

Empowerment - Whose power? What is meant?

1. On Entering a Sacred Space:

The role of the personal story

The place I am speaking from

I want to tell you the story of a young girl. When she grew up, she observed her parents, her siblings. She lived in a nice place, on an island, close to the beach. Her early years were often warm and sunny, growing up in nature, safe, able to walk wherever she wished with no fear. But still something was not as it should be. She could not place her finger on it. Though she experienced her environment as quite peaceful, she always noticed an existential fear in her mother. There was a permanent sense of hurry, of danger, of racing from someone or something, of fighting against some unknown foe in the family's life. Missing the bus could trigger a severe mode of crisis. She then observed her mother, already permanently nervous and on the edge, become frantic, fearful, sweating, shouting at the children. Coming late was somehow life-threatening. Getting a seat on the train or in a restaurant could become a life or death matter of tussling for the best space, sometimes with aggression against strangers, which she felt embarrassed about. It was always about securing something - a seat, food, a ticket, some space. When something did not go her way, the mother would be talking to herself, sometimes in angry whispers, sometimes loudly, as if the child was no longer present. It frightened her. When it got bad the mother would hit her fists against her head or fall to her knees and pray. At times, she and her brother would discuss how they would survive if she went to the 'madhouse'.

What did the child feel? For one she felt overwhelmed and confused because her experience of time and place seemed so different from her mother's. She felt angry at her mother's behaviour and then guilty at her own anger, for somehow her mother was vulnerable, that she understood. The child's confusion, her anger, was hurting the mother, that she could see. So she had to be strong, somehow pretend that all was fine. But her questions remained.

Years later, grown up, the girl went on to explore these questions. In this peaceful middle class setting - where was the crisis, what was going on?

That girl was me.

Why am I telling you this personal story? Not for the sake of the story alone, which speaks to some of the realities the children of war survivors are faced with even if they grow up in times of peace, but in order to locate my voice, the place I am speaking from. I have learnt over the years of working in the field of transitional justice that it is as much a journey of making sense of my own story and my place and contribution in the world, as it is about the bigger questions of how to enable a better future when emerging from a past of atrocity and injustice.

Hence I need to locate my voice when I am speaking to you about empowerment and when speaking about survivors of violence, for at first sight who am I - young, white, European,

highly educated, privileged, grown up in a prosperous country and setting - to speak about such things? But the lives of many of us working in transitional justice or dealing with the past have biographical clues when you look more closely, clues that speak to an original impulse and that need to be explored in order to speak with legitimacy about the issues at hand.

I now work in peacebuilding. I recruit, prepare and accompany mostly young people setting out to work in conflict contexts, and I give them this for the road: if you set out to empower others, or even 'victims', start asking some questions of yourself first. And if you are engaging with people's lives and stories, even with the best of intentions, know that you are treading on sacred ground.

2. Power is never given - it is always taken

Let's have a look at some definitions of empowerment - Wikipedia says:

The term Human Empowerment covers a vast rare landscape of meanings, interpretations, definitions and disciplines ranging from psychology and philosophy to the highly commercialized Self-Help industry and Motivational sciences.

Sociological empowerment often addresses members of groups that social discrimination processes have excluded from decision-making processes through - for example - discrimination based on disability, race, ethnicity, religion, or gender. Empowerment as a methodology is often associated with feminism:

Empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social or economic strength of individuals and communities. It often involves the empowered developing confidence in their own capacities.

Power is never given - it is always taken

What do I mean by that? I cannot 'empower' someone else! Empowerment happens from within. (a group, an individual).

But a space can be created. And we can perhaps enable and facilitate the creation of such a space in which power can be taken, in which people can access their own strength and inner resourcefulness in order to explore and make sense of what happened to them, to find meaning in it and seek out the purpose that springs forth from their experience for the future and for their life.

Hence the very idea of empowerment of victims, individual or in groups, assumes in a way their exclusion, marginalisation and deprivation. It does not cast them as resourceful and powerful. But in TJ contexts not everybody who might deem themselves victim is in this way disempowered. Robert Mugabe would possibly see himself as a victim of the colonial forces of Rhodesia. And is he not? Who are the victim's in today's Rwanda? In South Africa experiences showed that victimhood as a term may be contested as some were keen and proud to be declared a 'victim' while others deemed the term disempowering (They said: 'As if I had not known what I was getting into and that struggle involved sacrifice. It demeans my experience as a hero.'). Victimhood per decree, at the TRC, as a public institution, then became a kind of currency, an access gate to contacts, resources, recognition, travel, privilege, even a kind of 'fame' (with frequent public airspace in the commissions and media's public performances on the past).

It turned out in the course of the TRC and the civil society interventions that accompanied the TRC that processes of empowerment sometimes did not go 'as planned', that they may be indeed that - processes: non-linear, organic, messy, at times chaotic, conflicting and painful.

Example of Survivor Support Group at the TC - storytelling, candle light, singing songs, assumptions about 'healing' and needing to speak. Who facilitates? Legitimacy? Mutual projections? Then the move to political work, to advocacy and lobby work, for reparations, the group was daring to develop an own voice (not the voice of story as healing, it was the voice of struggle) triggering fear of a loss of control, of the group developing own dynamics, of violent action, of refuelled anger and as NGO of taking sides, of being political, of losing the fragile trust of government and donors on the side of the TC. Out of it came Khulumani and today the **Charter of Redress**.

At the TRC and other storytelling processes I witnessed in SA whenever survivors started to speak their mind with emotion other than sadness, when they want to take action, when they voiced their anger in an unforgiving way, this scared the commissioners or facilitators who invoked the paradigm of reconciliation, or simply ignored and silenced such voices. Victims were meant to be humble, wise, and at best amazingly forgiving. They were not thirsty for revenge and revolution or hungry for more radical change in South Africa. They were offered courses in anger management. This is not to belittle the role of efforts at transforming and using the energy of anger, this is precisely what is needed, to channel anger into creative energy, it is more the 'management' part that bothers me, especially in the public narration that was created around victims needing to be healed, to be given a voice (a particular one, not necessarily their own).

Perhaps it is worth asking: who exactly then are we seeking to empower? To what end? Where does our intention to do so come from? And is what we are seeking really an empowered victim? Or rather a survivor who has transformed the limitations of victimhood? And who is a survivor? Someone who had something done to them? And what kind of contribution do we expect of that survivor? To then function, fit in, be nice and quiet? To purge anger? To forgive and let be (but of course not forget as we will make sure with a ready museum industry at hand? Forgive my cynical edge here. Too often, it seems to me, such efforts of empowerment are the result of an unreflected mixture of assumptions that become visible in terms such as 'giving voice', 'empowering', 'healing and dealing with the past', and under which can be observed two primary emotions of the intervenors:

Fear of the uncontainable anger of victims (and hence a need to contain by giving 'voice' to experience, a particular regulated shape and form (testimony, truth telling, memory, story)

Feelings of Guilt and/or Shame for what was done to victims (or not done to prevent harm)

So is empowerment of victims in the end about our own redemption (as whites, as the Western World, as whoever) from what Karl Jaspers called metaphysical guilt that makes us co-responsible for all wrong and injustice committed in our presence (whether or not we claim to have known)? This notwithstanding that there is moral guilt in the sense of direct responsibility here, else we might not have the gaping gap when it comes to TJ debates on settings such as Afghanistan and Irak, as several young Afghans pointed out last week in a training course on TJ that I gave in Bonn.

Note that we tend to see victims as in need of help rather than as resourceful, rich and strong (I wonder do we connect to them only via the negative if we use the term victim) - but in my experience, many survivors of violence are all three of these things. Resourceful. Rich. Strong. Father Lapley, survivor of a letter bomb sent to him by the apartheid government, with whom I worked in Healing of Memories process for about 8 years, speaks of a process of going from being a victim to a survivor to a victor.

Hence the way I would like to frame empowerment here is as a possibility for taking back one's own personal power, the power to live life fully, the power to experience joy, to enjoy life, to create a meaningful life and hence to be powerful in shaping the social and political realities around us. Speaking about the joy of life, about purpose and meaning, it might seem that such empowerment is individual only, something that belongs merely to the psychological realm, to the modus of the personal, but I seek to show through some examples that it is from starting with the personal that the social and the political realm can be touched, more often than the other way around (though we try to engineer precisely that (top down) in most of our TJ interventions, not very successfully).

There are several spaces that I have found useful for such a notion of empowerment.

1. Separate 'safe' spaces for survivors with similar experiences to speak and grapple with their stories and make meaning together (such as Victim/Survivor Support Groups, the white 'Home for All' Campaign in RSA). Leaving groups space to narrate a discourse that makes sense and is meaningful to them is critical for empowerment. At the same time the narrative that one group find empowering might be hurtful for the other - i.e. the anger and hatred and desire for revenge surfacing in the stories of black survivors of apartheid is difficult to bear for white South Africans. At the same time the narrative of the white beneficiary that perhaps speaks of not having known, not having wanted to know and of wanting to purge guilt (but not give up a comfortable lifestyle of privilege) is potentially angering and hurting black South Africans.
2. Spaces in which contrasting and contradicting narratives can encounter one another, i.e. in the Healing of Memories process where the voices of the ordinary South Africans met. Here the stories of victims of structural violence in the broadest sense came face to face with the beneficiaries of that very structural injustice. This is a very different conversation then, one that needs careful facilitation and a space in which emotion can at once be held while tensions normally not permitted to surface in the public sphere for the dictates of political correctness are allowed to become visible.

If you tell me the story of your suffering and mine is one of ignorance and privilege, how do I deal with the questions that simply placing our narrations into the same space evokes? (Example from Diss where lady broke down and white guy felt it is not a safe space and black PAC member attacked him and he said: I am a Jew I also know about suffering, I am also a victim. This was not granted to him.). Surely, this is a daring and perhaps naive thing to want to achieve - meaningful engagement between contradicting narrations, yet if we wish to work against too simple stories on either side, if we seek to empower not only one side but a context on the whole to move towards a future of lasting peace, it is a move that is needed. The crux is in the HOW. Many dialogue programs show evidence of potentially feeding into what Vlamik Volkan speaks of as 'chosen traumas' and 'chosen glories'. For this 'mixed' space, the multiple, the plural, the shades of gray are central for there is no chance of 'resolving' the contradictions and there is often no answer to 'why' (did you not know, not look, not want to know,

not witness, not prevent our suffering??). What is possible is a gentle holding of these contradictions rather than seeking to resolve or dissolve them, an acknowledgement of the impossibilities to 'resolve' in face of a shared will to create a better future.

3. The first two are what I would call 1st generation spaces. There is a third set of spaces that is about **remembrance and teaching the young**. This is an inter- or even a transgenerational space that enables those inheriting the emotional realities of the parent's or grandparents experiences without necessarily having the means or the stories to make sense of them.
4. Finally, there is needed a **space for silences**, respect for silence, too, tells a story. And there is mindfulness needed that telling itself may silence (as some may be told not other; as this may be told not that; as we may tell here and not there; or one version and not another)

This and not that: for example the telling of stories of gross human rights violation in front of the TRC in SA led to people who had experienced less drastic forms of violation and discrimination which nonetheless dramatically altered their lives, did not see themselves as 'victims'. 'I am not a real victim' people would say at HOM and then tell a gruelling story of forced removals and destroyed lives. So by admitting some narrations into an arena of telling we may devalue others.

Here and not There: for instance the fact that so much money goes to Robben Island Museum and reasonably few funds to community museums or to create new memorial sites in places like Athlone, Gugulethu, Khayelitsha. Where memorials that the state is interested and sponsoring may tell a story that omits and silences other parts of people's memory and lived experience.

One version and not another: for instance in a case in Cape Town developers found an old slave grave site as they were digging a foundation for a big hotel. Despite efforts by the descendants of the slave community in the Cape to stop the development and recover the site as a place of burial and memory, the law decided in favour of the developers, the bones of more than 300 people were moved and re-interred in a memorial that community members feel is alien to them, severing the spiritual connection to the site and silencing their past rather than empowering.

It might be at first sight easy then to see where the interest of the state might channel funds to evolve a particular version and narrative of the past, empowering to some and not to others. But it gets much more nuanced and complex the more we dive into the realities of such processes.

For instance researchers felt in the initial period of the TRC that they were doing something empowering by 'collecting victim's stories'. In the course of events it became clear that not only did some people assume that by telling their story to a young PhD student from the US or Germany they had actually placed their narrative formally within the TRC (for who could tell the difference between a statement taker and a researcher, they were all people with notebooks and a lot of language at their hands). Many survivors also felt that the students went away again to get their degrees but 'we were left with nothing to eat'. (There were more PhDs in the US on the TRC than there were PhDs in all subjects in entire RSA...)

At best we may manage to bring about 3 new abilities that are needed for transformation and empowerment:

- Response-ability (‘I must let your pain happen to me’)
- Conflict-ability (negotiate, hold tensions, engage, disagree without superficial harmony, without harming)
- Soci-ability (‘Imagine ourselves in a web of interdependencies that includes our enemies’)

Struggling but Daring to Dance

- Experimenting with the temporary negation of structural reality in favour of the experience of a new encounter
- Translating the new imaginary into an immediate experiment – daring to confront the complexities of the task
- Accept that for some it is a moment of unprecedented connection,
- For others re-enforcing difference by revealing underlying contradictions and contestations

Mamphela Ramphele:

‘Transformation has come to represent a way of compensating previously disadvantaged people, rather than creating opportunities for all citizens to contribute their talents and energies to the process of developing our country.’

To facilitate spaces for empowerment to happen, in particular the spaces of encounter between Others, we need courage and the willingness to be changed, to fail, to stand up and persevere, to contribute and accept what each generation can do to be-labour the past and give birth to new imagination and new realities. We also need to accept where the limits are and when we need to let it rest.

At the end:

In my own case it was only after 50 years and on the soil of another country, in South Africa, 10.000 miles away from Germany, that my mother could, for the first time, tell me what had happened to her. I was following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa at the time, sitting in hearing after hearing on apartheid atrocity, but that afternoon she took me with her into the burning streets of bombed-out Berlin, into the cellars of fear of April 1945. She had never told anyone and I doubt she ever told anyone after that, but that one afternoon, on the slopes of Table Mountain, the gates of memory were allowed to open. And I, the child, understood enough to make sense of how our journeys, hers and mine are connected. I learned to appreciate her as a human being and dissociate from the remnants of horror lodged in her cells. And I understood enough to honour the silences and the secrets that remain.