

GETTING TO THE TRUTH THROUGH TALKING

Conflict-transformation expert Dr Brandon Hamber asks what messages programmes like Facing the Truth convey and what else might need to be done to deal with the past

by Dr Brandon Hamber

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The recent BBC series Facing the Truth, which brought victims of political violence face to face with perpetrators, has got people talking.

The dialogues, facilitated by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, are a stark reminder of the suffering caused by the conflict in and about Northern Ireland. It is sobering to think that the cases featured are a fragment of the thousands of stories that need to be told.

The programmes were a bold move and may have helped individual victims. They provide some hope for the future, along with the work of organisations that have fostered similar dialogues over the years, albeit behind closed doors. But we also have to ask what other messages such programmes convey and what else might need to be done to reckon with the past.

Although the programmes are not a truth commission but a dialogue, the central idea leans heavily on the South African experience. It draws on the idea of publicly airing grievances as a way of addressing the past, as championed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. There are profound differences, however. The South African commission's primary focus was on outlining the causes, nature and extent of the conflict through victim and perpetrator testimony. This testimony took place in separate victim and amnesty or perpetrator hearings. Although most amnesty hearings took place publicly, only approximately 2,000 of the 21,000 victims who gave statements to the commission gave testimony in public.

When perpetrators applied for amnesty in exchange for speaking the truth, victims or their lawyers could question perpetrators as to the veracity of their statements but this was not billed as a meeting or as necessarily reconciliatory. The South African commission was not primarily about victims meeting perpetrators and nowhere in its legal mandate does it say it was.

The BBC programmes, presented by veteran Irish reporter Fergal Keane, have now created this myth. Victim-offender meetings did happen on occasion as a result but largely outside the remit of the commission. In addition, such meetings and the commission itself were part of a more extensive political process. This leaves one wondering: Is Northern Ireland trying to walk before it can crawl or are high-profile encounters needed to move the process forward? Given the stalled peace process, the programmes might get people to re-engage with resolving the conflict. The courage shown by participants can demonstrate what is possible despite the dense fog of political dilly-dallying. However, focusing on the victims can also inadvertently suggest that it is the responsibility of victims, rather than wider society, to reconcile as the first step to change, thus burdening victims with another liability. Some victims could feel pressured to forgive, or perpetrators compelled into expressing remorse they don't really feel, especially on television.

The programmes' focus is the stories of those directly affected by or acting in the conflict. There is no context provided or debate about the causes. There was no questioning of the statements given by offenders, thus allowing them to define the truth. Truth commissions traditionally question and try to reach forensic truth.

Emotive television of this type also invariably draws one to the plight of the victims. This is important but conflict resolution is not only about sympathising with victims, important as that is. It demands that everyone across society recognises their own capacity for wrongdoing at the same time. In the project Healing Through Remembering, a five-year-old initiative that brings together over 80 people from different political perspectives each month to wrestle with questions about the past, the issue of considering one's own role in the past is discussed under the rubric of "reflection". Reflecting on the past, not merely remembering it, necessitates that we consider not only victims' suffering but also how we all supported or fuelled the conflict through direct action, our attitudes or our failure to act.

Resolving conflict requires reflection and public debate on levels of complicity and guilt, not only recognition of the hurt caused or confessions from direct actors. This process should be supported by public acknowledgment of hurts inflicted. This leaves no one untouched, and all institutions need to examine their role in the past — among others, paramilitaries, the governments, churches, the judiciary, political parties, the education system and the media.

The view of Healing Through Remembering is that there are no quick fixes and no one is neutral in protracted political conflict. A range of interrelated options for dealing with the past are required, such as a living memorial museum, a day of reflection, a network of commemoration projects, and collective storytelling. For truth recovery, an informed debate is necessary, evidenced by the misperceptions created by the recent programmes. To this end, Healing Through Remembering will shortly be launching five detailed options for truth recovery for public discussion.

There is no doubt that the BBC programmes have stimulated debate on dealing with the past. Questions, however, remain as to whether the focus on victims and offenders, as in the first major media intervention on this issue, has not confounded the reconciliation discussion. It certainly has confused many as to what really happened in South Africa. A more complicated, nuanced and reflexive debate about the past is needed, with a healthy and functional political context and, of course, the media have a role in this. But in the long run, this will demand something more subtle than eerie music and darkly lit forums where victims and perpetrators meet in the glare of the camera, no matter how moving or personally transformative such meetings might be.

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