

Introduction:

Firstly, it is my view that healing of the individual does not occur through remembering unless that which is remembered is the memory of a perpetrator and that remembrance is accepted by victims in a state or condition of willing and active forgiveness.

Time and distance may lessen the pain a victim carries within but it is also the ongoing consequences of a violent act in an individual's life that may sharpen or dull the pain. If life is such that there are constant repercussions or replications of the conditions in which an act of violence occurred, then that victim is not going to heal or be allowed to forget.

Having experienced violence at an early age, the remembrance of that violence has never healed a single thought or moment in my life, in fact there would be times when I still shudder at a certain recalled event.

It is my experience, personal and reported to me, that forgetting heals better than remembering. Often we are advised to 'forget it' and get on with our lives.

This leads to the principle question: *How should people remember the events connected with the conflict in Northern Ireland and in so doing, individually and collectively contribute to the healing of the wounds of society?*

Look at the ways in which events are remembered. As a first example I point to the mass murder at the Bookmaker's shop on the Ormeau Road, Belfast. There are the personal, family memories and stories around those victims, but look at how the public remembrance by the 'community' has become a piece of party political propaganda. Do those families object to their loved ones' memory being used in this way? Do they concur? Does this heal or exacerbate the conflict?

How do people remember Teebane, Darkley, McGurk's Bar, La Mon House or any other atrocity? People remember the positive events in their lives more than the negative: marriages, anniversaries and other celebratory occasions. Our common culture is focused on entertainment, comedy, song, escapism and fantasy, not the grimmer aspects of life and dieing.

It seems to me that the two communities publicly remember in different ways. Recently the Omagh bombing has been blamed on police negligence, is this the way to remember, by blaming others than the actual perpetrators? Again, when the Bloody Sunday inquiry seemed to threaten or expose some well placed persons, a blanket of silence fell upon the local television reporting of awkward facts and dodgy positions. What was the point of this inquiry, certainly the truth did not emerge, merely more lies, half-lies and near truths.

In remembering there are a number of ways in which something is recalled and that depends on the status of those doing the remembering i.e. there is the memory of those who actually do something, there is then the memory of those who witness such events, there is the memory of those who interpret such events, those who transmit the events and those who finally may receive a version of those events.

Each of these memories will be biased according to the remembrancer's personal makeup which in the Northern Ireland context will primarily be political outlook and allegiances, religion and other relevant modifiers.

At An Crann The Tree, since 1994, we have been collecting and archiving individual stories of the 'troubles', without editing or doctoring and without prejudice to any sector of the community.

These narratives can be in any media whatsoever; written, visual images, spoken word or any other form of communication.

Every piece of communicative work that has ever been, has its own narrative sequence which is structured thus: creator/narrator - artefact/thing created - audience. The audience can be a reader or viewer of a piece of 'art' and the dialogue occurs not directly with the creator but with the thing created. It is not the narrator who engages the listener/reader/viewer but the artefact or thing created. Just as the Chinese proverb has it - a picture is worth a thousand words - what the audience takes away is its own personal interpretation of the experience narrated through the image, action, word.

Some of An Crann The Tree's material is now in the public domain through publication, some will never be public. If there is any cathartic value for the narrator it is fleeting and only for the duration of narration and for the next six to eight hours after the event. Such is the human makeup that it cannot allow the organism to dwell on threatening or harmful experience, otherwise it would just die and the will of humankind is to live. It is only when the mind becomes too disturbed that people take their own lives or otherwise cease to function in a 'normal' manner.

Remembrance never heals wounds. At Poppy Day, we publicly remember those we never knew, in a public ritual. In these and other public acts, nothing is healed. In the context of Northern Ireland it is remembering which has motivated countless murders and acts of savagery. All acts of artistic creation are in themselves acts of remembering and retelling of events - an event here can be a thought as well as a tangible physical action. Consider too the illnesses that have afflicted many artists of every kind and the mental and actual variations from the 'norms' that many artists display in their lifestyles. That is not to say that 'ordinary' people cannot use the techniques of art to empower them to narrate their own stories.

People do remember in their own individual ways. The families of the hunger strikers who died will remember in a different way to the public displays of H-Block images presently on view in West Belfast.

This public propaganda has now become part and parcel of conflict culture. There seems to be no healing process only a form of public blame-mongering. It is systemic in both republican and loyalist subcultures.

Can 'healing' be defined for the purpose of this project?

Sub-questions:

What should be remembered?

There should be no prescription in this matter. To even suggest *what*, implies censorship before the event. People will remember what they want to remember - in fact nobody actually forgets anything, just can't recall the experiences - even more importantly, they will recall and relate only what they want to relate. That depends on who's listening, who's recording, and what the individual's own private agenda may dictate.

Fear is probably the most important and dangerous distorter of recall and utterance. In Northern Ireland, there are too many people living in the shadow of the gunmen to be honest in their stories. It is always safe to say something within the comfort zone of conformity to the local 'norm' which may be whatever prevails in a loyalist or republican housing estate and is supportive of the 'cause' and not too critical.

What form could the remembering take?

As stated previously, An Crann The Tree has been collecting and encouraging individuals to tell their story since 1994.

Look at contemporary 'community' remembrancing. Every one of them have been party political propaganda of one kind or another and none that I know of with a shred of humility, forgiveness for the perpetrators, perceived and actual, or any noble virtue that may redeem these acts or give hope for communal healing.

Remembering happens through art, which is probably and paradoxically both the safest and most dangerous way of remembering. It is also the most easily controlled: just withhold a grant and not much gets done. Decide who the artist is going to be and immediately the real story is lost in a plethora of contemporary arts management paperwork and aesthetic principles if there is still such a thing as aesthetics in art. Visual art work tends to vanish into private hands, publications ignored by shops more interested in selling lewd or lascivious tales of the great, the good and the caught on.

Considering how the Bloody Sunday Inquiry has been silenced and those who were involved, shuffled around telling the truth, inquiries seem to be a waste of time and resources. There are over three thousand deaths here, each of which would merit its own inquiry: none of us have enough lifetimes to go through such processes and at the end of the day the only people to benefit will be the legal profession and academics who may make substantial money out of such activities. Unless the desired outcome is to apportion blame, especially to the state authorities, there seems little other point to these inquiries.

If there is to be any national strategy or inquiry, it should address itself to the issue of suicide in Northern Ireland. An Crann The Tree is in the process of producing its own work on this issue. Whilst it is meritorious to support single identity work and cross community activities, there is a large unrepresented constituency, namely the wives and family members of ex-combatants and prisoners. Some of these people suffer the most atrocious abuse which is always put down as being 'domestic' whereas in fact it is abuse perpetrated by maladjusted ex-engagees in conflict.

The evidence from those who have been involved in truth commissions in South Africa and South America is that they serve no useful purpose for the victims. Within Northern Ireland, most deaths have been 'claimed' or 'blamed' on one organisation or another. So, what truth is being sought by any such truth commission that may be foisted on an already hurt people?

Is it a case of seeking some kind of revenge, a version of 'truth' that would be a kind of justification for acts of attrition? Will truth prompt more violence in a society which has systemic violence ingrained into its culture? Will truth emerge from a society in which dishonesty, deception and down right lies is a way of life? What use would court trials serve? After all, perpetrators have been given early release on license, many to re-offend, most never to do so. Many 'ordinary' people already object to these early releases, can it be imagined what would happen if a 'truth commission' was set up here? Truth commissions have only functioned elsewhere when there was amnesty and impunity from legal consequences of confession. Is a truth commission to be another kangaroo court? It is my view that a truth commission will not get to any great truth but will spawn another and greater mess of lies.

The hurdles to any of the suggested processes are simple: fear on the part of some victims, reluctance on the part of perpetrators. Consider the 'missing' and the failure to uncover the bodies of many victims.

Submission to *Healing Through Remembering Project* Dennis Greig
9th October 2001

Despite the public exercise in compassion, the perpetrators could not pinpoint the sites in which their lower echelons buried their victims, if buried at all. It is very probable that many secrets have already gone to the grave when perpetrators have died.

Consider the number of 'active' terrorists who have died: how much they knew is lost, forever. Truth dies unless remembered and terrorists have learnt not to commit anything to paper but are taught to remember and when they die their truth dies with them.

Implications and consequences: more hurt to survivors for one. What is going to happen to perpetrators? Will there be calls for revenge and retribution? Given the embittered nature of our divided society it is much too soon for any public act of remembrance, image or other memorialisation of the past. The Holocaust Museum has failed to halt anti-Semitic acts by Christians upon Jewish people, even here in Belfast, in at least one so-called grammar school, Jewish people are subjected to racial abuse. Nor has all the good will in the world prevented sectarianism and bigotry on massive scales such as we experience in Northern Ireland and the 11th of September in the USA.

What good is it for a victim or survivor to sit in a room and hear someone say, 'I did it', and for that perpetrator to walk away? The African and South American people to whom I listened did not paint a very glowing picture.

Will the Republicans and Loyalists who committed acts of violence and murder tell their story and tell it truthfully? I think not unless there is absolution via amnesty. Look at how the Omagh victims intend to privately prosecute people named in the news media as being responsible for that atrocity. Is this the kind of outcome sought for? The present rule of law is such that a person is innocent until proven guilty, and that proof must be beyond reasonable doubt. In a society which is ready to take revenge without due incontrovertible evidence is not yet fit to face the light of its own ugly truths.

The consequences could be more retributive deaths. These have already happened. People do wait to take revenge, it is human nature and it is inbred in a society which has known little except violence for so long. Old age pensioners are attacked nightly in North Belfast and are denied access to facilities such as shops and post offices on the grounds of their perceived religion: can anyone remotely hope that such a perverted, bigoted society say 'sorry' or ask for forgiveness never mind accept contrition from former opponents?

Even if there is total decommissioning of weapons, there will be too many guns available to anyone who wants them, there will be the continuing growth of violence that plagues our society. It will take generations for the people of this place to step out of the bloodstains: there are places in the republic of Ireland where mention of the Civil War there raises temperatures, can we expect our own hurts to heal over night?

What we need is money and jobs, the removal and not the relief of poverty which is a function of social security measures. The impoverished and undereducated of this society are already criminalised due to the changed rules of state welfare. Do you really expect a sixteen year old from some ghettoised community to give a damn about truth commissions and other hi-faluting social engineering projects?

I don't think this society as a whole could cope with a truth commission, not whilst it is at war, and it is still at war.

Do we need truth and if so whose truth? From what I hear most people in conflict zones have lost the will to live in peace, most seek a kind of vengeance and retribution rather than honest justice.

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There has been in the recent past a subtle deception played upon community activists and politicians to steer them into accepting a 'truth commission'. Certain organisations have introduced the theme under other guises.

Since there are several projects which use remembering in an artistic way to help people tell their stories are already up and running, the only thing that sticks out of the circular inviting a response to the consultation process, is 'truth commission'. Having heard evidence from other places which firmly condemns 'truth commissions', I am personally opposed to the idea in theory and practice. After all, historians write versions of the truth, do we need another layer of academia or civil service nomenclature to cloud the past?

Is the true aim of this consultation to gauge support for a truth commission? As pointed out before, we have arts-based and storytelling projects going since 1994, we have had inquiries on this and that, mostly aimed at embarrassing the government or police. So what's new?

There is now a 'mediation market place': are these successful, are these redundant, are these looking for a successor product? Its bad enough that terrorists should profit from death and misery without another bunch of panacea peddlers offering truth as the latest lifestyle guaranteed success.

As Freud is supposed to have stated, 'when we find the normal man we must cure him'. No one can heal anyone here except the hurt themselves. We cannot even treat our 'normal' mentally ill, so how the hell can we heal the victims and survivors of a conflict and lives amputated by fear?

Look at our life styles: from hours of televised misery aunts and uncles to plug-in air fresheners for people who couldn't be bothered using a spray-can, we are a sick society that is more interested in image than substance. Look at the rotten snobbery that divides our society; golf clubs which insist that visitors and members wear a certain type and colour of clothing, a society which gives jobs to idiots with PhD's than an illiterate with a grain of sense. A society which is fiscally corrupt and morally bankrupt cannot be healed. Class divisions in this country are getting wider, the haves are having more of everything and the have nots less of nothing much. Is this a society in which the truth may be found and forgiveness given?

To summarise: *the remembering process should continue via the existing groups and organisations which are already providing this service or function. The intermediary funders who have handled Peace 1 monies, already know what these organisations are providing and what they hope to achieve in the future. Is there any need for this to be replicated? The levels of funding have been inadequate especially for community based or focused organisations. CRC, Co-operation Ireland and NIVT know what groups have in mind. Truth commissions should be forgotten, these merely expand the scope for hurt. Hurdles are the refusal of funders to adequately fund projects up and running, the unwillingness of survivors to relive their trauma, the twisting of remembrance to party political ends, genuine disinterest by survivors who would rather get on with living. Are we trying to tell people that such remembering is good for them? The premise that healing comes through remembering could be seriously flawed to start with unless infrastructures at every level of society are in place to cope with possible negative outcomes. People will remember what they wish to remember. The implications and consequences could be continuing and worse violence such as South Africa is experiencing, or Zimbabwe or any other so-called post-conflict community.*

Finally, as I stated at the beginning, healing will not come through remembering but forgiving and forgetting. It is my hope that I will forget the past before the past forgets me.

Dennis Greig