Each of the men interviewed revealed that the memory of the violent acts in which they had engaged created internal cognitive dissonance and pain. Nepi revealed,

I find it too difficult to accept that early in my life I happened to be involved in a murder. I was trying to be more militant but it was very difficult because your soul is not militant, it is not a machine, it is human. Your soul feels, it feels things strongly, it remembers, and the memories, they never leave you. (October 3, 2003, interview)

Stone also revealed, “There is still pain in my heart. Maybe Mrs. Fourie has pain in her heart too. If we talk together, maybe the pain will be less for both of us. This would be a good thing to do. I am ready to talk with her” (October 23, 2003, interview).

Several of the men described the violent memory as a heavy weight that they carried inside them. Brian Mitchell described the horrific scene he



witnessed as a weight that seemed to suffocate him. In his words he describes the situation:

I was in absolute shock as I walked through the house and it became clear that the wrong house had been targeted and innocent people had died. As a police officer I had witnessed a number of violent deeds and death was common. But nothing I had ever seen in my life readied me for that moment. Blood was everywhere and the bodies of women and children lay where they had fallen. I think all sorts of things go through your mind, but once a person has moved beyond disbelief and reality sinks in, then fear descends upon you like a heavy black tarp that makes you feel like you are trapped and unable to breathe. (October 26, 2002, interview)

Khaya also experienced a sense of suffocating weight when he allowed himself to recall the events of the St. James Church massacre. He stated, "I remember the horror of bodies flying in the air from the explosion of the hand grenades. These memories haunt and weigh me down. The weight is inside haunting me. It is like a poison that needs to get out" (September 27, 2002, interview).

Each of the six men revealed intense internal pain, fear, and depression. They described this pain in several ways: "I felt a pain in my heart," "I felt pressed with a huge weight," "I felt as if I was being suffocated," "There was a poison that needed to be released." Although they attempted to hide that pain and used various emotional fortifications to alleviate the suffering, it persisted. Among the coping strategies these men used were denial, justification, and arrogance. The use of these defenses to protect their ego structure from shame will be discussed in the next section.

### *Use of Denial and Arrogance as Protection from Shame*

Prior to my departure for South Africa to begin this study, I viewed several videotapes of political perpetrators testifying before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Although the Commission had not included remorse or repentance as criteria for amnesty, I was surprised and even



puzzled that the majority of amnesty seekers viewed on the tapes appeared to be untouched by their experiences. Many showed stoic faces that revealed no repentance or remorse. Most justified their actions as simply following orders, or that it was a war and that in war there are casualties. Particularly disturbing was the apparent lack of emotion in several amnesty seekers as they described the torture they had perpetrated on others. From all outward appearance they appeared unbroken, unrepentant, and even arrogant. Gobodo-Madikizela (2004) writes, “Some people when faced with their evil deeds, understand the moral implications of their actions, but to maintain some dignity to protect their sense of identity as respectable human beings, they cling to the belief that what they did was morally correct. One can get a sense that they are struggling with their denial of the truth” (p. 23).

Foster (2000) concurs that this type of psychological stance creates difficulties in attempting to understand perpetrators:

It produces something of a problem for those who constitute a third perspective – observers, social scientists, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – since their efforts to understand perpetrators adopting their detached minimalist styles, comes across as insensitive to victims. (p. 3)

Several of the men interviewed indicated that they experienced anger, frustration, and fear during the Truth and Reconciliation hearings. They felt that they needed to take a defensive, protective stance. If they didn't divulge the complete truth they would be denied amnesty, yet they were fearful that what they said might betray other comrades. Khaya revealed that he felt sympathy for Dawie Ackerman, a church member who lost his wife during the St. James attack. “I felt sympathy for him because I knew I was the cause of his pain” (September 27, 2002, interview). However, Khaya believed that if he showed that sympathy it would expose his weakness, guilt, and shame to the people at the hearing and to the commissioners. He states, “I was not prepared to make myself appear weak because it would create more shame than I could bear.”



Erikson (1963) gives an insightful understanding of the fear of being shamed in public settings. He says, “Shame supposes that one is completely exposed and conscious of being looked at. One is visible and not ready to be visible, which is why we dream of shame as a situation in which we are stared at in a condition of incomplete dress – with one’s pants down” (pp. 252-253). Gilligan (1996) also touches on this deep internal fear of exposing one’s weakness and the level of shame that it creates when he states,

The family of painful feelings called shame and humiliation, which, when they become overwhelming because a person has no basis for self-respect, can be intolerable, and so devastating as to bring about the collapse of self-esteem and thus the death of the self. (p. 64)

After his amnesty hearing, Khaya asked to have the opportunity to request forgiveness from the people he had injured. He was taken to a small room where about 25 people were sitting in a circle and he was told to go to each one and ask for their forgiveness. He said it was a humiliating experience because it was so public; he was dressed in prison clothes with a chain around his waist that extended to his ankles and up to his wrists. It was difficult to walk, he could only shuffle, and he could only extend both hands, as if begging to shake the hands of the people from whom he sought forgiveness. Khaya felt he had no dignity or self-respect in this situation. He felt threatened and perceived an overwhelming need to protect himself. He said that the “eyes of some of the people had pity, some of the eyes had fear, and some of the eyes still wanted justice” (September 27, 2002, interview).

Five of the six men interviewed spoke of this internal need to maintain a sense of dignity and self-respect in an environment they perceived as extremely hostile to them. They used words such as “protect myself,” “keep my public face,” and “I could not show weakness” to describe the emotions they were experiencing while testifying before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Even when the environment was not hostile or denigrating, it



was difficult to let down their defenses and be open to the kind overtures of their victims.

Nepi described his first encounter with the parents of Amy Biehl when he, along with the other three defendants, was being transported to a conference room. They were in manacles and shackled together when they literally bumped, face-to-face in the corridor, with Linda and Peter Biehl. The couple recognized the defendants and offered to shake hands with them. Nepi said, "They offered to shake hands and all three guys shook, but I couldn't. I don't know why, but I told myself I just couldn't. I shifted to one side, but they did not notice and I bypassed them" (October 3, 2002). At that time he wanted to shake hands, but felt overcome with shame, as it was easier to hold on to his prideful face than to accept their gesture of reconciliation.

At this point in the research several questions emerged. How do we move beyond our fear of the perpetrator and the need to vilify him or her? How do we break through the perpetrator's defenses, specifically, the need to protect himself or herself from public shame? Finally, what deeds, words, attitudes, or acts facilitate the breaking down of ego defenses, allowing the perpetrator to experience remorse and a brokenness of spirit in response to asking for and receiving forgiveness? Discussion and findings from the investigation of the reciprocal role of empathy between victims and perpetrators in creating an environment in which forgiveness may be sought and received will be discussed in the following section.

### *Empathy in Asking for and Receiving Forgiveness*

If we accept the premise that there may be a deeply human side to perpetrators (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2004) that they cover up with defense mechanisms to protect themselves from shame and humiliation, then there must exist emotional bridges or psychological passageways that perpetrators can safely use in order to ask for and receive forgiveness. Evidence of this came forth as the men revealed their feelings of empathy and connection that arose from being forgiven. Each talked about their feelings of



empathy for their victims as well as receiving empathy from victims or their families. Stone stated, “During the Truth and Reconciliation hearings I felt that I was sharing the pain along with family members of the victims. That day I felt pain for the victims.” Stone also revealed, “I said to myself that I must not be difficult. I must be open to what Mrs. Fourie is feeling so that she can understand what I am feeling – so we can share, person-to-person” (October 23, 2002, interview).

Khali indicated that he initially thought of Amy as just another white person, a “white settler.” However, at the Truth and Reconciliation hearing he had the opportunity to hear Linda and Peter Biehl speak about Amy and suddenly he saw her as a real person, a real woman with parents who loved her just as his parents loved him. Each of the men in this study indicated that as they saw their victims as people — with subjectivity, humanity, and personhood — it was more difficult to maintain a façade of pride, arrogance, or indifference. These men indicated that it was only as they felt empathy with their victims that they were able to ask for and receive forgiveness.

### *The Gift of Forgiveness and the Ability to Self-Forgive*

Hannah Arendt (2000) shares profound insights into the redemptive qualities of forgiveness:

The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility is the faculty of forgiving, and the remedy for unpredictability is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises. The remedies belong together: forgiving relates to the past and serves to undo its deeds, while binding oneself through promises serves to set up in the ocean of future uncertainty, islands of security without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind, would ever be possible in the relationship between men. (p. 180)

A primary difficulty in healing interpersonal injuries for both victims and perpetrators lies in finding a way to reconcile the past in order to move



into the future (Borris, 2003; Holloway, 2002). Without forgiveness, both victim and perpetrator are locked together in the past without a pathway to the future. Arendt (2000) states:

Without being forgiven [and] released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victim of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer's apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell. (p. 181)

Brian Mitchell revealed that upon receiving amnesty he requested the opportunity to return to Trust Feed to ask forgiveness from survivors and family members of his victims. However, the people of Trust Feed rejected his request for forgiveness. Brian spent a year in limbo, deeply depressed and mentally running away from who he was and what he had done. The turning point came when he received a telephone call asking him to return once again to the village and join the community in a day of reconciliation and forgiveness. The son of a woman who had died in the massacre revealed to Brian that in a dream his mother told him, "You must forgive my killer and not seek revenge." This message brought Brian comfort and to a place where he could forgive himself.

One can pray and ask God to forgive you for what you have done. You can understand why you did certain things, but it seems to haunt you all the time until the stage where the other party comes and accepts your wish for forgiveness. If there is no acceptance from the offended party, forgiveness, self-forgiveness isn't a reality. (October 26, 2003, interview)

Nepi revealed that without the forgiveness of Linda and Peter Biehl, he could not have forgiven himself. He stated, "I've always wanted to be myself, but just couldn't get there. Linda and Peter were sort of a bridge over the trauma that I, not the militant, killed this lady and ended her life. I somehow have come to forgive myself because I have been forgiven for what I did and I can go on" (October 3, 2002, interview).



The theme of self-forgiveness appeared throughout the conversations with the men in this study. Each wrestled with the overwhelming task of moving his life beyond the violent event. However, the attitude of the public and the larger community was centered on their acts of violence. Even though they were storied as killers, these men believed themselves to be in possession of other dimensions that people were not aware of because the public could not see beyond the stigmatizing label of murderer.

Holloway (2002) speaks movingly of the burden of carrying past transgression around and the difficulty that the perpetrator has in ridding himself or herself of this stigma. He states:

This is the cause of the greatest pain our humanity carries, the fact and remembrance of our own failures, those acts that can never be undone or reversed, which now turn the past into a great weight of regret that we bear everywhere with us and cannot lay down. (p. 32)

The men I interviewed revealed that the act of receiving forgiveness freed them from the public and psychological stigma of being a perpetrator. It lifted their overwhelming sense of guilt in such a way that they could forgive themselves, which they indicated was by far the most difficult barrier to overcome. I must emphasize that for each of these men the journey to self-forgiveness was a long and torturous one filled with doubts and moments of self-loathing. When telling the story of Amy Biehl's death, Nepi took me to the marble cross in Gugulethu commemorating the place where Amy Biehl died. He spoke about the incident in the third person and when I asked him why, he said, "It is the only way I can talk about Amy's death without experiencing overwhelming feelings of shame and self-loathing" (October 17, 2002, interview).

The final theme of this study addresses the role of forgiveness, one of the principles of servant-leadership, in constructing the bridge upon which the perpetrator can cross to return to the community of people from which violence has alienated him or her.



### *Forgiveness as a Bridge to the Future*

Holloway (2002) speaks of the difference between conditional forgiveness and pure forgiveness, or what I believe to be unconditional forgiveness. He believes that various aspects of conditional forgiveness, no matter how practical or creative, are structured in such a way that they simply “limit or manage the damage we do to one another whereas pure forgiveness has an intrinsic good, a pure gift with no motive of return” (p. 78). It is this pure forgiveness, or what Enright (1991) also calls forgiveness as love, that when offered may move the perpetrator toward genuine repentance. Enright’s forgiveness as love constructs a bridge by which the transgressor can move from isolation to community and to a future. Holloway supports this idea:

When true [pure] forgiveness happens it is one of the most astonishing and liberating of the human experiences. The tragedy of the many ways we trespass upon each other is that we can damage people so deeply that we rob them of the future by stopping the movement of their lives at the moment of injury, which continues to send out shock-waves of pain that swamp their existence. The real beauty and power of forgiveness is that it can deliver the future to us. (pp. 12-13)

Nepi, Khali, Letlapa Mphelele, and Brian Mitchell developed very close relationships with the people who forgave them. These four men indicated that these relationships made it possible for them to think about the future and gave them a sense of self-respect.

Linda Biehl calls Nepi and Khali her sons, first born and second born. I had the opportunity to interview Linda Biehl while doing my research in Cape Town and observed an interaction she had with Nepi. I had just spent an hour with this remarkable woman and as we came out of her office at the Amy Biehl Foundation, her secretary asked her if she could work in another appointment that afternoon. She told her secretary that she could meet with that person before three o’clock, but not to make any appointments after that. She indicated that she was taking Nepi shopping for a car seat for his



newborn daughter. She looked at me with great concern in her eyes and said, "I'm so worried that Nepi's daughter have a proper car seat. You know young people these days just don't have the concern about car safety." As I was leaving, Nepi came out of the work room and to emphasize this point she said to him, "Nepi, don't schedule any appointments after 3 o'clock today. You and I are going car seat shopping for that new daughter of yours!" It was an amazing thing to hear from the woman who had lost her own precious daughter at the hands of this young man.

Of the six political perpetrators interviewed for this study, only one did not experience a feeling of acceptance back into the community after receiving forgiveness. In my final conversation in Pollsmoor Prison, Khaya poignantly shared,

The past is always haunting me. I feel I am not supposed to be here. People think I am a violent person, that I am not a trustful person. I heard them say they forgave me. I think they were sincere, but they wanted justice still. In their voices I could hear this. (September 27, 2002, interview)

## CONCLUSION

The findings in this study support the idea that empathy helps facilitate the interpersonal environment conducive to offering and receiving forgiveness. It was found that perceptions about perpetrators—based upon their attitude, personal presentation, and outward appearance—were not always indicative of what they were actually experiencing within. The use of detachment and arrogance by perpetrators, often interpreted as lack of remorse or insensitivity to the victim, may actually be defense mechanisms protecting them from fear, shame, and humiliation.

The findings of this study support the idea that violence harmed both the victim and perpetrator. Although the harm is not always apparent, it was found that the psychological wounds expressed by perpetrators included the feeling of being poisoned by the experience, the feeling of being weighed



down by the memory of the atrocity, and the feeling of pain whenever the event was remembered.

The findings of this study also support the idea that the offering of unconditional forgiveness, or forgiveness as a gift, increases the ability of the perpetrator to self-forgive. Self-forgiveness came only as perpetrators received forgiveness from the person or persons they had harmed.

The findings of this study support the idea that forgiveness is an important interpersonal experience by which perpetrators may be able to move beyond the immobilizing effects of their transgressions toward a future. Without the gift of unconditional forgiveness, the perpetrator, and perhaps even the victim, may remain confined to the injury from which neither may ever recover.

Because of the methodology used in this study, the conclusions cannot necessarily be generalized to all perpetrators and victims. However, this study's findings do indicate a need to continue seeking understanding of the role of empathy and forgiveness in bringing interpersonal healing for perpetrators and victims. If the importance of these human acts continues to be a significant area of study in interpersonal healing and alleviation of human suffering, it will be necessary to implement tangible and practical applications for promoting the occurrence of empathy and forgiveness.

Finally, the study implies that in an environment where human beings practice the principles of servant-leadership, empathy, forgiveness, and healing, there is hope for redemption in the hearts of some of the most hardened persons, the most unrepentant perpetrators, and hope for the restoration of community. This finding alone is perhaps the most important implication of this study. Such a revelation of hope may be the most useful learning for future researchers interested in studying this phenomenon, and for all those who suffer and have yet to make the decision to seek and receive forgiveness. This hope is centrally found in expressions of lasting and unconditional forgiveness, not bound by the remorse or denial of the perpetrator. Such forgiveness, unconditional and persevering, is integral to the soulful way of life found in those who have been greatly harmed but



have chosen a way of life attuned to the nature of legitimate power and greatness: a life lived for others. Even in the face of grave evil, this study revealed a resilience of human spirit I found uncompromising and filled with mercy. At the outset of my research I was unsure, even questioning the heart of humanity. I can now say a life for others, a servant-led life, exists, heals the world, restores us to one another, and gracefully makes us whole.

#### EPILOGUE

It has been eleven years since South Africa's first democratic election, and it has been three years since I interviewed the men in this study. In looking at their lives since then, I found that five of the six continue to practice the principles of servant-leadership so beautifully modeled for them in the forgiveness they received from their victims and in the restorative justice process of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Only one man, Khaya, has not continued to develop in the same way that the other five men have. I interviewed Khaya in Pollsmoor Prison, where he was awaiting trial for his alleged involvement in a robbery of an armored car in Cape Town. He told me that he wished that he could have gone on with his schooling and that he would have liked to have become an attorney, but life in the township was harsh and brutal – not much better for him or his family now than during the apartheid years. Although he had asked for forgiveness and was granted it by several church members and family of victims who had died in the St. James Church massacre, he did not feel that he had truly been forgiven. Nepi and Khali both work at the Amy Biehl Foundation in Cape Town in direct relationship with Linda Biehl. An unrelenting love has overcome the stolid denial and hardness that accompanied the early years after Amy Biehl's death. Today, Nepi and Khali, men of Africa who killed Amy Biehl, call Amy's mother their mother, and she calls them her sons. Together they work to improve the quality of life for families and children living in the townships.

In 2003 Letlapa, the APLA commander who ordered the attack on the



Heidelberg Tavern, which resulted in the death of Ginn Fourie's daughter Lyndi, extended an invitation to Ginn Fourie to come to a reconciliation ceremony with him in a township outside of Johannesburg. Ginn accepted the invitation and in a moving address publicly acknowledged Letlapa's request and extended forgiveness to him. During the ceremony in Letlapa's village, special names in his home language were given to her and to him. The names symbolize a unique greeting so that each time the two meet they can greet one another in this way: Translated, one asks of the other, "Where are you?" The response is, "I am with you."

Today Ginn and Letlapa speak together internationally in honor of forgiveness and since the reconciliation ceremony they have created the Lyndi Fourie Foundation, which helps political perpetrators and amnesty recipients receive personal counseling and vocational training in order to develop marketable skills to support themselves and their families.

In yet another act of servant-leadership, Ginn Fourie helped Stone, the man who killed her daughter, obtain a commercial-size chainsaw and contracts with the city of Cape Town to cut wood and clear brush. The chainsaw and the contracts enabled Stone, in turn, to be able to hire five additional men to assist him with the brush and wood clearing projects. Prior to this Stone had had no work, no future, and no hope of supporting his family. With Ginn's help, Stone became a businessman, capable of helping other men support their families as well.

Brian Mitchell, the police captain who ordered the attack on a house in Trust Feed Village where eleven innocent people were killed also continues living the principles of servant-leadership. Brian makes presentations around South Africa and internationally to bring attention to the plight of the Zulu people of Trust Feed. He is committed to restoring the community that he helped destroy during the apartheid struggle. In the attack, Brian's actions resulted in the death of innocent people, among them women and children. When the people of Trust Feed brought him back for a day of reconciliation and forgiveness, inviting him to live in the village, he felt his soul transformed. "I was dead until that day," he said. "And after that day I



lived.” Today he continues to work raising funds to construct a community center, hand in hand with those whose family members he had killed.

The lives of these men were redeemed through the restorative justice process of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as they were once again reunited with the community of people they had deeply injured. Greenleaf’s genuine test of servant-leadership is compellingly illustrated in the way these men have made deliberate choices to serve. Only a short time ago these men were denounced and vilified for their roles in the devastation of property and human lives. Political amnesty and interpersonal forgiveness gave them a future and another opportunity to live meaningful lives. In turn, the people they serve also have the opportunity to grow as persons and “become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants” (1977, pp. 13-14).

---

Marleen Ramsey is a counselor and psychology instructor at Walla Walla Community College, Walla Walla, Washington, United States of America. In collaborative research with the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation in Cape Town, South Africa, she interviewed victims of South Africa’s apartheid regime who gave forgiveness to their perpetrators. She also interviewed political perpetrators who were found guilty of committing gross human rights abuses, were imprisoned, applied for and received political amnesty, and were forgiven by their victims. Her work in unconditional forgiveness and spiritual responses to unavoidable suffering inspires an evocative body of research that influences life-giving ways of leading and being led.



## REFERENCES

- Amnesty International/Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper. (2003). Truth and justice: Unfinished business in South Africa. <http://www.hrw.org/background/africa/truthandjustice.htm>
- Arendt, H. (1958). *The human condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Bowman, R.F. (2005). Teacher as servant leader. *The Clearing House*, 78(6), 257-260.
- Borris, E. R. (2003). The healing power of forgiveness. Occasional Paper Number 10, Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy.
- Burton, M. (1998). Looking back, moving forward: Re-visiting conflicts, striving towards peace. Unpublished paper given at Belfast, Northern Ireland.
- Byrne, C. C. (2004). Benefit or burden: Victims' reflections on TRC participation. *Journal of Peace Psychology*, 10(3), 237-256.
- Enright, R. D. (1991). *Handbook of moral behavior and development*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Erikson, E. (1963). *Childhood and society* (2nd ed.). New York: W.W. Norton.
- Ferch, S. (2005). Servant-Leadership, forgiveness and social justice. *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*, 1(1), 97-111.
- Foster, D. (2000). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and understanding perpetrators. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 30(1), 2-9.
- Foster, D., Davis, D., & Sandler, D. (1987). *Detention and torture in South Africa: Psychological, legal, and historical studies*. Cape Town: David Phillip.
- Fourie, G. (2000). The psychology of perpetrators of political violence in South Africa: A personal experience. *Ethnicity and Health*, 5(3/4), 283-289.
- Gilligan, J. (1996). *Violence: Our deadly epidemic and its causes*. New York: Grosset/Putnam Book.
- Gobodo-Madikizela, P. (2002). Remorse, forgiveness, and rehumanization: Stories from South Africa. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 42(1), 7-32.
- Gobodo-Madikizela, P. (2004). *A human being died that night*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Greenleaf, R. (1977). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Holloway, R. (2002). *On forgiveness: How can we forgive the unforgivable?* Edinburgh: Cannongate Books Ltd.



- Howatson-Jones, I.L. (2004). The servant leader. *Nursing Management*, 11(3), 20-25.
- Kressel, N. J. (1996). *Mass hate*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Krog, A. (1998). *Country of my skull: Guilt, sorrow, and the limits of forgiveness in the new South Africa*. New York: Three Rivers Press.
- Laub, J. A. (1999). *Assessing the servant organization: Development of the Servant Organizational Leadership Assessment (SOEA) instrument*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Florida Atlantic University.
- Lax, A. *A culture of reconciliation in Africa: The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Transformative justice, the restoration of dignity and reconciliation*. Unpublished paper.
- Myers, D. (1999). *Social psychology* (6th ed.). Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill College.
- Nicholas, L. J. (2000). Expert witness testimony in the criminal trial of Eugene de Kock: A critique of the posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) defense. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 30(1), 33-36.
- Orr, W. (1998). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *Continuing Medical Education*, 16, 142-143.
- Sendjaya, S., and Sarros, J.C. (2002). Servant leadership: Its origin, development, and application in organizations. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 9(2), 57-65.
- Smith, B. N., Montagno, R. V., and Kuzmenko, T. N. (2004). Transformational and servant leadership: Content and contextual comparisons. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 10(4), 80-92.
- Sparks, A. (1994). *Tomorrow is another country: The inside story of South Africa's negotiated revolution*. Johannesburg: Struik Book Distributors.
- Spears, L. C. (Ed). (1998). *Insights on leadership: Service, stewardship, spirit, and servant-leadership*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Spears, L. C. (2005). The understanding and practice of servant-leadership. *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*, 1(1), 29-45.
- Spears, L. C., and Lawrence, M. (2004). *Practicing servant-leadership: Succeeding through trust, bravery, and forgiveness*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Staub, E. (1989). *The roots of evil*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tatum, J. B. (1995). Meditations on servant-leadership. In L. C. Spears (Ed.), *Reflections on leadership* (pp. 308-312). New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Terrell, M. N. (2004). Making truth fit: The Truth and Reconciliation



- Commission, its misunderstood gift and its underanalyzed legacy. <http://www.stanford.edu/~jbaugh/saw/ManonTruthReconcil.html>
- The Holy Bible*, NIV. (1984). Grand Rapid, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.
- Tutu, D. M. (1999). *No future without forgiveness*. New York: Doubleday.
- Villa-Vicencio, C., and Verwoerd, W. (2000). *Looking back, reaching forward: Reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press.