Forgiveness in Film: Finding Truth and Reconciliation

MARY HINKLE SHORE

“You want to see that they’re not monsters after all. Then once they show in a genuine way that they truly look back and regret and they’re full of remorse and then you feel that at least there is hope with humanity.”
—Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, Truth and Reconciliation Committee Member, in Long Night’s Journey into Day

“If you believe in God, you must also believe in forgiveness.”
—Magda Grootboom, mother of a slain student, in Forgiveness

In 1995, the South African parliament passed the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act establishing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The commission’s mandate was to create a record of human rights abuses from the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960 to Nelson Mandela’s inauguration as president in 1994, to honor victims by listening as they told their stories, and to consider amnesty for those perpetrators of abuses who had acted with political motives and who gave a full account of their actions to the commission. By the time the commission and its amnesty committee had been disbanded six years later, 140 hearings had taken place in 61 towns; “22,000 victim statements were taken covering 37,000 violations; over 7,000 perpetrators applied for amnesty.”

Two films, one documenting the work of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the other a fiction piece based on similar events, make fine resources for considering forgiveness and reconciliation in both political and individual contexts.

Two feature-length films chronicle the search for forgiveness embodied in South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Long Night’s Journey into Day is a 94-minute documentary telling the stories of four different applications for amnesty and the responses of victims to those applications. Forgiveness is the fictional story of a former police officer for whom amnesty from the TRC does nothing to relieve his torment, and who is driven to seek forgiveness directly from the family of a student he tortured and killed a decade earlier.

Long Night’s Journey into Day begins with the amnesty hearing for those involved in the murder of Amy Biehl, a Fulbright exchange student from the United States who was killed in 1993. Film from the hearing as well as interviews after the fact introduce us to Amy’s parents, to the man responsible for her death, and to members of his family.

Four years after Amy’s death, the Biehls traveled to South Africa to meet the people involved in her murder and to testify before the TRC. At the hearing, Linda Biehl introduced her daughter to the commissioners and the audience, saying,

“Because Amy was killed in South Africa, because our lives have now become forever linked to South Africa, we are here to share a little of Amy with you. Amy was a bright active child. She loved competitive sports, such as swimming, diving, gymnastics among others. Upon high school gradation she went on to Stanford University. Her love of Nelson Mandela as a symbol of what was happening in South Africa grew.”

Testimony like this comes from victims in each of the cases documented by the film. With the simplest of observations about single human lives, those left behind introduce their loved ones to the people responsible for their violent deaths, and the perpetrators come to see their victims as someone’s daughter, or son, or sister. The perpetrators of the crimes also become more recognizably human as they listen to those affected by their actions. In response to the testimony of Amy’s parents, Mongeszi Manqina, who admitted to having been responsible for her death, said, “It made my heart sore to hear how they described her. I didn’t know who she was. I had seen her simply as another oppressor.”

Even though the creators of Long Night’s Journey into Day tell only four stories, their film reflects the reality that by the end of apartheid, violence had spread across the divisions set up by that social system, and the society as a whole needed healing. Part of the genius of the TRC is that it encouraged all South Africans, across all the various categories that had divided them, to participate in the truth and reconciliation process. Both government officials and

---


3Ian Gabriel, Forgiveness (South Africa: Giant Films, 2004). At this writing, the film has not yet been released on DVD in the USA, though it is promised soon from California Newsreel (see above). More information on the film is available at www.forgivenessthefilm.com.
civilians participated. Both convicted criminals serving sentences and some who had never been prosecuted participated. People in each of the former institutionalized racial categories—black, white, and colored—participated. In armed conflicts, combatants and their press agents encourage people to see one side as “freedom fighters” and the other as “oppressors,” or to regard one group as representative of “stable government” and another as “a terrorist faction,” or to otherwise divide participants into those who are good and those who are evil. Perhaps because the TRC heard testimony about evil acts perpetrated by people across the spectrum of social locations in South Africa, its commissioners were able to resist labeling segments of society “the oppressor” or even “the other.” This film, therefore, as well as Forgiveness, leaves viewers with the sense that sin is two things. It is surely harm perpetrated by individuals: A member of the armed wing of the African National Congress detonates a car bomb that kills three and injures scores of others. Police officers scheme to impress their superiors with the murder of seven young men on whose bodies they plant weapons so the youth appear to be terrorists. A young man asks someone in a crowd for a knife so he can stab a stranger to death. Individuals bear responsibility for these deaths.

At the same time, sin is a reality in which whole societies participate. Speaking of the way violence spreads and reproduces itself through so many lives, the former police officer in Forgiveness says, “Once you start something like this, it doesn’t end.” At several points in Forgiveness we see fishnets, as well as caught and caged birds. Also featured is a tiny car that seems to get more and more confining as the three grown men in it travel across the vast South African landscape in search of retributive justice for the policeman who murdered their fellow activist ten years before. The images capture the feeling communicated by the stories in Long Night’s Journey into Day: people were ensnared in cycles of violence beyond their control, and one of the most insidious features of their bondage is that when given a choice, they chose to act in ways that not only did harm to others but also perpetuated the system in which they themselves were caught. Each movie recognizes this paradox. Both individual and corporate sin are real, and while the corporate reality does not absolve individuals of their responsibility for the transgressions of the past, neither is justice served or community restored by attending only to punishment of the individual.  

“both individual and corporate sin are real, and while the corporate reality does not absolve individuals of their responsibility for the transgressions of the past, neither is justice served or community restored by attending only to punishment of the individual”

...
is justice served or community restored by attending only to punishment of the individual.

So then, how is justice served and community restored? *Forgiveness* opens with former policeman Tertius Coetzee (Arnold Vosloo) driving into the coastal town of Paternoster, swallowing pills and looking for the cemetery. When a woman by the road advises him, “You go back the way you came,” we know where we’re headed. Everyone in this film is going back, back to the time, ten years before, when Coetzee was one of the officers responsible for getting information out of college student Daniel Grootboom. Daniel was suspected of violent activity on behalf of ANC aims, and Coetzee was one of those who tortured Daniel and the one who inflicted a fatal gunshot wound to Daniel’s temple.

With the help of the local priest, Coetzee meets the Grootboom family. Daniel’s father, Henrik (Zane Meas), is protective of his family and comments, “There are some things better left in the past.” Daniel’s mother (Denise Newman) appears mystified about what Mr. Coetzee could want from them. Daniel’s younger brother and sister are enraged that the man who killed their brother would dare to come to their home and ask them for anything.

Because of the children’s rage, Coetzee’s quest for forgiveness appears almost before it begins. Within minutes, the former policeman is gone from the home, and preparing to leave town. But when the daughter, Sannie (Quanita Adams), phones one of Daniel’s old friends to tell him about Coetzee’s visit, the friend convinces her to keep Coetzee in Paternoster until he and two others can drive there and kill him.

In the car, before the road trip begins, one of the friends asks the question that may occur to viewers of the film. It has been ten years. The policeman has been granted amnesty. Would the slain man’s friends really drive two days across the breadth of South Africa to kill a man for something that happened in such a different time and place? When Luke (Lionel Newton) expresses reluctance to make the trip, Llewellen (Elton Landrew) explains to him how their killing Coetzee will honor Daniel and avenge his death: “Let me enlighten you about something. The only reason you’re still sitting here today, the only reason you’re still alive, is because of Daniel. Because he kept his mouth shut. Now you think about that for the rest of your life.”

The two days it takes to drive across South Africa is enough time for everyone to travel a decade back in time and forward again. Daniel’s friends renew suspicions about each other and yet stay bound together and driven to reach their target. Daniel’s family members remember old wounds, inflict new ones, and forgive each other. Father Dalton (Jeremy Crutchley) experiences rage of his own and repentance. Eventually it seems the sea and the dead man, Daniel, conspire to grant a measure of peace to several of these characters. Yet nothing about *Forgiveness*—except a great catch of fish that turns mourning into dancing—is easy. At any given moment of the film, we know that various people (including, we suspect, Coetzee
himself) want Coetzee dead. Inasmuch as the light of truth, reconciliation, or forgiveness shine in this movie, that light shines always against a backdrop that is shadowy indeed.

After a recent screening of Forgiveness for a small group of people related to Luther Seminary, the conversation coalesced around three themes that have implications for the local contexts of Word & World readers: the role of the priest in the film, the way that forgiveness is related to paying for what one has done, and how people adjudicate what is just in a time of war.

THE PRIEST

Father Dalton seemed weak to some viewers or uncomfortable with what is happening in most of the scenes he is in. When he first brings Coetzee to the Grootbooms, he says to the family, “Thank you. For opening your home to us,” and he chatters on with small talk about Mr. Grootboom’s love for fishing. In the second encounter between Coetzee and the family, when the distressed former policeman is rehearsing the torture he inflicted on Daniel, Father Dalton responds to Mrs. Grootboom’s discomfort (or his own?) by saying, “Mr. Coetzee, I think you can spare us the details.” The family overrules the priest and asks Mr. Coetzee to continue. After Ernest breaks a teapot over Coetzee’s head and the priest returns from driving him to the emergency room, Father Dalton says to Coetzee, “You have no right to do this to people! To put people through this!”

“the priest’s best gift for ministry was the capacity to show up—and to abide with the family in their conversation”

The priest seems dreadfully uncomfortable with the role he has been given as intermediary between victim and perpetrator, and in most of the scenes where he appears, he stands at the edges while other characters engage in the real work of repentance and forgiveness. On the other hand, Father Dalton is the one who can and does intercede for Coetzee when the former policeman wants to see Daniel’s family, and he is the one whom the local B & B owner calls when Mr. Coetzee is having a flashback and an anxiety attack outside the home where he is staying. Finally, the priest is the one summoned for a service at Daniel’s grave. With the family and others gathered there, he prays the Lord’s Prayer, with its petition “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

As our small group discussed the movie, we concluded that the priest’s best gift for ministry was the capacity to show up—and to abide with the family in their conversation with Mr. Coetzee even when he was clearly uncomfortable doing so.

---

5Present were Luther Seminary students William and Margaret Obaga, staff members Barbara Gaiser and Kathy Hansen, and faculty members Fred Gaiser and Mary Hinkle Shore. Mary’s husband, Hank, also joined the conversation.
Otherwise, little about the forgiveness that was sought or offered had anything to do with him. The priest could not make forgiveness real for Coetzee any more than the committee that granted him amnesty could. Something else was needed, and it was not the priest’s to give.

We wondered, could we generalize about ministry on the basis of this portrait of a priest and his role in such a highly charged occasion for pastoral care? Is ministry like that? Would those of us who are clergy expect to do more in such an intense pastoral care setting, or would we be happy to function more or less like this priest, with the courage to show up even though we would be bumbling, frightened, and sometimes angry? If we or our pastors were like that, would it be enough?

THE ECONOMICS OF FORGIVENESS

Over and over, characters in the film talk about Coetzee needing to pay for what he has done. Sannie says to him in their first meeting, “You’re not sorry. You’re just glad you got off scot-free and now you’re here to gloat!” Meanwhile, Ernest is working with numbers on a pad of paper, and, after a moment, he stands up to announce how much money his brother would have been able to contribute to the family if he had not been killed. “It’s over a million,” Ernest says. “I bet you don’t have that kind of money. Or do you?” At a hotel dinner that Coetzee is hosting for the family, Ernest says, “How much is this dinner costing you?” and then, “You think you can just buy forgiveness, don’t you?” While a few of the men of the town are fishing, one of Hendrik’s neighbors tells him of a rumor his wife brought home: the white man who has been visiting the Grootboom family is interested in buying their house. “She says he wants to buy,” the fisherman says, and Hendrik replies, “Ja, but we’re not selling.”

In the film, something mysterious and out of everyone’s control begins to break apart this view of reconciliation as a transaction in which one party to sin buys and the other party sells. Even so, the idea of such an exchange is so persistent in the film that our conversation took up the question of how forgiveness and “paying for one’s sins” are related. When the film opens, Coetzee has received amnesty from the TRC, yet he remains as distressed as it is possible for a human being to be and still manage to function. He suffers from headaches, insomnia, and anxiety. As he is dropped off at the B & B after his first meeting with the Grootbooms, we see him on his knees beside the priest’s car vomiting. Are all these physical and mental ailments ways that Coetzee’s own body is requiring payment for his sins? Echoing a question that Sannie voices in the movie, we wondered, does Coetzee arrive in Paternoster because he wants to be forgiven? Or does he come because he wants to be punished not only by his own memories but also by the family of the one he killed, as if paying more or differently would finally cancel the debt? Whether he is seeking forgiveness or punishment, does he expect to buy it? With what? And which, if either, purchased commodity would lead to peace? If the an-
swer is “punishment,” what would qualify as appropriate punishment? How would one know when one reached that level of exchange?

As these questions multiplied, it became clear that the category of payment could not adequately describe what someone in Coetzee’s position needs to give or to receive in order to heal. Payment is too small a category for the needs of all these people. Peace, when it comes, comes from something beyond economic exchange. Both the Grootbooms and Mr. Coetzee know this, yet at the beginning of the film none of them can imagine what possible third way there could be between the alternatives of letting Coetzee off scot-free in spite of his treatment of Daniel or making him pay for it.

**WHAT IS JUSTIFIED?**

Perhaps the most disturbing content of *Forgiveness* is the description that Coetzee gives of Daniel’s torture. They made him stand for long periods of time. They tied a towel around his face and poured water on him in such a way as to simulate the experience of drowning. They attached electrodes to his genitals and administered electric shock. The description is troubling, not just because it is so horrible, though it is that. It is troubling because it bears such remarkable resemblance to reports of the treatment of prisoners in our own so-called war on terror. In November of 2005, *The Washington Post* broke the story of secret CIA prisons set up in foreign countries so that CIA interrogators would not be working where U.S. laws against the CIA’s own “enhanced interrogation techniques,” might be enforced. The sorts of things that Coetzee reports having done to Daniel in the early 1990s in South Africa are the same things reported to be done to detainees in prisons funded with U.S. tax dollars. Coetzee explains the context for his actions against Daniel by saying, “We were fighting a war. That’s what we thought.” Daniel’s father replies, “Did you think it was a just war?”

In Coetzee’s explanation of what justified his actions at the time, *Forgiveness* echoes the remarks of one of the police officers whose story is told in *Long Night’s Journey into Day*. Eric Taylor, who applied for amnesty in the deaths of four activists killed by police in Cradock, said in an interview with the documentary producers:

> I joined the police force when I was 18 straight from school. I accepted that we are there to uphold the present government and Apartheid was part and parcel of the government at the time. There were a lot of values that I felt we had the responsibility to protect, and Christianity was, of course, one of those values. All the people that I worked with were Christians. You must remember that one of the elements of Communism is Atheism and that is the outstanding point, as far as I’m concerned, that actually justified the kind of work that we were doing.

---

The justification that the most remorseful police officers in these films use for their behavior during apartheid puts this question to a post-9/11 American audience: How are the explanations used for American behavior toward suspected enemy combatants today similar to those with which the South African police comforted themselves after a hard day or night of work? Which decade, in which country might these sentences be found on the lips of government officials? “Our enemy is seeking to destroy our way of life.” “Our enemy is not Christian, and is, in fact, openly hostile to Christian faith and practice.” “Our use of drastic interrogation measures may be the only thing preventing our enemy from causing hundreds or thousands more civilian casualties.”

Lyn Graybill begins a chapter titled “Innocent Bystanders?” with the observation, “Michael Lapsley has said there are three kind of stories to tell: ‘What was done to me; what I did; and what I didn’t do.’”

What stories will our victims and their families need to tell Americans a decade from now? What stories will our own former government agents with tortured consciences eventually confess? What stories will American Christian civilians, most of whom are largely insulated from the “war on terror” and distant from the CIA prisons on foreign soil, need to tell ten years from now about what we didn’t do?

Or maybe we do not need to wait that long. One of the recurring themes in commentary about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is that religious faith provided a way through the most difficult experiences of victims and perpetrators speaking and listening to one another’s testimony. In response to an interviewer’s question, “Is religious faith a key to the film, Forgiveness?” director Ian Gabriel comments, “I do believe that without some form of faith, there can be no Forgiveness.” Lyn Graybill remarks about the TRC hearings, “The omnipresent praying and hymn singing during the procedures were clearly comforting to the witnesses. Although my own research on South Africa had persuaded me that religion was an important influence on South Africans, I nevertheless was startled by the number of references to God and the Bible in witnesses’ testimony.”

To the truth and reconciliation process, Christian theology offered (1) a view of both victims and perpetrators as humans loved and valued by God rather than anonymous monsters to be destroyed; (2) a view of sin as simultaneously individ-

---

9Graybill, Truth and Reconciliation, x.
ual and corporate, as manifest both as the unjust acts of individuals and as a deep bondage from which individuals and groups could not free themselves; and (3) a view of forgiveness as a gift that originates from beyond both victim and perpetrator and cannot be calculated but only received with relief and joy. Christian faith and practice were clearly healing influences in a process intended to report atrocities after they had been committed. These same insights from the Christian faith offer a warrant for speaking out against the fear and half-truths that create a climate within which such atrocities appear ever to be justified.¹⁰

MARY HINKLE SHORE is associate professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota.

¹⁰The ability of these films to stimulate conversation about the possibility and cost of forgiveness make them an excellent resource for congregational discussion groups. They are (or might become) available through some libraries or for purchase at California Newsreel. They are, of course, meant for adult audiences because of the language and violence they necessarily portray.