

# The Challenge of Healing Perpetrators

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I HAVE BEEN WORKING with the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines and with Catholic Relief Services for the past eight years on the conflict in Mindanao. It has been an opportunity to learn many things about healing and reconciliation. In what follows, I hope to give back a bit as a small contribution to building peace in post-conflict situations.

A great deal has been written about the healing of victims in post-conflict situations. That is a good thing; it is with the victims that we need to start. Indeed, as theologies of reconciliation have been developed over the past twenty-five years, the focus has been on the victim. That has been the case because in so many instances, either wrongdoers do not repent and ask for forgiveness, or are no longer present to approach victims and seek forgiveness. It is not uncommon that they may be dead and thus are beyond the pale for any reconciliation process. Moreover, beginning with the victim seems so much in line with the option for the poor, and the very concerns of God that are repeated in the classical prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures and in the ministry of Jesus himself.

But what of wrongdoers, or perpetrators—whatever we wish to call them? How are we to deal with them if they wish to repent? There has long been a literature on punishment focusing on punitive justice, and wrongdoers paying their debt to society. More recently, there has been a discussion of the place of punishment in restorative justice, building upon an ethic of political reconciliation.<sup>1</sup> This ethic

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<sup>1</sup> See Daniel Philpott, *Just and Unjust Peace*, 207–50; Daniel Van Ness, “Accountability,” 118–37.

proffers a concern about the goal of reintegrating the wrongdoer into society, but as yet is still working to articulate the role of punishment to meet the objections of the liberal approach to peacebuilding regarding its ethic of reconciliation. Inasmuch as the political ethic of reconciliation is still a relatively new approach, it may take more time for this aspect to be developed in more detail.

What is of interest here for me is how to deal with individual perpetrators who do want to repent of their wrongdoing in conflict situations, are willing to pay the societal price for their wrongdoing, and are seeking to be reintegrated into the societies that they have harmed. I would like to do this from both a psychosocial and a theological point of view. This is a question that comes up in another place where I have been able to work in the last seven years (with less frequent visits than I have had to the Philippines), namely, Colombia. There the insurgents—the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia or FARC for short—want to become a political party and be reintegrated into civil society. Colombia has already had some experience with reintegrating paramilitaries into villages after an agreement was made with some of the paramilitary groups in 2008. I would like to sketch out some of the issues and questions that will need to be addressed more thoroughly. In so doing, I hope to develop an approach to healing perpetrators that would complement the work that has been done on healing victims from the point of view of peacebuilding from a religious perspective.<sup>2</sup>

The work of healing victims in post-conflict situations has been summed up as engaging in four practices of reconciliation: the healing of memories, truth-telling, pursuing justice, and offering forgiveness. These four practices are not completely linear, although the healing of memories needs at least to be initiated at the beginning. Truth-telling does have to precede justice (lest justice become “victors’ justice”), and forgiveness will always come toward the end, if it is possible at all. Can something similar be devised for dealing with perpetrators? It is perhaps too early to say. What needs to be done

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<sup>2</sup> I have articulated this in “Reconciliation as a Model of Mission: Dimensions, Levels, Characteristics,” 1–44.

first is to begin to address the issues and questions in a preliminary way to set us on the path toward a more comprehensive view of working toward the healing of those who have done wrong.

I will try to do this in four parts. In the first part, I wish to consider the fears and anxieties that come upon people who are asked to deal with perpetrators, and why this proposes distinctive challenges that are not as obvious for those who choose to work with victims. In a second part, I will search for ways to talk about comprehending the wrongdoing that needs to be addressed and finding adequate images and metaphors for what the healing process would entail. For example, in working with victims, we are called upon to help “victims” become “survivors.” We talk about healing “wounds.” Is there a similar vocabulary for working with perpetrators? In a third part, I want to explore what leads people to do terrible things that are now classified as war crimes or crimes against humanity. Especially here I will focus on “ordinary people” becoming perpetrators. In the fourth and final part, I will bring the previous reflections together to start thinking about the components of a healing process, from a psychosocial and religious perspective. Special place will be given here to ritual, since it is such an important part of healing memory (it is through ritual that we traverse time and return to the past) and imagining a different kind of future). Again all of this is preliminary—as a way of beginning some kind of mapping out of the terrain—moving from wrongdoing to healing to reentering the community.

### **Fears and Anxieties about Dealing with Perpetrators**

When I am asked to speak with people who wish to accompany victims through processes of healing and reconciliation, I find that I have a ready audience. But when I turn to the healing of perpetrators, I can feel a certain recoil in the room, as though people do not want to hear about this or want to get involved in any way. Yet when perpetrators do approach us, what are we to do? We faced this situation in Chicago a number of years ago, when young men from the refugee Guatemalan community began to approach a treatment center for

victims of human rights abuses. They had been conscripted into the Guatemalan army during the civil war (in that country) in the 1980s. Typically, they were of indigenous background (twenty, mainly Mayan, communities), and as military they were forced to commit atrocities against other indigenous communities. They had fled their country to the United States, but could not reveal to fellow exiles the heavy burden of guilt they felt for fear of being killed. What were they to do and who was to help them?

There are four fears or anxieties that come upon those who are approached to give help to perpetrators that seem to recur again and again. First, there is a fear of contamination—a fear that if I get too close to a perpetrator, I may become one myself. It is similar to what happens to ordinary people when someone close to them is diagnosed with a major, though non-communicable, disease like cancer: we instinctively become afraid to touch them—even when human touch may be what they most need under the circumstances. We have to overrule an instinctive fear. Something similar seems to happen to people who are asked to work with perpetrators.

Second, that revulsion we feel when a perpetrator is in our midst is an attempt to keep “them” (the perpetrators) separate from “us” (the good people). That need to separate is an expression of our disapproval of what they have done; but it is also revealing a fear that, when all is said and done, we may not be that different from the perpetrator. This is especially the case when we encounter seemingly ordinary people who have done terrible things.

Third, anxiety arises because if we can help the perpetrator understand why he or she did what they did, that such understanding may seem to condone the wrongdoing, then to understand is to condone. We then become, in the eyes of others, someone who sympathizes with the wrongdoer about the deed. And we do not want to find ourselves in such a situation. That would contest everything we know and do. We do not want to appear to empathize with the perpetrator.

Fourth, and finally, there is an uncertainty about the impact of what the perpetrator has done might have on the wounds we ourselves carry. When working with people who want to assist victims attend

to their wounds, it is important to remember that we all carry wounds from our own previous experiences. Some of those wounds may be such that we cannot assist others with similar wounds if we have not attended to our own properly. Profound wounds stay with us always. The most profound evidence of that for Christians is that the transfigured body of the resurrected Jesus in John's Gospel (chap. 20) still exhibits wounds, even though Jesus is portrayed as being able to walk through locked doors. Profound psychic and spiritual wounds never entirely disappear, but if attended to they may help heal the wounds of others. This is the significance of the phrase in Second Isaiah, quoted in the First Letter of Peter: "By his wounds we have been healed" (Is 53:5; 1 Peter 2:24).

If wounds we carry are similar to the wounds the perpetrator has inflicted, then we may be unable to be of much assistance to the perpetrator if those wounds have not been attended to. Then we should withdraw from trying to offer assistance.

I find that, for entering into a healing process with perpetrators, these fears and anxieties recur again and again. By being aware of them, those who wish to accompany perpetrators can take the risk of working with those who have done wrong. Perhaps the only real "deal breaker" is the last one, the state of our own wounds.

### **Finding Ways to Comprehend the Wrongdoing and Images as well as Metaphors for Healing**

Victims entering into the process of healing sometimes are still suffering from trauma. One of the things that trauma wreaks on victims is a sense that there are no words sufficient to give expression to the strong feelings that are emerging. Finding a way to describe what has happened to them helps them get reoriented and begins a pathway toward healing. With victims, one way that has been found to be effective is to say that what had happened to them has robbed them of some of their humanity or human dignity. If we believe as Christians that we are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26–27), then to have been harmed is to have been treated as less than someone made in the image and likeness of God. Victims often feel helpless

or emotionally paralyzed. They are so overwhelmed by trauma that they become passive in the face of it. That one is healing is marked by a new capacity to act. Indeed, exegetes believe that it is precisely this capacity to act and to create that makes us in the image and likeness of God. To be able to act is what makes the difference between being a victim (one who is acted upon) and being a survivor (one who can act, has agency). In being able to act, then, we begin the process of restoring our humanity that has been wrested from us by the evil deed.

Is there something, some image, which is parallel for the perpetrator who wants to be healed? Some of the Guatemalan former soldiers I spoke of used the language of “I want to rejoin the human family.” This phrase connoted that they felt they had excluded themselves from that family by the atrocities they had been forced to commit. They were coming from strong collective cultures, and being barred from the family created profound pain for them. Other images that have been offered are “being lost,” “without a home,” “in exile,” and “being excluded.” All connote being disoriented, without a place to dwell, being shut out by what they had done. One way of looking at what the process of healing will be like is, following on the story of Nicodemus in the Gospel of John, being reborn (John 3:1–22). In other words, the process of healing is having to learn everything all over again, or being dependent upon others for guidance, in order to be allowed to enter “home,” or the human family, once again.

### **What Makes People Become Perpetrators?**

The disturbing question that lies behind work with perpetrators is: What brings people to do terrible things? If God created us good, as we Christians believe, then how could Cain murder his brother Abel? (Gen 4:1–16). To appeal to the doctrine of original sin seems to fall short of the mark. We are all affected by original sin, Christians believe, but what brings some people to engage in horrific evil? Can we trace a psychopathology here? There are three categories of people that I wish to talk about here in this regard.

The first are sociopaths, people who are able to do cruel things because they seem to lack the feeling for fellow human beings that most of us have. In tracking the neurophysiology of the brain, some have speculated that these people lack properly functioning mirror neurons in the forebrain. Mirror neurons were discovered in human and primate brains by two neuroscientists at the University of Parma in 1994. They are called “mirror” neurons because they help us imitate actions we see, and so learn. This is the basis by which infants learn, by doing what they see in others. Further work has led to proposing that mirroring is the basis for learning and developing empathy. Some studies suggest that those who lack proper functioning mirror neurons do not develop the capacity to feel what others feel. This has been linked to autism, on the one hand, and to extreme sociopathic behavior, on the other. (This is not to say that persons with autism are potential sociopaths. It only traces two very different kinds of behavior to a possible common source.) Psychologists, such as James Waller who has studied sociopathic behavior, suggest that sociopaths do occur in the population, but represent only a very small portion of the wrongdoing population. In other words, sociopaths do exist but by no means constitute the major portion of the wrongdoing population.<sup>3</sup> This is unsettling because we would prefer to have “them” as a separate group from “us.” This leads me to the second group: victims who become perpetrators.

Some people who have been victims of violence become perpetrators of violence at a later stage. Sometimes the violence they come to perpetrate mirrors closely what they have themselves experienced. This is most commonly the case with domestic violence: children who have seen their elders deal with strong negative emotion by resorting to physical violence can make this their learned response to such negative emotion when they are adults. Indeed, some studies indicate that children so exposed to domestic violence run about a 70 percent risk of themselves resorting to such violence in domestic settings if there is not an intervention that teaches them to deal with negative emotion in other ways.

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<sup>3</sup> James Waller, *Becoming Evil*, 20.

Unfortunately, this seems to play itself out on the political stage as well. Populations that have been victimized in social violence may resort to dealing with conflictual situations in the same manner. Although not the sole cause, it has been speculated that the Belgian experience of being forced to become a nation of Flemish and Walloons, after 1830, influenced their colonial rule in Rwanda. This happened when Germany ceded the colony to Belgium after the First World War. For the Belgians, the minority Tutsi became the Walloons (the minority that dominated Belgian politics at the time) and the majority Hutu became the (majority) Flemish underdogs. Right before leaving Belgium in the 1950s, the Belgians switched their preference to the Hutu, and this helped set off the first Tutsi massacre in 1959. This led to a series of bloody confrontations, culminating in the genocide in 1994. While Belgian policy was not the only factor leading to the genocide, it was certainly complicit in that tragic outcome.

One can read the victim-become-perpetrator into the biographies of sociopathic political leaders, such as the Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic. He suffered through an abusive childhood, only to become a psychiatrist (perhaps trying to heal himself?) before mapping out his own trauma on the Balkans after the death of Josip Broz Tito. While this may seem like amateur psychologizing, it does suggest that traumatic experiences endured—by individuals or entire peoples—may set them up to engage in destructive behavior at a later point. This may come either from patterns learned or from the stored-up psychic energy of rage, humiliation, and other strong negative emotions. This does not lessen moral responsibility, but as an explanatory factor it can help shape the healing process.<sup>4</sup>

The third group of perpetrators who may come to commit atrocities are ordinary people. This has been the most unsettling discovery, but one that accounts for the majority of such perpetrators, it seems. Already in the 1960s, psychological experiments on college undergraduates in the United States showed how ordinary and seemingly decent and moral young men could be brought within

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<sup>4</sup> The Turkish Cypriot psychoanalyst Vamik Volkan has studied the impact of trauma on populations in this regard. See his *The Third Reich in the Unconscious*.



a short period of time to inflict pain on their fellow students. Extensive studies have been done, particularly on groups of soldiers who, as draftees, came to engage in massacres and war crimes. Notable, for example, is a recent study by James Dawes on Japanese soldiers who committed war crimes in China during the Nanjing Massacre in 1937 and thereafter.<sup>5</sup> He corroborates in many ways what Waller had found in his own, more broadly based studies of mass violence; and I turn to his conclusions here.

Waller speaks of three “constructions” that enable individuals to engage in mass violence. These are in the sense of social or group constructions to bring people to act differently than they might as individuals. The first is a *cultural construction*. By that he means things learned from the culture in which people find themselves. He notes the power of group formation and authority; to motivate people to think of themselves as a member of a group, and cede moral authority to that group. This happens especially strongly in countries with dense populations, and where it is considered a strong cultural value to bend to the authority of leaders. It is noteworthy that Rwanda is the most densely populated country in Africa, and the largely pastoralist Tutsi and the largely agriculturalist Hutu had to find a way to live together. Japan, another densely populated country, has a strong inclination to cede moral authority to leaders. This was especially the case after the Meiji Restoration of the monarchy in 1868, when the cult of the emperor was directly promoted.

There is a *psychological construction* whereby a group is made “other” and often characterized as being subhuman, and therefore not worthy of life. A long program of propaganda by radical Hutu leaders, especially through the radio station Milles Collines, kept depicting Tutsi people as “snakes and cockroaches,” vermin that needed to be crushed. Such a dehumanizing depiction of the enemy group legitimates their thoroughgoing removal. It is part of an all too familiar process of social psychology of how enemies are created and how justification arises for their elimination.

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<sup>5</sup> James Dawes, *Evil Men*.

The third is a *social construction* that doubles back on the cultural construction to strengthen the group bonds that will allow individuals to participate in social mass violence. It is a familiar tactic used in training of recruits in the armed services, where intense bonds of loyalty between cadres within a fighting unit are cultivated so that potential killing of others is made more possible by imagining that, in doing so, one is protecting one's "buddies."<sup>6</sup>

That ordinary, otherwise decent and moral people can engage in committing war crimes and crimes against humanity is truly unsettling. Understanding how this is possible is key to the healing process that is being developed for the repentant perpetrator. Again, getting insight into this does not condone what has been done, nor does it constitute a justification for what has happened. Moral responsibility needs to be maintained. But if one is to chart a pathway out of being a perpetrator one must be able to indicate factors that contributed to the capacity to engage in such wrongdoing.

### **Sketches for a Process of Healing Perpetrators**

I come now to my fourth and final part: Are there discernible patterns emerging from the issues and questions I have explored here to begin to sketch out a healing process for perpetrators? What follows can only be a sketch, because of the limits of my knowledge and experience. Let me propose, however, some things under three rubrics: parallels between the healing of victims and the healing of perpetrators, the role of ritual in the healing of perpetrators, and reintegration of perpetrators into the community.

#### **Healing Perpetrators and Healing Victims: Are There Parallels?**

From the foregoing I have pointed to parallels between the healing of perpetrators (about which we still know too little) and the healing of victims (about which we know a little more). Thus, being able to imagine a process and to name that process are important. Both

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<sup>6</sup> Waller, *Becoming Evil*, chapters 6–8.

trajectories of healing point to some restoration of those involved. Both require some mode of accompaniment by sympathetic others. I want to hold up some other factors that appear to be parallel or play into the respective process in some measure.

It was noted that four principal practices of the healing of victims were healing of memories, truth-telling about what happened in the past, the pursuit of justice, and granting forgiveness. Healing of memories was the starting point; truth-telling was the prelude for pursuing justice; and forgiveness represented a final stage. In the healing of perpetrators, I would propose that truth-telling comes first in the process. In living with the guilt and shame of having committed atrocities, the first thing the perpetrator needs to do is tell the truth about what he or she has done, and take responsibility for it. What has happened cannot be explained away by external factors that influenced the perpetrator, even though these no doubt played a role. Responsibility has to be accepted. One technique used by perpetrators to be able to live with what they have done is “doubling.” This is creating a second self who has the responsibility for having done evil deeds. Such a second self is invoked to protect the conscious self from blame. (It has a rough parallel in developing multiple personalities to which some trauma victims are prone.) Only by accepting the truth about oneself can one hope to come to some form of healing and re-admittance into the human family.

Consequent to telling the truth is being willing to submit oneself to justice. Willingness to do that has a number of purposes, but foremost here is that it is a sign to the offended community of the sincerity of the repentance. It is a form of being “reborn,” as discussed above, of being willing to submit oneself to the community for re-formation as a member of that community.

Parallel to the healing of memories for the victim is the construction of a narrative of wrongdoing by the perpetrator. This narrative is not a justification of what had been done. Its purpose, rather, is to be able to present to oneself and to the community a connected narrative that shows the motivation for the act, the feelings experienced during the execution of the act, and the remorse the wrongdoer now feels

for having done the act. So it is a kind of “meaning-giving” to the act, although different from the meaning-giving that arises out of the narrative of the victim, which allows the victim to restore or recalibrate relationships with others.

Coming to forgiveness is the “end” of the healing process for the victim, inasmuch as forgiveness means the toxicity of the past is overcome. Forgiveness for the perpetrator is offering an apology to the offended community with the hope that eventually some form of forgiveness might be forthcoming. It is a moment of acute vulnerability for the perpetrator, who hopes to parallel in some measure the helplessness that the victim has felt in an earlier stage of that healing process.

### **The Role of Ritual in the Healing Process of the Perpetrator**

The longer I have worked with reconciliation processes, the more convinced I have become of the centrality of ritual for any progress toward eventual reconciliation. This should not be surprising. In reconciliation processes we are trying to undo the past—something we cannot effect, since we cannot move through time. But by ritual we can do this in some measure: by summoning up memories, by recasting narratives to give different perspectives on the past, by creating memorials to help us remember and not forget.

Two ritual activities are central to the healing process of the perpetrator. The first is creating a safe social space where the perpetrator can uncover past deeds and explore how they are to be understood. As I noted in the example of the former soldier from Guatemala, there was no safe place in his community to begin a process of remorse and healing. He risked being killed if he revealed what he had done. Those safe spaces are also essential for the victim in looking at the past. The fear of recounting past trauma is, for victims, a fear that it will reoccur. Having a safe space to explore that trauma is essential for the healing of the victim. The perpetrator needs a safe space as well.

The second ritual is the act of repentance for the wrongdoing that will allow return to the community. Here, the Western Christian

penitential process provides a good model: acknowledgment of sin, showing sorrow, and commitment to not doing it again; ritual separation from the community for a given period of time to refine and deepen the regret; the imposition of a penance or pattern of repair and expiation for what has been done. As ritual, these are attempts to “undo” in some measure the wrongdoing of the past, to show public repentance, and to begin to convince the offended community of the right intentions of the erstwhile wrongdoer in order to repair bonds of sundered trust.

### **Reintegrating Wrongdoers into the Community**

Reintegrating wrongdoers into the community is a difficult and under-researched area. What has come out of examining this in Colombia is that, if the situation has not experienced some improvement after the end of the conflict, it is well nigh impossible to consider reintegrating wrongdoers. The principal reason is that no justice has been done for the victims (e.g., stolen land has not been restored, no financial reparation has been made for other losses) and yet the wrongdoers have the “benefit” of being allowed to return to the community. In such a situation, there is strong resentment that needs to be overcome.

There has been some limited success with this in Rwanda. After people have served jail time, rituals were observed for reintegrating wrongdoers into the community, but they had to work out some kind of agreed upon reparation or expiation. Some of these were meted out by the *gacaca* popular courts that dealt with lesser offenders among the *genocidaires*. Others were set by the community themselves. This repair sometimes involved building houses for survivors or providing for the families of those who had been killed. What was helpful was the existence of reconciliation rites that communities have long used to end animosities on a regular or annual level.

## Conclusion

We still have much to learn about the healing of perpetrators to their own damaged humanity, and how they can be reintegrated into the communities they may have harmed. As church people we need to be involved in these processes, and bring to bear our spiritual resources here as well, especially the narratives from the Bible and the history that will support one or other of the things that need to go on in the processes for victims as well as for perpetrators. We need to learn as well from rituals practiced in indigenous communities that allowed for the reintegration of wrongdoers into the community. In those instances, small indigenous communities could not survive if some members were permanently excluded. As we try to bring about social reconciliation after conflict, we need to put more effort into figuring out how to find ways to restore wrongdoers into their communities. For as long as we are unable to do so, we may be setting the stage for the next round of conflict.

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