

# Peace and Beyond



Re-memory and transferred  
trauma: dealing with the  
past in post-conflict settings

Candice Mama

# Re-memory and transferred trauma: dealing with the past in post-conflict settings

Candice Mama



In her opening statement at her session at Peace and Beyond, Professor Pumla Goboda-Madikizela said: 'How to deal with trans-generational trauma in post-conflict societies is one of the most urgent questions of the 21st century.'

That set the tone for the conversations that would follow. What are the solutions to dealing with intergenerational trauma and how does intergenerational trauma affect victims, perpetrators and the new generation?

The panellists and delegates had come from over 20 different countries from around the world. Some countries were dealing with past conflicts; some had conflicts still ongoing. We came to Belfast to learn from their experiences in dealing with the past and planning for the future.

### Intergenerational trauma and mental health

The chair, Professor Joanne Hughes, started the session by addressing the idea that a generation of young people in Northern Ireland continue to be affected by a legacy of conflict that lasted more than 30 years, and is reflected not least in the deep segregation that continues to characterise daily living for young people from the two main communities (Catholic and Protestant). Other manifestations of the conflict years were noted, such as high levels of unemployment and social deprivation in some areas, substance abuse and mental health issues.

As community worker Jackie Redpath stated later in the session, this has given rise to Northern Ireland having the highest suicide rate in Europe, with far more people taking their own lives within the newfound peace than during 30 years of conflict.

Northern Ireland statistically has the highest amount of PTSD compared to other conflict-affected areas. PTSD and traumatic memory, or, as Professor Pumla referred to it, 're-memory', was a theme touched on by all speakers during the session as the biggest hurdle to moving towards dealing with traumas of the past.

Professor Pumla described traumatic memory as being inscribed in individuals and forming a persistent narrative of suffering, both individually and collectively. She stated that it was only through confronting and being able to work through the past that those affected could move forward. I articulated my belief that the problem stems from the lack of understanding of past conflicts and reimagining what exactly occurred. The latter is often reflective of poor historical education and inadequate debriefing of those who had been directly affected by the conflict.

During the discussion I used my own personal case study to illustrate the effects of choosing both to ignore and address the issues of the past.

**'It was only in going through this process that I had enough information and context to forgive my father's killer'**

## Case study

*I was born in 1991 in South Africa, a country that was gripped by the grossly violent and oppressive system of apartheid. This is my story.*

*My dad, Glenack Masilo Mama, was brutally killed in a vicious and unjust time in our country's history. My memories of him were nothing but compilations of different people's stories and pictures we collected over time.*

*However, the one thing I knew for sure about my father was that he had been tortured and then burnt to death by a man named Eugene de Kock. De Kock was a former South African Police colonel. In 1996, he was sentenced to two life sentences plus 212 years in prison on counts including crimes against humanity, murder, attempted murder and kidnapping.*

*In September 2014, The National Prosecuting Authority reached out to my family to enquire about whether or not we would like to meet him. As many would imagine, it wasn't a decision we came to without many dinner-table discussions and some trepidation from members of the family.*

*We agreed to schedule our meeting for the following Tuesday. In the days to come, a sense of self-reflection overcame me. I went on to read numerous articles and books about the man dubbed 'Prime Evil' and his legacy as the face and embodiment of an unjustifiable system of hate and oppression. In meeting him I was choosing to learn and confront my past memories.*

*Growing up in a house where reading and reflections were encouraged, I was able to contextualise my dad's killing. Which, in my mind, made his death mean something. He died fighting a system and wanting a different country for my brother and myself, which we are extremely fortunate to now be living in.*

*This made me realise I couldn't hate de Kock because love and hate cannot operate in the same space. If I wanted to resent him, I would never be able to fully enjoy the life my dad and so many others willingly or unwillingly died for.*

*He had robbed me of a father and I had subconsciously given him 16 years of my anger, anguish, sleepless nights and bouts of severe depression, as well as suicide attempts. Then one day, I just refused for him to take away my joy and enthusiasm for life any more than he already had.*

*So I did what I had to do and I forgave him.*

*At the age of 23, there I was with my family ready to finally meet the man who took away not only my father, but so many others. I was surprised at how I froze and allowed my mother to lead the line of questioning until I became present again.*

*With every question asked and every answer given, my empathy grew for this complete stranger, who spoke so sincerely that I couldn't help but let my defences down.*

*I looked on in awe as I witnessed myself crying not because of who I had lost, but because I saw a man who was created by a regime and who took the fall for a government. A man who lost so much more than I would bear had I been in the same situation.*

*I left having felt like I had just been lucky enough to meet one of the most brilliant thinkers of my time and someone who was also a victim to a system of indoctrination. I had forgiven him then, but having met him, I can say I have been changed by this encounter forever.*

*A few days later I went on to write an open letter to our judicial system. It included the following:*

*'The African National Congress's strategic objectives are to build a united non-racial, non-sexist and prosperous society. I believe in order to do that and fulfil the vision of the greats like Nelson Mandela, we have to go through the reconciliation process as a country, because there can be no progress without reconciliation.*

*As was the mantra within the struggle: 'The main enemy is the system and those who continue to support the system.'*

*Therefore, should we not extend a courtesy of fairness to a man who was ordered to commit those atrocities in the same way we extended a courtesy of fairness to those who ordered him to commit them?*

*This doesn't make Eugene de Kock a martyr in any way, shape or form. It does, however, mean we remove the venom in our system as a country to move forward uncrippled by the past.*

*As former statesman Nelson Mandela said: 'Forgiveness liberates the soul.'*



As a member of the 'next generation', the statistics given by the panellists on mental health affecting youth in post-conflict societies today resonate with me. It is important that the youth affected are neither invisible nor voiceless, not simply statistics. This is the value of sharing and reflecting on personal stories during dialogues such as that offered by the Peace and Beyond workshop.

Another deeply profound personal story was shared by Ziaad Saab, President of the Lebanese peace and reconciliation NGO Fighters for Peace. He clearly recalled that as a young man, he listened to stories his family would tell and retell about his grandfather's role as hero and martyr during the revolution against the French Mandate. He noted: 'It wasn't hard for me to pick up a weapon for the first time.' He subsequently became a leader in the military wing of the Lebanese Communist Party.

Through those stories, the traumatic memories of his family was passed on to him. Professor Pumla described this as transferred trauma, in which descendants take on the burden of trauma and adopt it as their own.

## Transitional justice

Ziaad stated that very little transitional justice – that is, measures that attempt to redress the legacy of human rights abuses – had taken place in Lebanon. South Africa had at least held the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which although it was seen as flawed, gave victims a safe place to find out what had happened to their loved ones. Professor Pumla described the process as '...like a brick being pushed off my shoulder.' However, outside of the comfort of 'knowing', she proposed that more needed to be done in addressing the afflicted trauma, and all panellists agreed that knowing is not enough, and that there needs to be tangible action to address the trauma experienced after major conflicts.

Jackie Redpath said there were parallels between South Africa and Northern Ireland, and called the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement as the 'Nelson Mandela moment' for Northern Ireland. It was seen as a major step in addressing the conflict because, as well as the political angle, there was strong engagement from civil society, and thus it felt like it belonged to the people. However, he also stated that what had started as the people's agreement became increasingly political and bureaucratic, limiting the crucial involvement of civil society. The focus on establishing political structures meant that many people did not feel they were reaping the benefits of what they believed was to come from the agreement.

And thus the resonance back to South Africa, where once Nelson Mandela was released there were promises of radical economic transformation and land redistribution. However, 24 years after democracy, and with the Mandela euphoria diminished, there is displeasure among those who believed that there would be more immediate and tangible changes to their living conditions.

As Professor Pumla pointed out, trauma continues to live on when marginalised groups continue to be victimised – and that includes economic victimisation. In South Africa, as well as in many post-conflict societies, many people still live within the confines and restrictions of the past, and thus cannot escape the past.

The post-apartheid generation in South Africa is often referred to as 'born-free'. Yet this is contentious. What exactly are they born free from? Certainly not poverty or discrimination. There remains a very large gap between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots. Next to every wealthy suburb there is an impoverished community; many of the people who live in poverty work for the elite.

In addition, those who have directly or indirectly benefited from the past are placed in better economic situations, receiving quality education and being allowed to live in good living environments – yet many refuse to acknowledge the benefits they received or that they continue to enjoy.

The ongoing inequality gap, and the lack of empathy from those in privileged positions to recognise this and address it, leads to resentment, and the potential for conflict to re-emerge.

## Education's role in intergenerational trauma

One key theme addressed by panellists – representing Northern Ireland, South Africa and Lebanon – and audience members was the need for historical education in schools. There was a strong feeling across the board that this was lacking.

As a speaker on trauma and forgiveness, I have travelled and spoken at high schools and universities in South Africa. One thing that has always stood out very clearly was the failure of historical education. In the question and answer sessions in which I would engage with students, they displayed a lack of understanding of apartheid; often, their only knowledge stemmed from an understanding of racial division as caused by apartheid, rather than the system itself.

Apartheid to them was represented as a past war with only two key figures: Nelson Mandela and FW de Klerk. The significance of this point resonated with opening remarks made by the session chair, Professor Joanne Hughes, Director of the Centre for Shared Education at Queen's University Belfast, when she referred to the need for young people to have access to holistic and multi-perspective critiques of local politics and history through education curricula.

I too remember spending less than six months in the duration of my schooling career learning about South Africa. Most of our historical education was focused on the cold war and conflicts that did not affect my own country. I had to seek my own education in order to be able to fully understand the era in which my father was killed and contextualise it in a way that allowed me the freedom to correct my traumatic memory. It was only in going through this process that I had enough information and context to forgive my father's killer.

Before I took that step, I was like many young people I still see today. I theoretically understood the very basic nature of apartheid, but not its brutality – which raised two problems. The first being that black students understood they were disadvantaged; however, they did not understand exactly how this had occurred. This turn left space for certain leaders to rewrite their own version of history and to radicalise those who had no other understanding. The second issue was that white youth dealt either with a silent guilt they were too ashamed to address, or they believed that they had done nothing wrong and therefore refused to acknowledge any privilege they received.

This has contributed to the development of a new wave of extremist leaders in South Africa who have capitalised on the poor quality of historical education, and the people's frustration at the lack of change within their immediate environments. This has allowed the youth to be more prone to being persuaded by the revisionist history promoted by emerging political parties and leaders.

Education is a vital element in building social empathy. More importantly, it's vital in ensuring the past will never be repeated and, as Jackie Redpath said, 'leave behind a generation that will re-emerge and do greater damage'.

And we should not forget that education need not only happen through the formal education system. Ziad Saab's work with Fighters For Peace shows that. They unite former combatants who had been in the Lebanese Civil war, but only those who have can address their own role and conduct, recognising their mistakes and speaking freely about why they are now committed to peace and reconciliation. They then engage with young people by travelling across Lebanon and holding discussions with them about the war.

This is all in an attempt to address the result that the conflict is considered a taboo in Lebanese society, and it is not taught in schools and universities. Thus the telling of stories is left to former soldiers who may be stuck in the past. As noted above, this risks potentially transferring their trauma to a new generation.

Fighters For Peace also use the arts, such as film-making, to effectively communicate memories and the experience of conflict and suffering in a safe space whereby others can learn, and so those traumatised by conflict can express it in a creative way, and know they are not alone.

When people know their country's collective trauma and past they can choose to acknowledge the pain caused and help ensure it will never be repeated. This gives people space to embark on the journey of personal, and later collective, forgiveness.

I am a passionate believer in my generation, and so I think it is important to encourage more dialogues such as the Peace and Beyond conference, and to include young people and the post-conflict generation, to allow us to be part of the way forward.

Young people no longer want to be spoken for; they want a platform to speak to the issues that deeply affect them in their everyday lived realities. What happens when this doesn't happen? An example is the 'Fees Must Fall' movement across universities in South Africa.

Youth from low-income households have been given the opportunity to attend university; they witness the large gap in inequality, and the gloomy contrast between their reality versus that of their more privileged counterparts. They also note the lack of acknowledgement of both disadvantage and privilege within higher education. All of that, as Professor Pumla noted, means they are constantly reliving a conflict that was supposed to have ended, and be suffering a trauma that has been handed on to them by previous generations.

The Peace and Beyond conference was successful in celebrating the attainment of relative peace in Northern Ireland and various countries that are transitioning from conflict. Furthermore, one of the main advantages of the conference was that it allowed all those in attendance to discuss the lived realities of what happens once peace has been agreed upon, addressing the questions of how those who have fought can deal with their own trauma and avoid transferring it to the next generation, and what the balance is between state and personal accountability in order for peace to be sustained.

When Nelson Mandela stepped out of prison, the hope he symbolised was felt around the world. Many people held on to that dream of a utopian society with the expectation that this would just seamlessly unfold. However, as in my own personal experience, it is up to the nation to equip its people with the capacity and tools to confront the past. Then it is up to the individuals to take those tools and choose to move forward.

What I took away with me from Belfast was the following: that to deal with trans-generational trauma in post-conflict countries there needs to be acknowledgement of the trauma experienced; adequate education for the new generation; and understanding that while hope is crucial, it needs to be accompanied by action.

***Candice Mama is a forgiveness advocate and reconciliation ambassador***

Peace and Beyond was a partnership between the British Council, Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, and delivered in association with the Centre for Democracy and Peace Building.

### **Photography**

All images © Pacemaker Press International