6. Private and Public: Practitioner Reflections on Forgiveness and Reconciliation

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Summary: This reflective essay draws on the life experience of Little and the facilitation work of Little and Verwoerd with former combatants and survivors, mostly from the conflict in and about Northern Ireland. In the first half of the essay Little describes his path from paramilitary violence to respect for those he had opposed. He shows how unclear is the distinction between victims and perpetrators and the fraught and delicate nature of peacemaking and, particularly, forgiveness. Little's experience speaks to analysis developed by Govier and Verwoerd, that Verwoerd extends in the second half of this paper. He reflects on a particular example from his work with Little, emphasizing the challenge of making an essentially private process of humanization between former enemies more public. He highlights the need for a sensitive, remote form of publicity, in part because effective public work toward reconciliation or forgiveness demands personal honesty and openness. He stresses the promise of a more indirect route to forgiveness, with even the language of "reconciliation" and "forgiveness" potentially being too freighted to take up directly.

1. Introduction

Trudy Govier's work prominently features the "promise and pitfalls" of apology, forgiveness, reconciliation. While aiming for greater conceptual clarity Govier always has a keen interest in real world application. It is therefore appropriate in this chapter to offer some practitioner reflections on the complexity of (public) forgiveness. We will be drawing mostly on our work with former

combatants and survivors from the conflict in and about Northern Ireland (NI).[38]

This reflective essay is based on input Alistair Little and Wilhelm Verwoerd gave to an international conference that brought philosophers (including Trudy Govier) and practitioners into conversation around the theme of "Public Forgiveness" (Nijmegen, 2010). Verwoerd's input was a continuation of a conversation with Trudy Govier that started during his time as a researcher within the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (SA TRC)(1996-8). This conversation and the joint series of articles on reconciliation, forgiveness, and apologies that grew from it were invaluable in his reflective work and teaching on the SA TRC (Govier and Verwoerd 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2004, 2011). He drew on both the conversation and his friendship with Trudy Govier while working as a facilitator on the island of Ireland between 2002 and 2012. During this period this conversation became greatly enriched by the personal journey and practical wisdom of Alistair Little, a former combatant himself and a facilitator in NI and beyond of "Journey through Conflict" processes, which he developed with Verwoerd (Little and Verwoerd 2013).

We begin with Little describing his path from paramilitary violence to respect for those he had opposed. He shows how unclear is the distinction between victims and perpetrators and the fraught and delicate nature of peacemaking. Little's experience speaks to analysis developed by Govier and Verwoerd, that Verwoerd extends in the second half of this paper. He observes the

[38] The phrase 'in and about Northern Ireland' is an attempt to accommodate those who are for and those who are against the continued existence of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom. Facilitators would typically alternate between the terms 'Northern Ireland' (used by Unionists/Loyalists) and 'North of Ireland' (to be inclusive of Nationalists/Republicans), with some also using the deliberately ambiguous phrase 'island of Ireland.'

value of making the private public even though that may require a remote form of publicity and in part because effective public work toward reconciliation or forgiveness demands a personal honesty and openness. Ultimately, an indirect forgiveness expressed without saying "sorry" may be absolutely necessary; even the language of "reconciliation" and "forgiveness" can be too freighted to take up directly.

2. Alistair Little: A former combatant and practitioner perspective

I (Little) continue to struggle with the concepts "reconciliation" and "forgiveness." If I've learnt anything so far, then it is to approach concepts such as "forgiveness" with humility and extreme caution. In my experience these are not only concepts. People's lives are involved – people who are struggling on a daily basis with their pain and continuing to grieve their loss.

My grappling with these concepts is rooted in my personal journey. I first became involved in violent political conflict as a teenager and then gradually started to question the use of violence. Eventually, through a complex, ongoing process, I committed my life to peacemaking (Little and Scott 2009).

I grew up during the years of mounting political and sectarian tension between Protestants/Unionists /Loyalists and Catholics/Republicans/Nationalists[39] that

[39] The complexity of the conflict in and about Northern Ireland is reflected in the use of these terms. Broadly speaking one might say that 'Catholic' or 'Protestant' are the most general descriptors, with the added complication that these terms can be used both in a cultural and a religious sense. (Being 'Catholic' is typically connected with being Irish, while 'Protestant' is often used interchangeably with 'British'.) The next, more specific layer is explicitly political, with 'Nationalist' referring to those committed to a political vision of a united Ireland and 'Unionist' designating those striving to maintain the political union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. These terms

erupted into violence and the deployment of British Armed Forces to NI in 1969. My hometown experienced many bombings and shootings. People I knew and cared about were killed. Those responsible and the Catholic/ Nationalist/Republican community they came from were demonized. This demonization quickly led to violence, as it did for many other young people, mostly men, on both sides of our conflict. By the time I was twelve years old I was fighting on the riot lines against those I saw as my enemy, and the enemy of my community and the way of life we valued. In response to the on-going violence, at the age of fourteen I joined a violent Loyalist paramilitary organization, believing that neither the police nor the British Armed Forces were able to effectively protect us. To be honest – even though it is still painful today to admit this – my actions were fueled by fear and hatred and the desire to inflict suffering on my enemies (Little and Scott 2009). (It is not possible to do justice here to the messy mixture of fear, violence from the enemy, and political manipulation that stoked this hatred and desire for revenge.)

I went to prison when I was 17; I was released at the age of 30. Probably for the first four or five years of almost 13 years of imprisonment I was quite content to be in prison. I was among men who'd been involved in similar acts of violence. Given the demonization of the enemy and our desensitization, we were able to justify to ourselves what we had done, strengthening each other in our belief that our cause was righteous. There was no consideration or even acknowledgement of the suffering

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also tend to refer to those from middle class backgrounds. The terms 'Loyalist' and 'Republican' include the above layers of meaning, but tend to refer to those with a working class identification and typically has the further connotation of those who are or have been willing to use violence or physical force to pursue their ideals. For instance, Alistair Little would mostly be seen as a 'Loyalist', though his political views are Unionist, his religious background is Protestant, and his cultural identity is British.

of the enemy: in fact, I felt superior to my enemy seeing them as less than human, certainly less human than I was. These feelings were shared by my peers in prison. We were separated in prison into our different political categories, so there was very little contact with those that we saw as the enemy. In the process, and with the conflict still raging outside prison, the demonization of the enemy and our exclusive awareness of our own suffering – what had been done to us – were reinforced.

My early understanding of forgiveness was formed by the fact that I grew up in a Christian home and as a young person had a strong belief that "God was a Protestant." My thinking was that "if God was a Protestant and I was a Protestant, then He was on our side" – and, therefore, in terms of any wrongdoing that I might be involved in or any questions around the violence and the need for forgiveness, "I would be okay with God because we were the good guys." A number of things happened while I was in prison that led me to begin to question these beliefs. For example, I once saw prison guards – "screws" (the common enemies of all prisoners) – laughing and rubbing their hands because the Irish Republican Army leader Bobby Sands had died on hunger strike. I remember that their laughter made me angry. I remember attacking the prison guards verbally, saying "Bobby Sands had more courage than you would ever have!" I remember going back to my cell, disturbed and thinking "Why am I defending Bobby Sands, someone who's my enemy?"

Working through those feelings I asked myself the question, "Could you starve yourself to death for something that you believe in?" Now, my ego and intellect wanted to say "yes", but in my heart I knew that the answer was "no" – that it takes a special type of human being to starve oneself to death for something that they believe in. For me it wasn't about what I thought of Bobby Sands or what he stood for – it was a recognition of his courage. In recognizing the courage of an enemy, I was recognizing, for the first time, his humanity. This recognition of his

humanity, in turn, helped to rekindle my own humanity, which had been desensitized by violence and hatred before I went into prison.

3. Beyond demonization

The rekindling of my own humanity via the recognition of the humanity of my enemy contributed to my questioning further the use of violence and thinking more deeply about the suffering of the enemy. But in doing so – even simply considering the suffering of my enemy – I felt that I was betraying who I was. With the benefit of hindsight I now see that this early and unwanted consideration of enemy suffering, this unexpected glimmer of empathy, was an important step on what became a risky journey of internal transformation. It was a journey without clarity about where I was heading, and I often grappled with powerful feelings of betrayal and confusion and painful, lonely, isolating, fearful awakenings of my own humanity.

Looking back, I appreciate that the seeds for this journey were planted in prison and included conversations about peace and the peace process with men who had actually been engaged in violence. But at the time, I had no understanding that even just thinking about the suffering of the enemy was for me the beginning of "reconciliation", an opening up of the possibility of "reconciliation." I certainly did not understand this process in terms of "forgiveness." It was only much later, when looking back, that I realized that for me the questioning of violence and beginning of considering the suffering of my enemy were really the first steps on my journey beyond demonization and desensitization.

The word "reconciliation" remains for me a very hard thing to describe or to define. But I know what it feels and looks like from my journey of rehumanizing former enemies and myself: it begins with going into a room with your enemy simply to score political points, to state your

story, not to listen to theirs. Eventually, months and repeated meetings later, you might make eye contact. Then you might simply nod your head when you're making eye contact. Months and months down the line, you may actually use someone's name, and ask how they're doing. You may then find yourself sitting in a circle and knowing inside yourself that you agree with what your enemy is saying, but you're not going to acknowledge that publicly, given how that would be perceived in your own community. Eventually you come to the place where you're trying to be true to yourself as a human being – you're thinking about risk-taking in relation to "reconciliation" and "peace building," realising that others (including the young Alistair) would not be happy. These risks include publicly acknowledging that you actually agree with what has just been said. The most frightening stage is when you begin to realize as a human being that you actually like this person. But what do you do with that? How do you acknowledge that you like a former enemy, when you're still living in your community, where many people still believe in violence and who weren't on that inner journey?

4. Complexity of forgiveness in practice

"Forgiveness" is a term I use with caution because of my personal journey and my experience as a peace practitioner who places an emphasis on storytelling between former combatants and victims/survivors (Little and Verwoerd 2013; Senehi 2002). In NI today, there are many former combatants who now have strong working relationships. They work on important projects together, and form friendships, but there has never been talk about the need for "forgiveness." Forgiveness between former politically motivated combatants simply is not an issue. They had been involved in a war, they had done nothing wrong, so there's no need to acknowledge it or anything to be

forgiven for. But for victims or survivors of the conflict, the denial of the need for forgiveness is very difficult. They hear the words of those who are responsible for their pain and suffering but don't even seem to recognize any wrongdoing.

The issue of recognizing wrongdoing brings me to the complex role of religion in forgiveness, especially in NI. If someone comes from a strong Protestant Reformed faith, as I do, forgiveness can be offered only if there is acknowledgement of wrongdoing, genuine repentance, a change in attitude and behavior. And because in NI forgiveness tends to be viewed primarily as a religious concept, many people who do not have a faith or who do not believe in God feel that forgiveness has nothing to do with them, and, therefore, conversations around "forgiveness" tend not to happen. Another complication comes from the potential for faith-based forgiveness to be experienced as emotional blackmail: many people I work with no longer attend church on a regular basis because they were told that "as a good Christian, you must offer forgiveness as part of your faith." At the time, however, they did not feel ready to forgive and many lost their connection with the church, with some even talking about a sense of betrayal by their church.

It is, of course, not only the language of "reconciliation" and "forgiveness" that is complicated. I've used the terms "combatants" and "victims" or "survivors" above, which are also very controversial in NI. There is a questioning of who the (real) victims are, leading to what has been called a hierarchy of victims – with "innocent victims", who did not "deserve" their suffering at the top and (non-state) combatants, who deserve any suffering as a result of their actions, at the bottom. There are also questions about who the perpetrators are – simply the men who were engaged in paramilitary organizations, or those who went to prison. What about those who supplied information, washed or burnt clothes after an act of violence, gave financial aid or

collected money, or doctors who treated paramilitaries so that they wouldn't have to go to hospital? What about the governments, what about the institutions such as the churches, who in different ways directly and indirectly contributed to sectarianism and violent conflict? While one must be careful not to justify the actions of those who, like me, were engaged in violence, there is also a need to guard against the demonization and scapegoating of certain people and groups in the context of a deeply rooted political conflict (Verwoerd and Little 2008). Thus, the contested and multi-layered nature of "victims" and "perpetrators" also makes the issue of forgiveness and reconciliation much more complex (Govier and Verwoerd 2004).

Given the complications referred to above it is not surprising that in my experience as a peace practitioner (public) forgiveness in the Northern Irish context has been problematic. Let me mention a few examples. In one case, a person was killed and, immediately the father publicly said that he forgave the killers. People were shocked, disturbed, and angry. Some said that the father's forgiveness cheapened the notion of forgiveness, that it undermined justice, and that it encouraged the killers to continue their actions because, having been offered forgiveness, they had nothing to worry about. So, in this case the offering of forgiveness in public caused a huge outcry. On the other hand, there were a number of questions raised by these strong reactions: Does another person have the right to comment on an individual whose son has been killed and who offers forgiveness as part of his journey of dealing with his grief? What is it about one individual who offers forgiveness that angered and upset people? Perhaps the reaction comes from the feeling that the example is one that they couldn't follow and, therefore, made them less of a person.

The second example was a mother whom I worked with as part of the storytelling or sharing of life histories work that I do with victims and former combatants. This

mother, whose husband had been shot dead and who had reached a stage in her personal journey where she was considering participating in a life histories workshop, was told by her daughter: "If you step into that room with the men who represents the organization that killed my father, if you even consider going into the room, you are no longer my mother. If you do that you betray my father." What does that mother do? What does that daughter need? This example highlights the long term impact of a violent death on the family and loved ones – not only did those responsible kill a husband and a father, they also contributed to the possible further destruction of the family because of the mother's consideration of forgiveness and the daughter's being at a different place in her journey and inability to accept it. Unfortunately forgiveness can be a highly destructive process that can destroy families. I remember saying that to a minister in the church one day and he looked at me aghast, saying "how can forgiveness be a destructive process?" The destructive potential of forgiveness is something that he hadn't even considered, but this is what ordinary people on the ground are struggling with every day.

Another woman put this struggle of living forgiveness to me as follows: "I regret that I offered forgiveness; I feel I betrayed my loved one; I think I've betrayed my loved one." And a few months later she returned and said: "I feel okay with it again. I'm okay now. I can make sense of it. I don't regret it." But a few weeks later, the smell of food reminds her of her loved one, or a song on the radio, or something said in a conversation, and once again, she was plunged into this doubt and this turmoil about having offered forgiveness. Does that make the forgiveness that she offered real or not? Or is that lived experience a reflection of what forgiveness is really about –that it is not a place that you go to, that it is something you try and struggle to live with on a regular basis, while still carrying your memories and your pain and your loss?

The third, very public example I want to mention briefly is a recent TV series, involving encounters between victims and former combatants and chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. I was involved in the early stages of this programme and was going to participate myself. However, I quickly withdrew, as did a number of other people, once it became obvious that this was going to be a dangerous, overly choreographed, sensationalist process, without adequate preparation and support for participants and their families, and with undue pressure on participants to "reconcile", to shake hands. When the series of encounters were broadcasted there were people who were watching the television at home, who saw for the first time the person that was responsible for killing their father. They were not informed that the programme was going to be shown. They rung a help line and all they got was an answering machine.

Of course, people outside of NI were amazed – "here are men who had killed, facing people who had lost loved ones – how wonderful is that!" Many outsiders thought it was a very successful and very powerful programme. However, in my experience (and having talked with many others) it was quite destructive in NI.

Moving from "public forgiveness" to a more personal level again, I would stress that in my own life and with regard to my own violent past actions, I also continue to struggle with questions around forgiveness. I believe that I am not entitled to ask for forgiveness. I don't think that a person who perpetrated violence on a family has the right to go to that family without being asked. Without them requesting such a meeting, there is a risk that their suffering could be increased. My experience has been that most people who ask for forgiveness, are driven more by their need to move on rather than being concerned about the family's needs. I think forgiveness is a gift. If forgiveness is offered, that's different. But I don't think someone engaged in violence has the right to ask for it.

The implication is that to some extent I can never have inner peace. This lack of inner peace is something that I have to carry for the rest of my life. I've learned to come to terms with that so that I'm still able to function, and work and have a life, but it is something that is always there. And there is a part of me that feels that there is a justice in this lack of inner peace, so I don't complain.

I think there is a positive side to that human cost as well. At times, when I get angry or get into conflict, I'm always aware of that lack of inner peace, which reminds me of the consequences of violence, to not go down that road again, to find a different way of resolving that conflict. So I'm always aware of the pain that I caused, and this awareness prevents me from causing more.

My own pain and my own consciousness of the pain that I caused enable me to do the work that I do, to go into dangerous places in order to try and resolve conflict. I thus use my life experience to try and work with other people to help them to move away from violence by understanding the human cost involved.

5. A need for humility

I think my personal and work experience highlight the problems that can be caused by those who insist – without enough humility – on defining "reconciliation" or "forgiveness." If someone had come along and told me in prison that I was talking about reconciliation when I was thinking and feeling my way through those strange, initial thoughts and feelings of change arising from beginning to consider the suffering of my enemy, I would have resisted and turned away from what was happening inside of me. So, a sense of timing and place is important, coupled with humility in our use of language given what human transformation can cost an individual, a family, a group, a community or society in general.

I also have come to understand that people who reject the terminology of forgiveness, for example those without a faith base, nevertheless do talk about the reality of forgiving in a different way. “Letting go” or a willingness to engage with others they would not have engaged with before, stepping into the room with others to listen or to deepen understanding without agreeing with, all the things that people would never have considered doing before, all the little or maybe not so small changes that take place. Some call these steps “forgiveness” but I tend to think of it as “change.” This change – in the ways we look at ourselves and our enemies, individually and collectively – sometimes happens to us unintentionally; it often comes out of something else we are engaged in, and often we can be surprised by it.

I am grateful that my work has also taught me more. I've personally experienced that those who have suffered the most, tend to be those that are most gracious, the most willing to reach their hand out, even to me. Those that often tend to be the most bitter or the most resistant towards peace are those that haven't suffered as much as those that have lost loved ones. I've had people that have shaken my hand, people who have come up and hugged me who have lost loved ones, and they've said to me that they never thought in all of their lives that they'd be able to do that. They've sent me cards, phoned me, thanking me for the work I've done with them, and all of them have suffered and lost loved ones. These experiences have been very humbling.

6. Wilhelm Verwoerd: Another practitioner perspective

My (Verwoerd’s) first in depth experience as a practitioner was working as a researcher within the SA TRC, from 1996-1998. My second experience, from 2002 to 2012,

was as a NGO[40] co-ordinator and facilitator of workshops with former combatants, victim-survivors and members of wider society connected with the conflict in and about NI. The SA TRC – a national, large scale, "top-down" process – was probably one of the most public and the most publicized international processes of dealing with "reconciliation" and "forgiveness" thus far. In contrast, most of my work surrounding the conflict in and about NI was about sensitive, behind-the-scenes, confidential, "bottom-up" engagements and relationship cultivation.

Thus, my journey over the last almost 20 years has to some extent been a move from the public to the private. It has also been a journey from a South African process where the language of truth, reconciliation, forgiveness, justice, held a very public and prominent – though contested – place (Verwoerd 2007; Govier and Verwoerd 2002c), to a context where Alistair and I tend to avoid using concepts such as "reconciliation" and "forgiveness."

Given the negative baggage that typically comes with those words in the context of NI, we try to use different concepts, such as "humanization;" we focus on the need for "understanding," of "finding creative, non-violent ways of dealing with difference;" we talk about "journeying through conflict."

Having had this experience of both working in the TRC and working with Alistair and others linked to the conflict in and about NI, I find it quite challenging to reflect on the theme of "public forgiveness." In addition to the points that Alistair has made about the need for caution and humility regarding the language of forgiveness and victims-survivors – with which I agree – I therefore would like to reflect on one example from our joint work that to some extent can be seen as a process that includes "public forgiveness."

(The focus here is not on a more obvious meaning of "public" namely "by public representative(s)." For a

[40] NGO stands for Non-Governmental Organization.

philosophical exploration of this meaning of "public forgiveness" as expressed in the SA TRC and especially the prominent role of Archbishop Tutu in this regard, see Verwoerd (2007). In the latter exploration I draw on distinctions and insights arising from work with Govier (Govier and Verwoerd, 2002c; 2002d; 2011). These distinctions include the secular, conceptual exploration of the affective, temporal, ethical reframing and release aspects of 'forgiveness;' plus they separate forgiveness from 'reconciliation.' Distinctions between unilateral forgiveness, bilateral forgiveness and unilateral forgiveness initiatives, with attention to how these processes can or cannot be applied at individual/small group and large group or collective levels, have also been helpful. And I drew on distinctions between primary, secondary, and tertiary 'victims.' These distinctions, amongst other things, led me to a cautious conclusion that Archbishop Tutu's passionate advocacy for forgiveness as Chairperson of the SA TRC can also be interpreted as a unilateral forgiveness initiative, at a national level, on behalf of tertiary victims.)

7. A highland journey through conflict

Drawing on decades of our own conflict experiences (Verwoerd 1997, Little and Scott 2009) and many years of working together Alistair and I gradually developed a small group conflict transformation process entitled "Journey through Conflict" (Little and Verwoerd 2013). This carefully facilitated process weaves the sharing of life histories ("storytelling"), deep dialogue, and nature-based activities together, and includes individual and group preparation and follow-up activities.

The selection of groups of ten to fifteen participants is guided by the search for as much as possible inclusivity and diversity in terms of conflict experience, cultural-political and regional backgrounds, gender, and

age. Unless there is a need for "single identity" work, we include those who have been directly engaged in armed conflict (former combatants from state and non-state backgrounds), those directly affected (victim-survivors) from Irish, Northern Irish/British, and English backgrounds, as well as representatives of key parts of broader society (such as business, education, churches).

We have found that this kind of inclusivity allows us to work with complexity – having multiple voices in a group makes it more difficult to stick to simplistic oppositional categories of "us" and "them." In the process there is more room to look beyond rigid conflict labels and generalizing stereotypes, and thus to humanise relationships (Verwoerd 2006; Halperin and Weinstein 2004).

The ideal process allows for a series of residential workshops, including venues that are relatively remote and away from the glare of publicity and other everyday distractions or conflict associations. This series of engagements provides opportunities for former enemies to humanize their relationships, for participants from opposing conflict backgrounds to deepen their understanding of each other and of themselves, and hopefully to come to some point where they are willing to work together back home, in their own communities.

Throughout many years of doing this kind of work we have been very cautious about publicity – generally no cameras or even observation has been allowed. On one occasion, relatively early on, we did allow a group process to be filmed in order to develop an educational resource for wider use.

Despite extensive consultation with all involved, the filmmakers did not stick to the agreement. This significantly added to the difficulties of a tension-filled process that included a group from opposing backgrounds, with different needs and levels of trauma.

Around 2008 we were approached by a Japanese documentary team who were interested in trying to capture

something about the process of reconciliation in NI. We expressed our strong reservations about allowing filming, but after extensive discussions we agreed on the following: we would select a group that agrees from the start to be filmed; there will be a strict agreement, including with participants, about how the documentary team would operate to minimize interference with what had to be an authentic process; the documentary will only be shown in Japan.

Alistair and I proceeded with the selection of 10 people, who all agreed to the making of the documentary. For some, this was an opportunity for the loss of loved ones to be more widely acknowledged; others wanted to be part of getting a message out about the difficulties of dealing with the legacy of violent conflict. For those with local security concerns it was vital that the documentary was restricted to Japanese television. We then co-facilitated a Journey through Conflict process, including preparation and follow-up meetings in NI and five day workshop in a remote house in the Scottish Highlands. The whole process was successfully filmed.

This group included Gerard, who is from a Catholic background. In the 1970s two of his brothers were lured away by Protestant "friends" in their workplace to go and play cards in a Protestant neighbourhood. Both brothers ended up being shot dead by the UVF, the organization that Alistair belonged to. This family experience of trust being brutally betrayed made it very difficult for Gerard to accept our invitation – based on a recommendation from his victim's support group – to go away with us to a remote place in the Scottish Highlands. But he also felt that his brothers' deaths were never given the full acknowledgement and public recognition that some other victims were getting. So, for the sake of his brothers and his family, he wanted to be part of a process where there was a public dimension to it. We also made it very clear to him that this process was not about

reconciliation or forgiveness; it was about deepening understanding, it was about humanization.

He arrived in the process with a visible cloud hanging over his face. One could see that here is a person who after all these years is still sitting with the trauma, with the heaviness, with the shadow hanging over him. He displayed little emotion, his face looked quite dead. Through being given the space to share his life experiences, and to listen deeply to what others were saying - and in his case for the first time hearing what someone with Alistair's Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) background was saying – through this process one could actually see something starting to change in him.

At some point, the Japanese documentary team asked Alistair to sit next to Gerard over lunch, but Alistair replied: "No, this is not what this is about. If it happens it happens, but I'm not going to be part of a forced process." We thus respected the slowness of that kind of inner journeying, but over time something visibly changed in Gerard. By the time we returned home there was light back in his face, his skin colour changed. He talked in the group about feeling some relief from a deadening numbness that he was carrying for 30 years. And during the last group meal in Scotland, Gerard, by choice, did end up sitting next to Alistair.

During a follow-up interview at home he and his wife responded as follows to questions about the meaning of what happened in the Highlands, and about forgiveness:

> Q: Gerard, could you describe what the trip to Scotland has meant to your life?
> G: It was a type of relief that I could actually sit with people, especially people from a UVF background… that I could sit quite comfortably with him [Alistair] and respect him as being an ordinary individual. I could understand how they became involved and why these things happened. It happened on both sides obviously. Okay, there's nothing you can do about the past; it's happened – even though we still live with the

consequences. I was very impressed with Alistair's story and him being so totally truthful, and honest, and not holding anything back, which was good for me. He was aware that what he was saying could hurt me but I think he must have known in the back of his head that if he held anything back it wouldn't heal me in anyway. So he did me good by being truthful and honest.

Q: How would you tell your two brothers about the Scotland trip?
G: I don't think I would know how to explain it to them. I possibly would say that it was terrible that they had to be murdered but hopefully through their murders, that something good can come out of it for everybody else.

Q: Kathleen, how would you explain what has happened to Gerard to his two brothers?
K: Well, Gerard loved his two brothers. And to forgive the people that murdered the two boys must be very hard for Gerard. But I think he came a long way. Gerard has come a long way with this forgiveness. And I hope the two brothers forgive us, for forgiving the people that done it. And I'm sure they will. John and Thomas will forgive us. Because we worried a lot; we've been through a lot with their murder. Now it's time to let them two be in peace.

Q: Gerard, do you think you have forgiven the people who murdered your brothers?
G: I suppose I would say 'yes I do'. It's hard to say that. As I said, from the start, I didn't really feel… I felt numb and I still do feel that bit of numbness, but I've a better understanding. It was just unfortunate that … if it hadn't have been them two, it would've have been two other people. You just have to accept it, and try and get on with life and forgive people. That whole Scottish experience just brought it home to me, made it very clear that we can forgive… I'll not say forget but try to forget. I can never forget John and

> Thomas. But I just have to put it out of my head that they're not here. They're in heaven. And the people that done it just didn't know any better at the time.
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> Q: Kathleen how do you feel now?
> K: Relieved that this is another part of our lives that we can move on with. Because to me, Scotland done something for Gerard that I couldn't do because I didn't know what to do. Relieved that Gerard has let go of part of the hurt and the awful feelings that he has went through life with. And, please God, we will move on, and be peaceful.

The Japanese team also asked Alistair, "Would you say you're sorry when you get the chance to meet with Gerard?' and he said "only if it is appropriate, but I would be willing to say 'I'm really sorry for what happened to your brothers'." This illustrates a complexity regarding the sincerity, proper process and timing of both private and public apologies that Govier and Verwoerd (2002a, 2002d) highlighted in their discussion of the 'promise and pitfalls' of apologies and in their cautious defence of public apologies.

In March 2009 the group met again and in a moving session looked together at the documentary produced for Japanese television, entitled "Beyond hatred – the journey of reconciliation from the Troubles in NI." The two Japanese translators were also present and they gave feedback and shared the audience reports from the multiple times that the documentary had been shown. We received a translated copy of this written feedback, including encouraging statements such as these:

> *Female / 39 / Freelance / Tokyo*
>
> The documentary made me consider violence in general. I realized nothing could be solved by violence. Their physical journey might be only a little light in the dark but it is a fantastic challenge. I know it's not enough to solve all the problems but I also

> know nothing could be done unless they stop fighting each other. I think that we should have more time to talk in school / at home since childhood. Once it becomes a habit, it will spread to the family, friends, and society. Then it may also spread to the peace process after all. It was a rewarding documentary and greatly contributed towards non-violence.

Even though they never directly talked about forgiveness and "sorry" wasn't said explicitly, Gerard and Alistair have been working together since their return from that Scottish Highlands Journey.

The initiative for working together, publicly, came from Gerard. In early 2010 he invited Alistair onto a panel, in his local community, a strongly Republican (Catholic) part of West Belfast. As part of Gerard's initiative to bring the message that it's possible to work together with someone from the other side into the public arena within his own community, the local media was invited into that process.

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Orangeman shares platform with ex-IRA man, ex-UVF man and victim

Four different stories told at Cloona House discussion

BY CLARA QUINN

THEY say that many issues can be resolved if people just sit down and get around the table.

[illegible]

IT'S GOOD TO TALK: [illegible]

8. An example of "public forgiveness"

The above overview is a brief summary of what happened within Gerard and in particular between him and Alistair during a specific Journey through Conflict process. (I am not suggesting that a "cloud" did not return to hang over Gerard, but three to four years later, as part of a longitudinal research project, he still talked very positively about this Highland experience. See Hamber, Little and Verwoerd, forthcoming.)

Sharing this on-going journey with both of them helped to restore my conviction that this kind of "public forgiveness" process is indeed possible, partly because we managed to avoid the pitfalls pointed out earlier by Alistair. This was a genuine, bottom-up, carefully facilitated, small scale process that allowed change to grow and eventually bear fruit; it wasn't a top-down process, it didn't put undue pressure on anybody (Verwoerd 2008). Furthermore, in terms of the "public"

nature of forgiveness, a number of important distinctions emerge from this example:

8.1. Making the private public

In this example an essentially private process (rooted in the conflict in and about NI) was made public in Japan through a careful and extensive process of prior discussion, selection of participants, and on-going attention to the relationships among everyone involved. As facilitators a lot of effort went into making sure that the documentary team understood the process, and stuck to our agreement. Where appropriate, we included them in the process – for example we gave them opportunities to also introduce themselves in some depth, and they were invited to join the group during meal times in Scotland. This further encouraged their sensitivity to the process and the group, and helped participants to be more relaxed in the presence of the filming team.

In terms of more tricky local publicity, the initiative was taken by a victim-survivor to organize a public meeting and to include local media. The active support and involvement of participants in the process, and respect for their agency and consent, allowed international and local media to be used, without any damage (that we are aware of) being caused in the process. In these ways a small-scale, interpersonal process could be taken into a much bigger public realm (Little and Verwoerd 2013).

One meaning of "public forgiveness" thus has something to do with making the private public by using the media in a carefully facilitated way that respects the complexity and the humility of the process.

8.2 Making the public personal

The example used here also highlights the potential of making the public personal. At the public meeting in

Gerard's community he was sitting in the front, next to Alistair, and they both shared not only something about their life experiences but also talked about their recent experience in Scotland. Both were honest about their inner journeys – their thoughts and feelings, their struggles and breakthroughs along the way. They spoke from the heart.

There were 40-50 people in the audience. For many this was the first opportunity to see a victim-survivor from their own community sitting next to someone from the "other community," who used to be part of the organization responsible for their community member's bereavement. For many it was the first time to hear someone like Alistair and someone like Gerard speak from the same platform and in the way they did. During the question and answer time and in follow-up conversations a number of people talked about how deeply moving and encouraging this panel discussion was.

This audience response points to what a South African TRC colleague, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, describes as the need to "make public spaces intimate." (Gobodo-Madikizela 2008) In other words, it is important to find ways to bring the personal into the public realm, because this kind of (careful) exposure to individual, human experiences has the potential to touch people at a deeper level, and thus to encourage more openness and a greater willingness to try and understand. And in the process a positive ripple effect in the community and beyond is often created.

8.3 Direct and indirect forgiveness

The Highland Journey example also brings a further important distinction to the fore, namely between indirect and direct forgiveness. As stated before, in our Journey through Conflict work the focus is not specifically on forgiveness or reconciliation. The language of forgiveness (and saying sorry) was eventually used in interviews with the Japanese documentary team, but not in the face to face

interactions between, for example, Gerard and Alistair. The process thus had an indirect quality – allowing understanding and deepening human connection to grow, without putting pressure on anyone to "forgive" or "reconcile".

The need for indirectness is poetically alluded to by the Irish poet-philosopher-priest, John O'Donohue, when he talks about the need to respect the "shyness of the soul." "The soul," he says "is shy. If it sees you coming after it, it will do a runner and be gone in a crevice" (O'Donohue 1997). This challenging notion of the "shyness" of the "soul" – that innermost part of who we are as human being – has been one of the guiding principles in Journey through Conflict work, in our approach to facilitation and programme design.

O'Donohue uses further helpful metaphors in this regard when he warns against the "neon light" of modern, scientific consciousness. He likens this neon light to the "harsh and brilliant white light of a hospital operating theatre" which is "too direct and clear to befriend the shadowed world of the soul. It is not hospitable to what is reserved and hidden." He is drawn instead to the reverential quality of "candlelight" when approaching the unique "mystery and depth of the individual soul." Candlelight "is ideal light to befriend the darkness, it gently opens up caverns in the darkness and prompts the imagination into activity" (O'Donohue 1997, 109-110).

In our experience there is a reserved, "soulful" quality to interpersonal forgiveness and reconciliation. Thus there is a need for processes that respect the sensitivity, the fragility of human relationships, especially when traumatized people are involved; processes that use more candlelight than spotlight; processes that are more indirect than direct.

The above example from a particular Journey through Conflict process thus illustrates that it is indeed challenging to make this deeply personal, typically private kind of process public. Neither is it simple to make public

spaces personal or intimate. The media and public spaces typically have a glare, a "spotlight" feel to them. However, the example given here does show that this kind of "public forgiveness" is actually possible. The promise of forgiveness, in public or in private, is real – as long as we remain deeply mindful of the many pitfalls along the way.