

A Human Being Died That Night

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, April 23, 2004

Recent national elections in South Africa came and went without a hitch. No corruption. No violence. How on earth did that country, which ten years ago was wracked with killing, imprisonment, and terror, pull it off? Simple, and not so simple, forgiveness.

Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela is no stranger to tragedy. She was five when military tanks rolled through her black township near Cape Town, firing at anti-apartheid demonstrators. In her child's eyes, the tanks were "huge monsters."

That wasn't the first nor last time Pumla would know violence bred by the oppressive apartheid regime that mandated a draconian separation of people according to race. Crimes committed during bitter decades of political struggle are part of South Africa's troubled legacy. Wounds were raw when apartheid was finally dismantled, and the black majority formed a democratic South Africa under Nelson Mandela. To begin a process of healing, in 1995 the government established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a process in which victims could lay bare their pain and perpetrators confess. As a member of the commission, Dr. Gobodo-Madikizela sat beside Bishop Tutu listening to anguished testimony.

It was the story of the country's most brutal covert commander, nicknamed "Prime Evil," that led Pumla to ponder the power of forgiveness. During commission hearings in 1998, Eugene de Kock, the mastermind of apartheid's murderous operations, asked to meet with some of the widows of the men he killed. After the encounter, one of the women told Pumla she was profoundly touched. "I was overwhelmed by emotion, and I was just nodding, as a way of saying yes, I forgive you," said the widow. "I hope that when he sees our tears, he knows that they are not only tears for our husbands, but tears for him as well." That outpouring of empathy spoke volumes about the human capacity for forgiveness. But, Pumla wondered, was de Kock worthy?

After 46 hours of interviews with the death squad chief in prison, Pumla found her answer. In her newly released paperback, "A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Story of Forgiveness," she describes a man whose memory is littered with corpses. "But for all the horrific singularity of his acts,"

she writes, “de Kock was a desperate soul seeking to affirm to himself that he was still part of the human universe...a human being capable of feeling, crying, and knowing pain.”

When de Kock broke down in tears talking about the widows’ husbands, without thinking, Pumla reached out and touched his hand to comfort him. She touched his trigger hand, the one he’d used to kill and maim. The next morning, she couldn’t lift her right forearm. It was numb. Her brain, body, and soul were in turmoil. She’d gone beyond her role as a psychologist. Should she seek to know—and possibly forgive—this killer?

During commission hearings and her interviews with de Kock, Pumla found that when victims and perpetrators started talking, the healing often began. Survivors were hungry for information about their loved ones. The three widows had asked de Kock every last detail of their husbands’ deaths: What were they doing? What were they wearing? Victims who confronted perpetrators during asked similar questions: What did my father say before he died? Did he fight back? Where was he when he was shot? It was almost as if by knowing what happened they could ease their loved ones’ passage to death—and mourn in peace.

Not all criminals confess. Not all criminals express remorse. But for those who do, there’s hope for transformation. “To dismiss perpetrators simply as evildoers and monsters shuts the door to the kind of dialogue that leads to an enduring peace,” says Pumla. In a world troubled by conflicts, it’s important to know that cycles of political violence can indeed be broken. Forgiveness may seem like weakness, but it actually empowers the victim. “For just at the moment when the perpetrator begins to show remorse, to seek some way to ask pardon, the victim becomes the gatekeeper to what the outcast desires—readmission into the human community.”

I drove with Pumla through her old township. Saw the tiny house in which she grew up. Even after ten years, unemployment is rampant and the neighborhood is depressed. But Pumla understands that hate only perpetuates loss. She and millions of South Africans have chosen a different way.