CHANGEMAKERS

THE FORGIVENESS ISSUE

Ginn Fourie and Letlapa Mphahlele
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Welcome
By Davina Patel
September, 2014

This summer we welcomed Ginn Fourie and Letlapa Mphahlele, protagonists of the award-winning film Beyond Forgiving, to the UK. Their powerful story has captured the hearts and minds of many. The film takes you through the journey of two South Africans bringing healing and reconciliation to their country post-Apartheid. One has suffered directly from actions of the other, but both have been victims – and risen beyond their pain. What brings them together is a profound story of tragedy, forgiveness and hope.

In this special edition of Changemakers we look deeper into this issue of forgiveness and reconciliation through storytelling. We hope that Fourie and Mphahlele’s story continues to inspire bridge-building across the world’s divides.

Beyond Forgiving

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Intitiatives of Change is a worldwide movement of people of diverse cultures and backgrounds, who are committed to the transformation of society through changes in human motives and behaviour, starting in their own lives. We work to inspire, equip and connect people to address world needs, starting with themselves, in the areas of trustbuilding, ethical leadership and sustainable living.

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Please contact us with your views:
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and Oxford. Marking 20 years since the end of Apartheid, this was a chance for people in the UK to hear a moving story of tragedy and hope and how it is possible to go beyond forgiving to break the cycle of vengeance.

A journey of forgiveness

From Oxford's dreaming spires to Belfast's peace line, the message that Fourie and Mphahlele carried was that forgiveness is not a destination but a journey. At South Africa House, London (19 May) His Excellency Mzimela also commented on the forgiveness journey that provides lessons for the world. A similar sentiment was echoed by historian Dr Peter Shambrook in Durham. Forgiveness and reconciliation is a process, a journey over many years. A journey with no map.

There is little doubt that Fourie and Mphahlele’s visit to the UK has inspired and captured the hearts of new audiences across the country, different cultural backgrounds, religious communities, and for both old and young. But what is the meaning of forgiveness, how does this make you feel and why is it important? These were questions that Fourie expertly facilitated and encouraged audiences to reflect upon at each event.

The forgiveness challenge

In London’s East End with the Life Line Institute (20 May) hands shot up from the young British gathering obviously inspired by the film who had little awareness before that day of the social injustices of Apartheid; the years of conflict around the world or the movement towards restorative justice.

With razor sharp questions, the young group attempted to make sense of the circumstances of how a white Christian woman could forgive a black atheist man for killing her only daughter.

A young boy asked Mphahlele, “So the lady forgive you for what you did but could you forgive yourself?” This was a common question that was also raised by a young man at the Royal Geographic Society event. Such clarity and pertinence startled and moved many to reflect on how to cultivate forgiveness in their own lives. Mphahlele’s response was soul searching. He challenged us to rethink the way we treat ourselves around self-forgiveness, with dangers and links to suicide attempts, eating disorders and alcohol abuse, critical in the psychological well-being and spiritual health of an individual.

 Forgiveness misconceptions

A common misconception of forgiveness was posed at various screenings: Does a person need to apologise first before somebody can be forgiven? In Durban, an Australian lady asked the question of Fourie. “You were able to forgive before there was a sorry” In Australia the “sorry” has been refused as it is seen as an empty gesture... Forgiveness is different to saying sorry.

As Fourie commented, forgiveness should not be confused with condonation. While condonation is important it depends on the person being forgiven and for further and deeper communication to happen both ways. It is well known that Mphahlele refused to apologise at the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) and talks candidly of why he would not apologise. Mphahlele said, “For me saying sorry is as good as not saying sorry if it’s not followed up by action... I was not prepared to face the TRC as I believed it was a sham where those who were accompanied by lawyers manipulate what was not the truth.”

In Q&A sessions following the screenings, an audience member in Bradford, who had lived and worked in Namibia said, “The film just talks to your humanity.” Fourie admitted that the act of forgiveness was an affirmative ‘restoration of our humanity’. She described her raw emotions from feelings of numbness and anger: the futility of why her daughter had to die, to re-gaining her composure and humanity by following her heart.

Could you forgive? The lingering question remains for each one of us and how this relates today. Despite the circumstances that defy comprehension Fourie and Mphahlele have every reason to hate each other but are inspirational in that they have found a way to move forward – both being victims of Apartheid.

As Fourie observes, forgiveness is something that is entirely up to an individual; reconciliation is where two people come together in mutual respect and requires both parties working together. Although reconciliation may follow forgiveness, it is possible to forgive without re-establishing or continuing the relationship.

Fourie and Mphahlele both emphasised the reason why they were able to undertake this journey was that forgiveness is something we all long for. For many, the healing power of forgiveness allows people to move on without grief and pain in their lives.
A terrorist or a freedom fighter? Letlapa Mphahlele a black South African, atheist and ex-combatant demonised the people he was fighting against and stands as a controversial figure who ‘had no choice to armed and violent resistance’. From prisoner to guerrilla combatant, he rose from a fledgling cadre to senior command in the Azanian People’s Liberation Army (APLA) - the armed wing of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). As a youth, on the run seeking refuge across the African continent he endured a turbulent, nomadic life in exile for nearly 20 years. He defied South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), in which individuals, in return for amnesty, can ‘declare their past crimes and admit remorse’, and escaped criminal sentence for his command in the Heidelberg Tavern massacre (1993) responsible for the killing of four civilians.

Following Mandela’s release from prison in 1990, South Africa looked forward to its first multiracial elections with the hope and optimism for racial reconciliation in dismantling and tackling the decades of oppression, poverty and inequality. As an anti-Apartheid revolutionary, political thinker and philanthropist, Letlapa walks in the shadow of the late Mandela (Nobel Peace Prize, 1993). With continuing violence and no ceasefire by the South African Defence Force (SADF), this triggered a train of retaliatory attacks by the black liberation movement APLA that sent shock waves through Cape Town - described as a ‘slaughter of innocents’. Mphahlele was the APLA military commander who ordered retaliatory attacks and the Heidelberg Tavern massacre where Ginn Fourie’s only daughter Lyndi aged 23 was killed.

Surprisingly, Letlapa does not think the responsibility for his command in the killing of innocent civilians nor does he shy away from the tough decisions or controversial social issues his country faces today. Letlapa sadly observes, ‘South Africa is suffering from “soul sickness” – we are not a normal society, we have not taken the exercise of healing to its logical conclusion.’

Today, Letlapa is the President of PAC, a politician, and an ambassador promoting ‘freedom, peace and cooperation’ through the Lyndi Fourie Foundation. A man of many sides, he is also a renowned author, poet and philosopher. He impresses with his directness, integrity, a man who simply loves his country and people. He has a great sense of humour, a big laugh and vociferously defends his controversial decisions and political activism. I talked with Letlapa on issues of violence and forgiveness during the Beyond Forgiving UK Tour (18-30 May).

Is the act of violence ever justified?
So does the act of violence not pose a great personal conflict for you, I ask? I questioned his motives and the justification for the part he played in the Cape Town killings and his subsequent evasion at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). As a freedom fighter, Letlapa openly justifies his decision for violence in war. ‘The conditions of oppression and exploitation called for resistance… I felt strongly I had to play my role, no-one agitated me, no-one recruited me – but the circumstances resulted in my need for action.’

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If you don’t indicate, young babies are being raped and these for me are all manifestations of ‘soul sickness’ – the propensity towards violence… This is a country that cannot disengage from an ingrained culture of violence… So 20 years is too short a time to cure people who have been afflicted by this disease over centuries.’

An act of forgiveness

Whilst injustices and war are often blamed for needless innocent deaths, the reasons behind the violence in Letlapa’s eyes were justifiable. Twenty years on, I asked why had he refused to apologise or take part in the TRC process.

Letlapa responded, ‘It was a just war and there was no reason to apply for amnesty or apologise for the attack. I did not think that it is a good precedent for a freedom fighter to ask for forgiveness for fighting for freedom otherwise what message does this give.’ He adds, ‘I was critical of the process of TRC because the outcome of TRC did an injustice to the struggle of liberation and those who were oppressed… I was not prepared to face the TRC as I believed it was a sham where those who were accompanied by lawyers manipulate it was a sham where those who were accompanied by lawyers manipulate… So 20 years is too short a time to cure people who have been afflicted by this disease over centuries.’

Letlapa describes that moment of forgiveness as ‘a restoration of his humanity’. He comments, ‘Yes, it was. Ginn who understood why I could not say sorry. She said it in spite of the pain that you caused me, I forgive you. Now that was like being “struck by lightning” out of the blue on a cloudless day.’

I asked Letlapa how difficult it was to forgive himself? Letlapa answered: ‘Forgiveness is not a destination but a journey… I think that the act of forgiveness, the starting point is oneself, the whole world can forgive you but if you don’t forgive yourself then that act just collapses – some self-destructive decisions that we might take – for example, alcoholism, drug abuse, suicidal tendencies – are because we struggle to forgive ourselves and indeed Ginn encourages me to forgive myself… I have a responsibility to accept the gift of forgiveness, and that in itself, is the gift I give to Ginn and the entire world.’

But also for Ginn forgiveness is a challenge with a ‘burden of guilt’ that weighs heavily for the acts of her British colonial ancestors. She says, ‘We have shared each other’s blood for the injustices in South Africa.’ This act of forgiveness was poignantly demonstrated at Letlapa’s homecoming ceremony when she asked for forgiveness. Letlapa spoke of the significance: ‘At the end of the war we have to make peace so that there is co-existence… Ginn delivered the most moving speech of the day and she got the loudest applause – louder than I got after nearly two decades in exile… Ginn stood up and asked for forgiveness from the people on behalf of her ancestors… She understood me where other people couldn’t understand these terrorists still being unapologetic… but she understood that this person is remorseful.’

Can forgiveness be a substitute for justice?

For justice to be achieved it is assumed that when a crime has been committed, if found guilty, appropriate sentence is given through the criminal justice system and served. In restorative justice, bringing victim and perpetrator face to face, offenders are still held to account for what they have done and required to take responsibility and make amends. With Letlapa’s impassioned rhetoric: ‘You cannot reconcile the dispossessed with the oppressor’, has his position changed and does he believe forgiveness can be a substitute for justice?

Letlapa is very clear in his response: ‘For me forgiveness should not substitute justice. I was more than prepared to be tried in a criminal court to answer for my actions… Even after Ginn had forgiven me I did not go to withdraw charges. The justice factors should be independent from what people do in forgiving and not be part of legislature.’ Letlapa added: ‘Today all forgiveness and conciliation is concentrated just on one rail to the detriment of another… Reconciliation should not move strictly on one rail – that of morality and religious belief that is deemed to be good. Reconciliation and forgiveness should move on two rails – that of social, political and economic justice.’

Ginn also comments on the need for a justice that beckons us all to take collective responsibility. ‘Just imagine if in our woundedness, separation, alienation and loneliness, we acknowledge our complicity in the injustices of the past. Reach across the divide as individuals and communities and then hold ourselves and our leaders accountable.

Forgiveness is an endless subject with no clear answers. The debate on whether violence is justified remains controversial. Letlapa stresses he does not feel the need to ‘apologise’ but it does raise the paradoxical issue of doing the wrong thing for the right reasons and the duality of the world we live in.

‘South Africa is suffering from soul sickness’

Today, Letlapa voluntarily works with Ginn through the Lyndi Fourie Foundation to help others, through conciliation, heal from the wounds of conflict and war. He concludes: ‘When people say who was Lyndi Fourie the story will be told and retold and Lyndi’s name forever will be associated with conciliation.’

In Letlapa’s home town trees have been planted in memory of those killed by the bullets of APLA. An outward gesture of sorrow for the blood of innocents that has seeded forgiveness and hope in South Africa and beyond.

‘Reach across the divide’
Ginn

‘Ghosts of the past still haunt us, in the pain and violence enacted by many’

It has been a blessing to hear so many insights and know that we all struggle together. I am excited that through our story we were able to raise consciousness.

‘Ghosts of the past still haunt us, in the pain and violence enacted by many’, reflects Fourie who challenged the British public to face their own complicity in the injustices of past actions. The effects of colonialism and the exploits of the British Empire are still felt by many across the world. ‘We have to come to terms with our colonial past’, admits Fourie. ‘We need to recognise the humiliation and shame and then treat each other with dignity, tolerance and acceptance.’ For Fourie and Mphahlele, it is clear that true reconciliation can only be achieved.

Facing up to the injustices of the past

By Davina Patel

The Dalai Lama once said that the fabric of society is kindness. Without kindness, compassion and care for individuals, society cannot succeed and develop. So how do communities repair when violence leaves scars? South Africa is an example of a country torn apart by wars, colonialism, slavery and Apartheid, but one woman’s story of forgiveness gives hope to a nation still living with the effects of war.

‘Without forgiveness there can be no future for a relationship between individuals or within and between nations’ – Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

South African Ginn Fourie, a mother who lost her daughter to Apartheid in the Heidelberg Tavern massacre in 1993, has forgiven the man (Letlape Mphahlele) who ordered the fatal attack. Her story of forgiveness and reconciliation shared in Beyond Forgiving, has inspired many with her courage and conviction. I met Fourie who, along with Mphahlele, toured the UK attending screenings of the award-winning documentary, sharing their journey with people from all backgrounds, some with their own bridges to build. Fourie said: It’s been a great learning experience hearing other people’s experience of facing discrimination, the hurt and the pain.

‘We have to deal with the skeletons in the cupboard that come tumbling out.’
by talking honestly and openly about what has happened in the past and then change the systems that marginalise some groups which result in poverty. 

“We have to deal with the skeletons in the cupboard that come tumbling out. That consciousness has to be raised. Feelings should be examined. Until it is acknowledged we cannot go into the future with peace’, explained Fourie who attended Mphahlele’s homecoming ceremony to ask for forgiveness on behalf of her ancestors for the role they played in the Anglo-Boer War. She said: ‘I told them that I had spoken to my ancestors to know why we were in this situation that we are in, in South Africa. They said they were deeply sorry for the hurt and pain that they had caused through slavery, colonialism, the Anglo-Boer War and then Apartheid. Fourie explained that her ancestors, and others, ‘had come to South Africa from Europe to flee religious persecution and poverty. They were unable to express their hurt and so they caused the same pain and suffering to the people here... they are sorry... they seek forgiveness for their demeaning and degrading attitudes and behaviour.’

For Fourie the Anglo-Boer War was directly related to Apartheid, as she explained, ‘through the fear of humiliation from the Anglo-Boer War, Apartheid was the way out. It was not the intention but it was what it became. The Whites needed to rise to the top and they did that by oppression (Apartheid).’ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was the first attempt to bring forgiveness into national thinking. ‘We must absorb the humiliation and violence in order to move forward but it is not easy, it is hard to absorb, the closer and the more painful it is.’

Today, South Africa still faces inequalities and segregation but according to the South African Reconciliation Barometer, which measures racial and social attitudes, a recent survey showed that the majority of South Africans do want a unified country. However, inequality is the biggest barrier to reconciliation. The survey revealed that less than 40 per cent of South Africans socialise with people of another race, while only 22 per cent of white South Africans and a fifth of black South Africans live in racially integrated neighbourhoods. Just 11 per cent of white children go to integrated schools and 15 per cent of black children.’

For the past 30 years, the number of integrated schools in Northern Ireland has grown dramatically. Commenting on the visit to Hazelwood Integrated College in Belfast, Fourie said, ‘integrated schools are the hope for the future; through secularism everyone is divided and living apart and there’s no human connection or moral compass. It is most impressive that families of all religions come together to learn.’ According to the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, ‘in 32 years the number of children educated in integrated schools has grown from 28 pupils in Lagan in 1981 to nearly 22,000 today. Integrated education is a vital in building a united community away from religious divide and segregation.

Fourie’s faith played a fundamental part in her journey of forgiveness. As a Christian, she ‘cherished the memory of Christ forgiving his murderers. Since then I have come to understand forgiveness as a process which involves the principled decision to give up one’s justifiable right to revenge. Because to accept violation is a devaluation of the self.’ She reiterated that ‘forgiveness is part of moving from victim to survivor to wounded healer’. When I spoke to her about her faith she said, the ‘root of all humans is spirituality, it is our means of connecting with ourselves, each other and the divine, which transcends religion, ideology and rigid ways of seeing the world.’

Together with Mphahlele, Fourie has set up the Lyndi Fourie Foundation (LFF) which aims to bring healing for ex-combatants and their families who suffer from post-traumatic stress of which flashbacks, paranoia, and rage result in addictions and family dysfunction. One of the communities that LFF works with is the San people who migrated from Angola and Namibia during the liberation wars and have been resettled on a farm called Platfontein near Kimberley in the Northern Cape. They have not been integrated into South African society and feel isolated and disadvantaged. Poverty, unemployment, alcoholism, domestic violence, suicide and HIV plague this small community. The LFF has set up a youth empowerment project supporting children and young people in gaining skills for employment, support in education and conflict resolution, among others.

By sharing their story of forgiveness, conciliation and hope in South Africa and internationally, Fourie and Mphahlele are able to support countries struggling with conflict. Initiatives of Change South Africa is partnering with the Lyndi Fourie Association International to host an international conference called ‘Freedom – Our Responsibility’ aimed at inspiring a new culture of sustainability, empowerment and integrity. The conference will be held in Bloemfontein, South Africa from 26 to 30 September 2014.
What inspired you to share Ginn and Letlapa’s story?
I met Ginn and Letlapa 10 years ago at an international peace conference in Switzerland organised by Initiatives of Change. As it happened, Howard Grace, the Executive Producer of the film, was there. We and the audience were deeply moved by their standing together to tell their story. At that moment, we developed a conviction to make a documentary film about them.

There are many conflict areas in the world where there is deep pain on a vast scale. One of these conflicts is Israel and Palestine, my homeland. I believe that our film can bring a glimpse of hope to a world torn by conflict and violence and make a difference to them. If people can see that even in the direst circumstances forgiveness is possible, then many of us can at least forgive those who cause us small upsets in our daily lives.

What lessons can we learn from their story?
Beyond Forgiving shows that it is possible to forgive, but that it requires a degree of empathy and humanisation. Forgiveness can bring about healing and reconciliation. It is important to move beyond forgiving into action that can inspire others and bring about healing. Despite living through the horror of injustice, inequalities, violence and personal loss, it is possible to transcend the hurt of the past and go beyond forgiving to help others build bridges across divides. Their story shows us and inspires new ways of living.

Our hope is that Beyond Forgiving will inspire people to be positive agents for change within their own communities and play their part in building a better world. Initiatives of Change believes that change comes from within and that individuals can take personal responsibility, whether it be in their own personal life or community, to make a real difference to help change society for the better.

As a Palestinian, do you think forgiveness and reconciliation are possible between your home country and Israel?
Yes I certainly hope so, but to reach that we need first of all to arrive at a political settlement which deals with issues of occupation, domination, fear and security. For me, it is a privilege to work on this inspiring story because as a Palestinian I can draw a parallel between the Apartheid period in South Africa and the situation in my country.

To see that people who used to be completely at odds in extreme positions are able to look back and feel how horrible it was, gives me hope that one day in Palestine we could see a peaceful coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians.

Tony Blair said that he believes passionately in the two-state solution, but also believes that it can only be achieved by a negotiation with Israel. He is quoted as saying: ‘The truth is that transformational change is impossible unless it goes hand in hand with a political process.’ Do you agree?
First of all Blair is a politician and he speaks like one. However, I do agree that peace through negotiations is the best and even only option, however, unequal warring parties need outside help or pressure to move beyond their positions and reach a degree of empathy that can then bring about a just solution.

What do you think would help build peace between Israel and Palestine?
Pressure from outside, especially from the friends of Israel, to bring about a realisation that dominating the destiny of another nation can’t continue indefinitely, will not bring security to Israel and ultimately is not in the best interest of Israel. I’ve become more convinced than ever that there is no solution without serious international pressure and even intervention.

Palestinians and Israelis are not equal parties in any sense of the word. They can’t be left to sort it alone, either on the negotiating table or in the ‘field’. Israel sees that it has a right to exist and to defend itself but is blind to the injustices that it is inflicting on another people. We, the Palestinians, have a legitimate right to freedom and self-rule, but can’t see that our militant actions are bringing us no closer to our aspirations. Both parties will only change with the help of serious international pressure that would see them reach a final settlement to be put to both peoples in a referendum.

So, a greater empathy by the Israeli public and awareness of the daily violations of Palestinian human rights by the Israeli occupying forces in the Palestinian territories is needed. Also, for the Palestinians to be united behind a strategy of peace and to give peace negotiations a chance by denouncing all forms of militant resistance while adopting a strategy for non-violent resistance.
The Wilderness Foundation, partner of the Beyond Forgiving initiative, hosted the South African protagonists, Ginn Fourie and Letlapa Mphahlele, in Northern Ireland on the Beyond Forgiving UK Tour. 

The Belfast visit was facilitated through Irish and English partnering organisations: The Wilderness Foundation, Hazelwood Integrated College (HIC), Start360 and INCORE (International Conflict Research Institute). All partners recognise the role that wilderness can play as a medium for effective change in conflict resolution and leadership development and how models for this can be shared across the world.

The Wilderness Foundation is a socio-environmental charity who use the power of nature to educate, address social issues, and measure the benefits of nature to society and individuals. Major projects include supporting young people ‘at risk’ to change the destructive course of their lives to become valued contributors in society; cultivate a network of young leaders to lead their communities to a better future; evaluate the impact of wilderness on the reconciliation process between former political adversaries and ex-combatants in Northern Ireland and South Africa.

Jo Roberts, CEO of the Wilderness Foundation, believes the role of the wild is vital in retaining our sense of humanity given the frenetic nature of today’s society. She comments: ‘The Wilderness Foundation has been a pioneer in using wilderness as a positive force for social change. This has been achieved by taking political, business and community leaders, as well as historically disadvantaged youth, through our programmes which allow them to experience wild nature – often for the first time. The basic belief is that wilderness is the foundation stone upon which society has existed from time began – it is a blueprint for life. This sense is often lost when people become highly urbanised and do not have access to nature or wild areas in which they can escape the pressures, noise and activity of our cities.’

Youth at Risk

Young people from Hazelwood Integrated College, one of the first interfaith schools located in the middle of Belfast’s peace line, and Start360 (formerly Opportunity Youth), met with Ginn and Letlapa on the tour. Kathleen Gormley, Principal of Hazelwood College, commenting on the pressures and need for strong leadership in Northern Ireland says, ‘the visible sign of reconciliation is in our school crest and the journey which has been made by Hazelwood is a lesson to anyone in leadership to have the vision and stick to it and not bow down under a weight of negativity.’ To hear the Beyond Forgiving story was a chance for the young people to voice their opinion around healing and forgiveness.

Speaking at the event, Roberts highlighted how adolescents can...
commonly face peer pressure with regards to gang involvement, violence, alcohol, drugs, sex and pregnancy that potentially place them ‘at risk. Wilderness and Start360 both provide services to young people including peacebuilding and justice programmes, personal development and self-esteem growth. Anne-Marie McClure MBE, Director of Start360 and a former nurse, who helped set up the organisation in 1993, says, ‘Our aim is to make a real difference to young people’s lives and to build a safer community in Northern Ireland.’ Their work involves acting as mentors for young people in custody, and working with adult prisoners who face drug or alcohol addiction, amongst their many services.

Drawing on the Foundation’s flagship initiative, Roberts outlined the compelling benefits for wilderness intervention for the youth at risk, using examples from their project in Essex: ‘The TurnAround Project in the UK is an intensive intervention that aims to address negative behaviour in youth at risk. Over the course of a 12-month period, project beneficiaries engage in wilderness trails, monthly nature-based activity workshops and regular mentoring sessions with community-based volunteers. The aim or outcome is for youth to return to education or employment on an ongoing basis on which they average an 85 per cent success rate each cycle.

Commenting on the psychological and social benefits that wilderness can offer participants, she says, ‘It represents a personal growth process and the majority of participants learn how to manage their behaviour and express their emotions (ranging from anger to love and affection) constructively whilst being pushed well out of their comfort zone. As the programme progresses, the frequency of negative events reduces, criminal activity declines, substance abuse improves and they display less anti-social behaviour. Thus, major differences in their behaviour are observed between the beginning and end of the programme.’ The Wilderness Foundation measure their outcomes in a key partnership with many years with the University of Essex.

Roberts states: ‘The project instigated positive change for all concerned and young people leave the programme with better self-esteem and communication skills; enhanced psychological health and wellbeing; a new set of coping skills; strengthened family relationships, greater awareness of personal behaviour patterns, a renewed interest in school and a set of future goals and challenges to address. They are also more hopeful about life which is a key to continuing to move forwards.’

Peace cultivation

Wilderness interventions for reconciliation have long been used by organisations such as the National Peace Accord Trust (NPAT) in South Africa working with former combatants from the Apartheid struggle. Roberts recalls her youth: ‘Growing up in Apartheid South Africa, and luckily from a politically aware family, encouraged me to be deeply interested in people, justice, politics, inhumanity/humanity and the meaning of life in general. I could not be bland, or disinterested in life, because each time I looked out of a window I was confronted with the reality of South Africa and what was going on between its people. At 16 I remember hearing about the riots in Soweto on the radio... whilst feeling disconnected from the reality of the situation, as we were in an all-white, privileged private school and had never met with our black 16-year-old counterparts in the townships... We were so far apart socially and geographically we could have been on different planets. This was something I wanted to address and be sure my children were never so cut off from others in the same way.’

Working with peacebuilding partnership programme, Sustainable Peace Programme, Roberts pays tribute to fellow South African Wilhelm Verwoerd’s work, and says: ‘The Sustainable Peace Network in Ireland emerged from the Glencree Survivors and former combatants programme... to promote dialogue and sustainable relationships between victims/survivors, ex-combatants and the wider society in Ireland and Britain between 2002 - 2008.’

The development of the ‘ex-combatants programme’ has built ‘bridges across the world divides’ as it took one loyalist and one republican ex-prisoner to South Africa. Roberts comments, ‘The visit included exposure to South Africa’s political transition and the socio-economic inequalities arising from Apartheid. A central feature was a shared wilderness experience, facilitated by the Wilderness Leadership School.’ For a few days two former enemies were walking together in a place of unspoilt beauty, crossing crocodile infested rivers, sleeping on the ground, protecting each other while on guard duty against dangerous animals. The friendship that grew out of this experience echoed similar results achieved with employing Wilderness to bring South African ex-combatants together.

It was fitting that the Beyond Forgiving Tour ended at 174 Trust (a new Healing and Reconciliation Centre) in the centre of Belfast. This part of the tour was in association with INCORE as part of ‘The Accounts of the Conflict’ project based at the University of Ulster, and its Director Professor Brandon Hamber. Hamber who also worked as a key facilitator and lead on SPN, commented: ‘Even with the best of intentions, such as to promote reconciliation after deeply divisive events by “turning the page”, erasing the past can prevent new generations from learning critical lessons while forever compromising opportunities to build a peaceful future.’ With a sentiment for responsibility towards change Mphahlele also comments: ‘History is just in process... we cannot wait for politicians or leaders to make the decisions to pave the way. It is the chance for each and every one of us to take part in the on-going processes of change.’

Wilderness: a symbol of humanity

Out of discussions and storytelling around campfires in the wilderness grew the idea of the Wilderness Foundation – to acknowledge and honour the web of relationships, interconnectedness between wildlife, wild places, human beings and urban environment.

The symbol of the Wilderness Leadership School is the Erythina Tree (Msinsi in Zulu) - a natural trinity of life. The ethos of the Wilderness Foundation is: ‘The Msinsi is a tree found in the wild and also in the settlements. It is our job to take people from the settlements to the wild and then bring them back again. The leaf has three points and each point contains a message – Man to God, Man to Man and Man to Earth.’ As our two South African protagonists continue their journey and carry the message of forgiveness across world divides they share much with the Wilderness for the ‘restoration of humanity’ and social change.
Forgiving my alcoholic father

Charlie Ryder's father, Patrick, was an alcoholic who battled with his addiction until he died of lung cancer when he was 72. For him and his family it was a disease that destroyed precious relationships and caused hurt and trauma to loved ones. Despite the pain, Charlie chose to forgive him; a journey that he is now walking.

Charlie's parents and grandparents were born in rural Ireland. He recalls the historical underlying issues that were not dealt with. "I think there was a lot that went on in Ireland at that time, a lot of wounding, a lot of trauma. It is still a recent history and I think when my dad was in this rural area, times were quite tough. When they came over to England, there were a lot of unresolved issues that didn't get talked about. I think there was a lot that went on, a lot of selfishness and by forgiving him I came to realise that I would be a much happier person and it would help me to break this cycle so that I wouldn't become an alcoholic." 

This journey helped Charlie to rebuild his relationship with his dad. "Alcoholism contributed to his lying, self-pity, selfishness and by forgiving him I came to realise that I would be a much happier person and it would help me to break this cycle so that I wouldn't become an alcoholic."

Al-Anon helped break the culture of denial, and by admitting there was a problem they were able to move forward to an ongoing journey of forgiving his dad. "Forgiveness has allowed us to move on and share the love we had for him. In his last few weeks he was in a lot of pain as he had lung cancer but he reached out and let us hold his hand. In these moments we got to share love with our dad. I feel that it is an assumption that if you say it is forgiven then it's all dealt with. At the funeral I deliberately said that for me this was an ongoing journey. I said there will be flashbacks and things that need to be worked through. It is important that we talk about that. There will be new things that come up and new things that we learn."

At the funeral, Charlie recalls, he felt anxious about his mother giving a eulogy and addressing his father's addiction. "I'm glad she did get up and speak, because my uncle didn't really want her to talk. In the morning I had to be really firm with him, and say 'actually she is going to talk, and I don't care what you think.' There is a fear that exists, a fear of shame and not wanting to talk about the alcoholism. It was important because she cared for him and had been with him for all those years."

Continuing his journey, Charlie is having singing lessons and working with musicians to make a song about his father and the alcoholism that consumed him. "One of the things I want to do is have guitar lessons because I think with things like alcoholism conversations can happen when you do things like musical poetry."

For Charlie it is clear that forgiveness is a journey, one that can inspire others to follow a similar path. "Forgiveness has given me a place where I could just be honest with people and they understand. We could just share experiences, and it helped me to understand that it was an illness, a disease. Listening to other people put me on a journey of forgiveness."

This journey helped Charlie to rebuild his relationship with his dad. "Alcoholism contributed to his lying, self-pity, selfishness and by forgiving him I came to realise that I would be a much happier person and it would help me to break this cycle so that I wouldn't become an alcoholic."
A re-humanising gift

by Marina Cantacuzino
Founder, The Forgiveness Project

What is it that so inspires us about former enemies coming together in a spirit of peace and reconciliation? Retaliation may be our default position, and yet frequently we find that conflict resolved through compassion motivates and encourages us far more than conflict resolved through revenge.

Take for example Nelson Mandela’s statement following decades behind bars: ‘I knew if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind I’d still be in prison,’ or the recent story from Iran of the mother of a murdered son, who had no intention of sparing her son’s killer from execution until the moment she saw the noose around his neck. Both examples have inspired millions of people around the world to support peaceful solutions to conflict.

There is a particular scene in Beyond Forgiving that audiences across the UK seemed invariably moved by. It is when Letlapa is talking about the gift of forgiveness handed to him by Ginn. He describes how it was not something he was expecting, certainly not something he deserved, but it transported him to an entirely different landscape. ‘Forgiveness was like being struck by lightning, out of the blue. In a cloudless day lightning strikes you… it is the opening of a world which was until then closed to you,’ he says. These are powerful words because they sum up the magnitude of the gift of forgiveness. Forgiveness isn’t a pro-social act born out of the victim’s generosity but a rehumanising gift emphasising the humanity of the perpetrator.

During the 10-day speaking tour, the story was a public demonstration of how Ginn’s forgiveness of the man who gave the orders for an attack that killed her only daughter could rehabilitate the offender, assist in a victim’s recovery and generate healing on a personal and societal level. Again, as Letlapa said, ‘It was only when people extended gifts of forgiveness that the roots of my heart were shaken and something was restored inside me.’

Their meeting and the subsequent work they have done together to promote peace and understanding around the world is an example of reconciliation in a profoundly human sense, in Letlapa’s words through ‘meeting soul to soul, person to person.’ It would appear that to listen to the other’s story when no one else will, or when you’ve been deeply hurt or violated yourself, is the greatest catalyst for change in countries with a history of sectarian violence.

The story of these two remarkable South Africans, a relationship clearly based on honesty and integrity, was presented to audiences across the UK as people unpacked their own stories and related to the pain of others. Referencing her own ancestors’ responsibility for their Anglo-Boer past, at times Ginn would challenge the British audience about their own complicity in the injustices of the past, namely colonialism and the exploits of the British Empire. The insinuation was that it is the responsibility of the living to heal the dead.

The reason why this story was so compelling, and why Beyond Forgiving is so important, is that this healing narrative can illuminate the way ahead on a dark and tangled road – whether for groups or individuals. As Letlapa says, ‘Storytelling is part of the healing process, you release and share something verbally. It’s a catharsis.’ And this catharsis isn’t just for the protagonists but also for those of us who choose to embrace the journey with them, to be able to see, as Ginn puts it, ‘the woundedness of the other’.

To buy your copy of Beyond Forgiving or No Enemy to Conquer please call Initiatives of Change on 020 7798 6000 or visit www.uk.iofc.org

Apartheid.

Never believe there’s nothing you can do, it lies with us to stand together for peace. – Terry Waite

‘I found the film to be extremely humbling and moving. We have had our own well-documented troubles in Northern Ireland and I found myself feeling guilty that so many people here seem unable to move on from the past when Ginn & Letlapa have been able to do so in such a profound way. I now find myself thinking twice in situations where forgiveness is an option as opposed to bearing a grudge or retaliating.’

Jordan McNeill, Year 11 Student, Hazelwood Integrated College

‘Really powerful, moving and inspiring #BeyondForgiving.’ – Dipesh Dhimar

‘It is amazing to see how just two people can inspire change and reconciliation in communities torn apart by wars and secularism. We all have a responsibility to make this world a better place.’ – Louise Cook

‘We’ve burdened our youth with the duty of protecting us from a repeat of our dreadful past #BeyondForgiving.’ – Matthew Pitman

Never believed this was possible.‘ – Steve Plant, Director of the British Council

‘It was only when people extended gifts of forgiveness that the roots of my heart were shaken and something was restored inside me.’ – Letlapa Mphahlele

‘I knew if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind I’d still be in prison.’ – Nelson Mandela

‘It was only when people extended gifts of forgiveness that the roots of my heart were shaken and something was restored inside me.’ – Letlapa Mphahlele

‘I knew if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind I’d still be in prison.’ – Nelson Mandela

‘I know this response well from having created The F...’ – Marina Cantacuzino

‘For me, forgiveness is a journey of discovery...’ – Letlapa Mphahlele

‘It is the opening of a world which was until then closed to you.’ – Letlapa Mphahlele

‘It was only when people extended gifts of forgiveness that the roots of my heart were shaken and something was restored inside me.’ – Letlapa Mphahlele

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Be the change you wish to see in the world