Annalet van Schalkwyk

ON STIGMATA, RACISM AND RECONCILIATION IN A POST-TRC SOUTH AFRICA

For Willem, who knows pain...

My mother had the charism of bleeding for people. She would stand washing up at the kitchen sink, the tears dripping from her cheeks onto her work-roughened hands and trickling into the soapy water as she washed the dishes one by one. She wept for the people of the town and the people of the location; for the clinker-brick Dutch Reformed Church at the top of the main street and for the little whitewashed "iDutch" church on its dusty hill in the location. She wept for people ripped apart by wealth, poverty, self-righteous religion, violent laws, prejudice. In some metaphorical sense her tears had the density and weight of blood. They were heavy drops of compressed pain and compassion welling-up like blood from the wounds of her eyes. These stigmata bled and bled until grief cleansed her and opened up her heart and arteries, until, once again, her love could flow to the people she was called to serve. Might her compassion have been one tiny channel of redemption in a torn community?

CAPITAL PARK

Not long ago there was a double murder in our neighbourhood. This couple lived quite close to us, just across a busy throughway from where we live. Hans had served along with my husband Henk on the committee of the local Residents’ Association. Like most Capital Park residents, he was politically right-of-centre and adjusted to the new South Africa rather pragmatically. He was a warm-hearted man and well known throughout the community. His wife was a teacher who worked hard and conscientiously for the children of a primary school in Pretoria-North. In her home she had a display of fine old porcelain, which she loved.

The news of the murder swept across Capital Park like a tidal wave. Each member of the community felt the impact of the atrocity. The general reaction was that “we have to do something about it.” The Residents’ Association called a public meeting, and for the first time in its existence just about everybody was there. The local town councillor was there, the minister of the local Dutch Reformed congregation and his wife, old people who had...
lived in the area for decades and young families who moved into Capital Park only the other day. There were businessfolk and teachers, retired civil servants and army officers from the old dispensation, rich people and poor, English speakers and Afrikaans-speakers. There was even a solitary Coloured family. Towards the front of the hall, a few Rambo types kept getting to their feet to air their views. Most of them had bulging shoulder and arm muscles. They swaggered a bit whenever they rose, like wrestlers ready to climb into their opponents. One of them wore a revolver and some kind of knife in leather holsters at his belt. His wife sat next to him; her finely manicured little hand rested passively on his massive knee. Her big eyes stared in a rather dazed way at the people around her. It transpired later on that most of the Rambo’s had seen medium to long service in the old Army. One of them, a short man with a rugby player’s build, was still a sergeant in the Air Force.

At the end of the evening’s consultations, everybody willing to join the Police Reservists was asked to remain behind. The “Rambos” stayed, also some committee members of the Residents’ Association and a few other people. Henk and I stayed too: Henk in his capacity as Mr Chairman, and myself in the guise of madam the Chairman’s wife. In fact, I simply felt curious—and plain obstinate to boot. I wasn’t going to let this meeting take place without being toned down by our presence; it was the least we could do. The discussions went on as before. Reasons were suggested for the rise in the crime rate. One man, a building inspector, thought a decline in the income level of Capital Park residents was making them willing to take lodgers into their outbuildings, even corrugated iron and wooden structures in their backyards. Many of these lodgers, according to him, were vagrants who had no stake in the community. Some were petty criminals who circumspectly occupied themselves in robbing the neighbouring houses. The building inspector felt it a pity that innocent, impoverished white families in the backyards should suffer, but there was no choice: the whole category of undesirable backyard dwellers would have to be evicted by the Municipality, since “they” (it was clear what “their” predominant pigmentation was) were nothing but a source of trouble. For the large numbers of black domestic and other workers who lived in backyards to be close to their jobs, there was no pity at all.

Another solution was more pragmatic. An ex-Army officer suggested mounting rotating infra-red cameras on tall poles to record all movement in the area. This elicited the following bit of wisdom: “But “they” will simply steal the cameras off the poles or throw stones and break them!” That was the end of the idea of pole-mounted cameras.

Another ex-Army officer, a much older man — and also much better
attuned to political realities – felt that much of the traffic through Capital Park and the “Moot” area consisted of people walking from the various railway stations to their workplaces. “These people are not a problem;” he said. “A lot of them are “our” people. The dangerous ones are the loafers and hobos. Many of those have motives of another kind. We need to get these elements out of the neighbourhood by using the law to our advantage.”

“I sat there wondering: How do you set about doing that legally? Do you introduce the pass system all over again, this time giving the passes to people who are formally employed in the Pretoria city centre and adjacent suburbs? What about the hundreds of job-seekers who pour into the city day by day? Some of whom, no doubt, help themselves to what they need if the jobs are not forthcoming? Henk and I fell into conversation with the retired officer: Surely there must be broader ways of looking at the problem? If the unemployment problem is acknowledged, it surely becomes possible to take a different view of people passing through our neighbourhood and gathering in groups on the sidewalks at certain points, such as the local homeware shop, to offer their services to passing shoppers and motorists? Then, surely, one can think of different ways of helping or at least accommodating the job-seekers - and the hobos who also flock to the main streets? Like the sisters at the Iona Convent who tried to organise a feeding scheme, with very little support from the community? But the retired colonel found it difficult to accept that unemployed people who are here for valid reasons are as much a part of our reality as the Witwatersberg hills that bound our suburb. These people are a potential security problem and will remain until the necessary has been done to suppress crime and to “cleanse” the area of undesirable elements.

That more or less summarises the tenor of the evening’s talks. Henk and I, the “covert lefties,” had to watch our step not to aggravate the mood with our talk about human rights for criminals and undesirables, and to keep our footing as participants in the discussion by Capital Park residents of solutions to the very real crime problem in our neighbourhood. Henk is far better than I am at this “walking on eggs,” yet we managed to keep on reminding the others that we were talking not about “houtkoppe” or the “k” word but about fellow human beings and black people. And that “we” should indeed treat “them” as fellow human beings. Did we make any contribution to the measure of sanity which did triumph in the end? Maybe. At any rate, we escaped unharmed from our encounter with the Rambos.
THE LESSON OF TEARS

But the next morning I was not so sure that I had survived. I was due to
attend a tea party in honour of one of my colleagues, but I didn't make it to
the tea room. I got stuck in my office, impaled by a familiar muscular agony
(I am subject to a condition, not unlike rheumatism, which affects the
shoulder and neck muscles). Or was it the vengeance of the Rambos, who
had been watching me throughout the night and now pounced on me like
wild black cats with cruel claws? Lest I seem to have gone completely off my
rocker, let me explain myself a little. When in pain, one is capable of
imagining the most dramatic and fantastic scenes and of exaggerating and
distorting experiences and perceptions - sometimes with good reason.
Because pain can force you to look afresh - or askew? - at something of
which a different perception has long been needed. And so the madness of
pain brings with it some wacky new visions of reality, as well as a measure
of sanity - sprinkled with a good dose of sardonic humour.

So, through a haze of pain, I happened to look at one of a pile of books
on my desk: a workbook (Shifting paradigms: Using an anti-bias strategy to
challenge oppression and assist transformation in the South African context)
of the Early Learning Resource Unit (ELRU) compiled in the hopeful years
after 1994 (published in 1997.) I had recently ordered this book for a course
on Racism and Reconciliation to be written by a colleague and myself; and
here the book was, right in front of me, with its bright hopeful cover. A road
sign indicated "New South Africa," and the opposing signs pointed to the
edge of the picture: "Oppression" and "apartheid." The "New South Africa"
road was being braved by many courageous, inspired "new South Africans"
carrying banners of green, yellow and orange, inscribed 'Affirmation',
'Inclusivity', 'Democracy', 'Equality', 'Respect' and 'Trust'. Looking at this
image of the road to the New South Africa with its brave banners fluttering,
I burst into tears for no apparent reason. Because these images were simply
too far removed from my experience of the previous night? Or - worse -
because I don't know whether my own immediate world contains nearly
enough people who walk this colourful road to the New South Africa and
who accept and apply all these lofty terms?

In the neighbourhood where I live, most white people think exclusively
and in isolationist terms about their group identity - and view those people
who regularly travel through Capital Park with some enmity or at least with
total disinterest. Like the man on the dangerous road from Jerusalem to
Jericho (Luke 10), the unwanted black people have to travel through the
hostile environment of Capital Park to get on with the daily business of their
lives. How ironic the recent crime plague in Capital Park is! In the wider South African context, who is in fact robbing whom? Are the unwanted people robbing the white middle class citizens, or are the white middle class robbing the unwanted black sojourners? Yes, our urban landscapes of isolation and estrangement may create pseudo-safe spaces where middle-class, mainly white families can live behind burglar bars, steel fencing or high walls which barely contain their over-aggressive watchdogs, but they also create a landscape of estrangement and dispossession for the black sojourners who migrate through them, or who stay in backyards for shorter or longer periods, while their weekend or month-end homes are kilometres away in peri-urban ex-bantustans like Hammanskraal or KwaNdebele.

I admire and respect many of my black fellow Capital Parkers for their fortitude and resilience in making themselves at home in a place where, in most white people’s eyes, they are not welcome. You hardly ever see a white person giving a friendly greeting to a black person in the streets of the neighbourhood. Now that I think about it, greetings from black to white may not be quite as rare. White employers rarely affirm black employees by giving them good wages and living conditions and yet there are the hopeful ironies of black and white children playing soccer together in the park down the street; black middle-class families – even black business people – gradually moving into the neighbourhood, co-existing quietly and peacefully with their neighbours; or white couples relying on workers with whom they have had friendly and reciprocal relationships for many years – even if it may have been the old-fashioned paternalistic kind. But the majority of decent church-going citizens still inhabit the old South Africa in which the term “democracy” largely connotes a situation where criminals and undesirable elements get away with “human rights.” And so the list runs on, of the Old South Africanisms with which we are forced to live every day.

On the morning after the encounter with the Rambos, the weight of this list was too much for me and the contrast that confronted me was even worse. The previous night I had been in the lions’ den of the Rambos, far away in the Old South Africa; that morning I looked at a dream image of how things are supposed to be in the utopian New South Africa. I had to get an intellectual grip on these two truths (one of them more dream than reality, the other more reality than dream), and I simply couldn’t do it. So I responded in a “typically female” way by resorting to emotional sadness and my tear glands.

Later, in a somewhat more cynical moment, I would laugh at my absurd effort to reconcile two very irreconcilable realities – the post-1994 realities of an old white civil-servant Pretoria neighbourhood on the one hand and the utopian vision of a high-minded and progressive artist on the other. For the
moment the discrepancy overpowered me. I could only sit there crying about my aching body and my mind could not grasp the cruel contrasts and injustices of my motherland. I went home and cried my heart out, and then allowed my pragmatic husband to remind me that after all last night's meeting had not been so bad; that there had been a number of fai rminded and decent citizens among the Rambos, people with whom one could work for security and solidarity (which might, one day, include both "us" and "them") in our neighbourhood. Yes, that there are even a subversive handful of white residents who accept the presence of the black poor in our midst and work for their inclusion.

When the whole incident was over, my mother and her ability to weep for others came to mind again. And I thought about the colleague who walked into my office on the day of the crying bout. Having asked me what was the matter, she commented that it was a good thing somebody cried about the things I had been crying about. (Of course, there had also been the other colleague who asked what I had been doing in the Rambos den in the first place!)

I don't believe crying is a particularly productive use of one's time. (I do believe it is sometimes unavoidable, and then it is best to get on with it in the hope of emerging with a somewhat clearer perspective). Even less do I believe that one should play a martyr's role, either at one's own hands or those of others. The history of Christianity and that of various other religions abound with cases where martyrdom was used as a means to justify retribution which would lead to further oppression and abuse. Just think of the crusades during the medieval times. And feminists are only too aware that women disempower themselves even more by placing themselves in a martyr's role – as though it is the Father God's decree that the weaker vessel should suffer and sacrifice ... And yet, as Tertullian had it; "the blood of the martyrs is the seed out of which the church will grow."

So I concede: there is a role for suffering and for the experience of pain in one's inherently religious relationship with other people, with nature and with the divine; or, to put it differently, that suffering and compassion are a part of our human and created reality. It is part of reality not because God is a cruel and wrathful God, but because God is himself compassionate and – because of his merciful identification with us in the incarnation – a vulnerable God. The whole of creation is, in fact, always passing through a process of dying and rising again, of death and rebirth and because God is always present in the midst of these processes (McFague 1987:72-77;129).

Perhaps the Oriental religions are somewhat more in touch with the coming and going, the death and life, the fading and flowering, the eternal "it is" of reality than Christians manage to be, with their excessive death-life
dualism. This reality is symbolised well by the figure of the Hindu deity Shiva, portrayed as god of destruction, change, transformation and recreation (Wasserman 1993:65). Fritjof Capra, in his well-known book *The Tao of physics* (1983:249-272), depicts the image of a dancing Shiva from the 12th century which is superimposed by 20th-century physicists on the rhythmic patterns of subatomic particles. Thus the eternal dance of Shiva, the perpetual coming and going, the cycle of repetition and destruction, transformation and recreation, the everlasting balance of opposites, is depicted not in the metaphysical world only but also, in physical reality ... in terms of the tiniest particles of which the cosmos is composed.

As a Christian, I am not drawing a random or even fatalistic parallel between the blood of the martyrs (the seed of the church), evil and redemption, and Shiva’s dance of destruction and recreation. Where the Oriental religions provide a metaphor for the “it is,” the eternal flow of the *Tao* of reality, the Christian tradition in turn explains how God walks with people through the awesome and shattering processes of decay and death, resurrection and recreation.

Here I simply state my view of an understanding of God as belonging to the Christian tradition, but I recognise that the entity whom we call “God” may be far greater than the collective knowledge of a single tradition can encompass. To me – in my experience of faith, history, human conflict and suffering, and the celebration of recreation and transformation – *God-with-us* is the God of intimate friendship, compassion and empathy. The God who shares our human experience because he, or she, also took on humanity and lived as a human being (Heb 4:15-16). The God who knows all the pain of history’s old wounds that will not heal completely – no matter how hard we work and pray for the building of a new land. The cross of Christ is at the heart of this sometimes indissoluble knot of old and new which refuses to unravel and evolve into something totally new. The cross of Christ is itself the bridge to what is new and hopeful. In our history, in the wider course of world history and the cycles of the cosmos, Christ will walk with us again and again in times of crisis and challenge until we see the Realm of Peace realised in and around us.

**THE EUCHARIST AS A WAY TO LIBERATION**

On this note: the celebration of the eucharist may serve as a valuable entry point for Christians’ participation in the post-TRC phase of South Africa’s history. Denise Ackermann (1998:76-101) writes about the practice of liberating theology in a post-TRC South Africa, a South Africa suffering from
the trauma of transition. According to her, one can enter into this traumatic reality only by a litany of mourning for the wounds inflicted by the perpetrators of our apartheid past. I would like to add to her view by suggesting that we should keep on mourning, as our country continues to struggle with the legacy of apartheid in terms of the poverty-and-wealth disequilibrium, crime and moral decay, and continuous estrangement between different groups of people in our country. But mourning can be hopeful and healing if we enter into an experience of sadness by means of the eucharist. Or — to put it differently — if we enter into our reality through the wounds in the body of Christ, we might find a way into a future of healing and resurrection. The eucharist may help us to find meaning and direction in our mourning. It may enable us to understand mourning and to find its significance for our lives in a post-TRC South Africa. As Denise Ackermann (1998:96) says:

Facing the irresoluble enigma of human suffering and then learning to live in that vacillating zone between acceptance and rebellion, is strangely healing. The psalms have much to teach us here. Lament of victims dares to rail against God and the inexplicability of suffering. Then, virtually in the same breath, it turns to praise. Divine silence is assaulted with tears, petitions and then with praise. In the midst of all the questioning, we find a God in whom we can truly trust. In Walter Brueggemann’s words, we find a God ‘whose impotence is reshaped by pathos’. 

This is possible because the paradoxical celebration of the eucharist takes us back to the memory of Christ’s wounds and suffering (and to the memory of our own and our neighbours’ suffering), but it also leads us through suffering towards thanksgiving and celebration, because God blesses us with the gift of new life through the death and resurrection of Christ (Ackermann 1998:99; Louw 1985; Moltmann 1972). This eucharistic journey from pain to new life may be compared to the narrative therapeutic approach through which hurt people may remember their most traumatic experiences and heal these experiences by bringing them into the open in a compassionate and accepting environment. Recounting and narrating their life experiences may then lead them to “re-author” or rewrite their life stories and discover what is hopeful and strong in themselves (Kotze 2001:1-12; White 1989:5-28).

It seems to me that this eucharistic therapeutic journey is necessary both for the perpetrators and beneficiaries of apartheid and for its victims. Both parties are not only suffering from the inhumanity of our apartheid legacy but from the distress of change and transition. The present time of transition, through which our society is moving, is not the dream-come-true of the artist Carole Howes who created the utopian image for the cover of
the ELRU workbook. It is not what we hoped it would be in the euphoric days after the 1994 elections. It is closer to the somewhat uncomfortable "it is," the reality of both destruction and creation, through which the dancing figure of the god Shiva hauntingly moves.

Chris Langeveldt (2001:327) depicts this South African reality of continuous violence, animosity and pain when he comments as follows on the lack of conversion and/or healing in our society:

The recent inquiries into racism in the media, the adversarial politics punted by various political parties, and the spate of brutal attacks on the elderly, children and youth point to the lack of real conversion at the affective and socio-political levels within our country. The legacy of pain, humiliation and suffering generated by apartheid and colonial rule still festers within the body politic. The consequences of sick economic and political policies still need to be undone. At the affective level many of our people, especially women and children, have been and continue to be traumatised. The feeling worlds of many of our citizens have been damaged by self-doubt, humiliation, aggression, fear and brutalisation.

People are in need of healing, empowerment and the re-establishment of their realities.

This reality of racism, violence, hurt and the legacy of oppression is felt by both sides of the old (and still persisting) racial divide. And according to Langeveldt (2001:322-324), both sides need conversion and healing. People on both sides need to go into their own inner worlds of experience to find healing there, so that they can be able to relate to others (in their own communities and in communities of the "other"). This cyclical movement of turning inwards to oneself, then outwards towards the other is what we call conversion. Conversion involves an individual surrender of one's life to God as well as an ongoing transformation in terms of our affective, intellectual, moral, religious and socio-political life. Conversion is thus a process of shifting values and horizons rather than the adoption of a different creed. It refers to a movement away from individual and collective irresponsibility towards responsibility and accountability to oneself as a person, to the community and ultimately to God.

To come back to the eucharist. From the Christian perspective, conversion — and healing — can only take place through our collective eucharistic therapeutic journey, by entering into the death of Christ and by participating in the resurrection of Christ. This re-authoring of our lives through Christ will help us re-define ourselves in relation to God and to the other.

In Langeveldt's (2001:325-328) opinion, this relating with the other (or the "welcoming" of the other) is now, in the first decade of the new century, the strategy which activists should adopt in order to transform and heal our society. Analysing the material conditions underlying capitalist development and colonialism alone and struggling against these oppressive forces, like
during the late modernist years of the 1980’s and early 1990’s, is unable to reveal the depth of our need for integral liberation. We now have to go further in our resistance against oppression and violence. We need to undergo a profound shift in the way we understand our relations with others, the earth and God. We have to heal the interconnecting links between the members of our nation and the human race, in order to move into a new phase of liberation and transformation. The healing of relationships becomes an issue of passionate justice. Justice now has to be understood in term of the restoration of right relationships between people, with all the material and spiritual consequences that such a project of restoration holds for especially the marginalised, the poor and the severely wounded in society (Hess 1998:51-74; Van Schalkwyk 1999:184-186; Maluleke 1997:324-343). Shiva must start to dance a celebratory dance of restoration.

For this to happen, Christian activists have to embody reconciliation in the way in which they participate in the church community as well as in the wider society. They have to be exemplary in the way in which they act as social agents (Volf 1996: 22) in order to reconcile brokenness and restore community. Forgiveness, repentance and the acceptance of responsibility and accountability in one’s private and political life does not depend on isolated words or actions. It depends on embodying reconciliation, justice and restoration in one’s whole life, as one interacts with one’s own inner world and with the broader socio-political world (Vosloo 2001:25-29). It depends on our willingness to mourn in the light of our wrongdoings and brokenness, reach out in vulnerability to the other and have the courage to embrace and to be embraced. It depends on forming our identity not in terms of exclusion, but in terms of our openness towards the other, our willingness to define ourselves by relating to others (Volf 1996:119-156).

But how do we do this? How do we deal with our past? How do we handle guilt? How do we forgive those who have committed atrocities against us? How do we find conversion and healing? How do we live with the “other” who is so far removed from us? How do we transform and restore our society which has suffered, and is suffering, under such severe injustices? Can we do all this within the limited space of an individual life? Can we do this on our own? Again, the only answer that we as Christians have on these tricky questions is to remember the wounds of Jesus Christ through the celebration of the eucharist, to enter into his death, his sacrifice and his forgiveness; and finally, in faith and hope, and to embody his resurrection in our work for the healing and restoration of our nation.
CONCLUSION

In conclusion: when my ever-so-tolerant husband, Henk, read the introductory narrative about my "Rambo" experience, he commented that the passages reveal to him that I distance myself from the Capital Park residents and that I don't accept them for who they are. I replied that I know that it is the case, and that I needed that "distanced" angle to write about my experiences. Perhaps I was justifying myself a little. To be fair, I wrote it in that way because I have all along been struggling to deal with the "otherness" of the Capital Park (white) residents. I could not bring myself to embrace them for who they are – although I found many of them to be attractive and authentic characters, even if in another cultural and political paradigm than my own.

I think I started to allow myself to embrace the white Capital Park residents only once I allowed myself to show my true colours to them (we interact with each other in a Residents' Association which is supposed to be "non-political" but whose business is in reality determined by serious underlying political issues and attitudes). At our last meeting, I was quite outspoken about the fact that we have to include our "informal residents" of our neighbourhood who stay in the backyards, as well as our rising number of black house-owners, in our proceedings. If we do not do so, I argued, we will soon find ourselves to be isolated from the developments on local council level, in the Greater Tshwane region – even if such developments are sometimes problematic and not well-negotiated with the wards. Afterwards, our local Councillor told me that I said the right thing and that we had to recognise that our only strategy for the future could be to think in this inclusive manner – that it would in fact also protect the interests of the white residents. The other committee members were still somewhat uneasy with me, but I found them to be much more honest and direct with me than before. Some reciprocal acceptance of "me" and "them" was starting to take place. I think we are now entering into the "drama of embrace" which Volf (1996:140-147) describes, which allows for space to be different; for time to overcome hurt and suspicion; and for identification with each other – as well as for the recognition of the authentic identity of the other and the identity of the self. Henk, of course, is involved in this dance of embrace since he first started to be involved in local community affairs. He enjoys the humour and the irony of such encounters.
LIST OF REFERENCES CITED


