



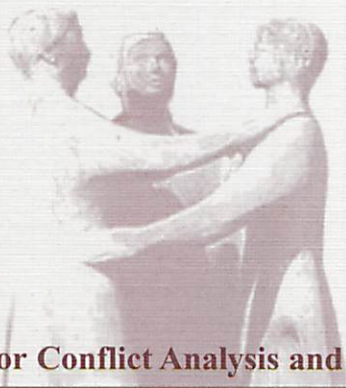
Occasional Paper 16

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**Empathy and Forgiveness for  
Apartheid's Most Condemned Man:  
Confronting the Human Side of Evil**

by  
Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela

February 2002



**Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution**

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**George Mason University**

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## About the Speaker

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Dr. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela currently teaches at Brandeis University and has been a Visiting Fellow at the Center for the Study of Values in Public Life at Harvard University's Divinity School. Earlier she served on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Human Rights Violations Committee from 1996 to 1998 and chaired many of the commission's public hearings. Her experiences on the commission, and particularly her work on perpetrators, led to her dissertation and Doctoral degree in Psychology from the University of Cape Town.

Prior to her work on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and her doctorate, Gobodo-Madikizela was trained in social work and clinical psychology in South Africa. She has taught at the University of Cape Town and the University of Transkei in South Africa. She has been associated with Women Waging Peace, a global organization engaged in peacebuilding.

Gobodo-Madikizela has published in a variety of journals, including the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* and the *South African Journal of Psychology*, and has a number of chapters in edited books. She has been interviewed on National Public Radio and Pacifica Radio, contributed op-ed pieces to a number of international newspapers, and presented distinguished lectures at the American Psychological Association, the Rama Mehta Lecture at Harvard's Radcliffe College, and the Women's Foreign Policy Group at the White House.

This paper is based on Dr. Gobodo-Madikizela's Lynch Lecture delivered at the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, in May 2001.

## About the Lectures

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Friends of the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution and prominent Virginians Edwin and Helen Lynch made a substantial gift to George Mason University in 1987 to establish a chair, first held by the late Dr. James H. Laue, then by former director Dr. Kevin P. Clements, and currently help by Dr. Daniel Druckman, in the name of Mr. Lynch's parents, Vernon M. and Minnie I. Lynch. Mr. and Mrs. Lynch have continued to provide invaluable support, both material and spiritual, to the institute. In 2000, Mr. and Mrs. Lynch made another substantial gift in the form of a property on Mason Neck along the Potomac River. The institute plans to use the gift to create a conference and retreat center for conflict resolution.

In order to bring the idea and theory of conflict analysis and resolution to the entire university community, and in gratitude to Mr. and Mrs. Lynch, the institute established the annual Lynch Lectures. Previous lecturers have been James H. Laue (1987), John W. Burton (1989), Kenneth Boulding and Elise Boulding (1990), Richard E. Rubenstein (1991), Ambassador Samuel E. Lewis (1992), Roger Wilkins (1993), Deborah M. Kolb (1994), Rajmohan Gandhi (1995), Johan Galtung (1996), Anatol Rapoport (1997), Donald W. Shriver (1998), Ronald J. Fisher (1999), and Daniel Garcia-Peña (2000).

The Lynch Lectures are published as Occasional Papers by the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution and, along with other publications of the institute, are available from the George Mason University bookstore.

## About the Institute

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The Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, has as its principal mission to advance the understanding and resolution of significant and persistent conflicts among individuals, communities, identity groups, and nations.

In the fulfillment of its mission, the institute conducts a wide range of programs and outreach. Among these are its graduate programs offering the Doctor of Philosophy and Master of Science in Conflict Analysis and Resolution, clinical consultancy services offered by individual members of the faculty, and public programs and education that include the annual Vernon M. and Minnie I. Lynch Lecture Series.

The institute's major research interests include the study of conflict and its resolution, the exploration and analysis of conditions attracting parties in conflict to the negotiating table, the role of third parties in dispute resolution, and the application of conflict resolution methodologies in local, national, and international settings. The institute's Applied Practice and Theory Program develops teams of faculty, students, and allied practitioners to analyze and address topics such as conflict in schools and other community institutions, crime and violence, jurisdictional conflicts between local agencies of government, and international conflicts.

The Northern Virginia Mediation Service is affiliated with the institute and provides conflict resolution and mediation services and training to schools, courts, and local agencies and practitioners in communities across Northern Virginia and the Washington metropolitan area.

For more information, please call (703) 993-1300 or check the institute's web page at [www.gmu.edu/departments/ICAR/](http://www.gmu.edu/departments/ICAR/).

## Foreword

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The Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution is proud to present Dr. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's paper "Empathy and Forgiveness for Apartheid's Most Condemned Man: Confronting the Human Side of Evil." Her presentation as the 2001 Lynch Lecturer on this topic demonstrated the power of Dr. Gobodo-Madikizela's perspective and the importance of this topic.

Gobodo-Madikizela's lecture and this paper focus on one of the greatest challenges to peacebuilding, the question of empathy and forgiveness—that is, reconciliation. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission is one of the models for questioning how reconciliation takes place, and Dr. Gobodo-Madikizela's experience with the commission informs her reflections.

In this paper, Gobodo-Madikizela focuses on the very micro process of reconciliation and the issue of apology and forgiveness. She asks, "How can we understand forgiveness in the context of tragedy?" She argues that forgiveness derives from the "sheer humanness" of an encounter between victim and perpetrator of evil and the ensuing empathy and understanding.

She provides a detailed, nuanced account of her encounters with one particularly notorious individual, Eugene de Kock, one of the apartheid government's chief assassins, and her personal struggle with empathy. She seeks to understand how he reached his decision to apologize and how the act of apologizing transformed him. Her meetings with de Kock led her to question the nature of evil, and how empathy can distort the boundary between interviewer and subject, and how the human touch alters relationships.

The Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution will continue its examination and thinking regarding these critical processes of reconciliation, and we welcome your thoughts.

Sara Cobb  
Director  
Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution  
George Mason University

While blacks in South Africa suffered racial discrimination and repression throughout the twentieth century, these practices were only codified into law as apartheid in 1948, when the Nationalist Party came to power. The effect of apartheid was not only to legalize every imaginable form of discrimination, but also to reduce blacks to second-class citizens, even foreigners, in their own land.

The African National Congress (ANC), founded in 1912, used peaceful forms of protest during the first half-century of its existence. But a remarkable event occurred forty-one years ago that transformed the nature of the struggle: On March 21, 1960, several thousand black people gathered in Sharpeville to protest the notorious "pass law" that required blacks to carry internal passports that totally regulated their lives. The police opened fire on the crowd. Sixty-nine people were killed, including eight women and ten children.

Both the Pan African Congress (PAC), who organized the Sharpeville protest, and the ANC concluded that this wanton killing by the apartheid regime spelled the end of peaceful protest. Force had to be answered with force. Nelson Mandela announced the establishment of *Umkonto we Sizwe* (the Spear of the Nation), an armed wing of the ANC, to carry out acts of sabotage. A police raid on the ANC's secret headquarters in 1963 and a long trial the following year led to life sentences for Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, and six other leaders of *Umkonto we Sizwe*.

The government responded by stepping up its security apparatus, establishing the notorious Bureau of State Security (BOSS), which soon became the most feared symbol of state repression. Over the next decades, more discriminatory laws were passed and repression spun out of control; hundreds of thousands of apartheid's opponents were detained without trial, while thousands were severely tortured and many died in detention.

State-orchestrated violence grew even further during the 1980s, when covert operations units were established in the security police and defense departments, which ran a network of police informants (black and white), murder squads, and scientists skilled in the art of biological warfare. South Africa saw an increase in widespread torture by security police, mysterious

deaths, disappearances of political activists, mass killings, and police cover-up operations. At the same time, the police were given immense powers and immunity, with laws that protected them from prosecution for the human-rights abuses they committed. The liberation movement stepped up its armed struggle against apartheid, which also included human-rights abuses in the process.

By the beginning of the 1990s, President F. W. de Klerk and his colleagues were driven to the realization that the spiral of violence was leading the country to ruin, and the international isolation was becoming too much to bear. He released Mandela from prison. A widely representative political negotiations team, the Congress for a Democratic South Africa, or Codesa, was established to negotiate what amounted to the modalities of transferring power to the majority, a process that resulted in the election of Nelson Mandela and the ANC in 1994.

South Africa emerged from a horrific past, and the political negotiations signaled the dawn of a new era. One of the issues on the negotiating table was how to confront the traumatic legacy of the apartheid era. There was the question of perpetrators, most of whom were apartheid operatives whose jobs in the police, army, and national intelligence were protected by the sunset clause that ensured that all employees who served under apartheid would keep their jobs. There were apartheid's institutions of oppression. And, as in all societies that have suffered mass trauma, there were bystanders, the beneficiaries of apartheid privilege. Most important, there were victims, most of whom wanted to heal, and some of whom were even prepared to forgive.

South Africa established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to try and deal with its traumatic past, and to break the cycles of violence that so often repeat themselves historically. The TRC was promulgated by an act of parliament—the National Healing and Reconciliation Act of 1995—with a mandate to focus on three issues:

1. Establish as complete a picture as possible of past human-rights violations committed by all sides of the political spectrum;



2. Give victims of human-rights abuses a chance to speak publicly about the abuses they suffered in the past; and
3. Grant amnesty to perpetrators of human-rights abuses on the conditions that they give full disclosure of the details of the acts for which they want amnesty, and prove political objective—in other words, that they were acting under orders; and provided that the act was not disproportionate to the political objective.

Because South Africa's political transition was realized through negotiation, the TRC could not be conducted as a vehicle for victors' justice, as had the Nuremberg Trials following World War II. The conditional amnesty granted to perpetrators was intended as an alternative to retributive justice.

The provision of amnesty should be understood as a compromise solution and part of a negotiated settlement in a country that was trying to restore peace and social cohesion instead of revenge. The TRC's conditional amnesty differed in many dimensions from other amnesty processes, such as those in Brazil and some other South American countries, where outgoing military and civilian leaders granted themselves amnesty and blanket amnesty to their foot soldiers. Amnesty in South Africa was conditional. Applicants for amnesty were required to appear in public to testify about their deeds, and to fulfill all three of the conditions mentioned earlier: full disclosure, proof of political motive, and proportionality of the act to the political motive. Apology and regret were not required for the granting of amnesty. Yet interestingly, expressions of apology were heard on the stage of the TRC. Different motives led perpetrators to apologize to their victims; not all of the apologies were sincere or remorseful, and the presence of remorse was not always easy to establish.

Apologies made by perpetrators of atrocities are unremarkable compared to the moving stories of forgiveness by family members of victims and by victims themselves. How can we understand forgiveness in the context of tragedy? What do victims mean when they forgive a person who has murdered their loved one? What brings them to that forgiving space? Should perpetrators of atrocities be forgiven? Is forgiveness born out of empathy, which belongs in the moral realm of humanity, and so cannot be denied

when somebody, even a perpetrator, cries out for it? What does it mean to forgive, to show empathy for a person who has committed evil deeds? When I started exploring these and other questions about forgiveness in my work with victims and perpetrators, I did not expect that my investigation would be transformed into a deeply personal journey.

In this presentation I want to do two things. First, I would like to share part of the book I am writing, which is based on my interviews with Eugene de Kock, one of the apartheid government's chief assassins, and to highlight my struggle with empathy in my encounter with him. Second, I would like to shed some light on Eugene de Kock's internal struggle with evil, and to reexamine some commonly held notions about evil.

Eugene de Kock was the head of covert operations unit on a secret farm called Vlakplaas located just outside of Pretoria. In South Africa he is known as "Prime Evil," a nickname that caricatures him as the embodiment of all apartheid's evil. He is serving 212 years and two life sentences for crimes he committed under apartheid. Like most perpetrators serving sentences for their politically motivated crimes, de Kock has applied for amnesty and his amnesty application, the longest submission by a single applicant to the TRC at 1,000 pages, is still under review by the Amnesty Committee.

My interviews with Eugene de Kock began following his first appearance before the TRC, where he testified about his role in a bombing incident in which three black policemen were killed to prevent them from revealing the identity of the white policemen who had murdered four well-known activists from a small town called Cradock in the Eastern Cape. De Kock, on orders from a police general, gave instructions for the building of the bomb that killed the three policemen. At the end of the TRC hearing, de Kock asked to meet privately with the widows of the men killed in the incident. Not only did the widows agree to meet with him, they also offered him the forgiveness he wanted. To try and understand this extraordinary gesture of forgiveness, I spoke to the widows after their meeting with de Kock and asked them what motivated them to forgive him. In response to my question, one of the widows answered,

“I was profoundly touched by him. I didn’t even look at him when he was speaking to us. I don’t think I looked at him, at least I don’t remember looking at him in that room. Yet I felt the genuineness in his apology. I couldn’t control my tears. I could hear him, but I was overwhelmed with emotion, and I was just nodding, as a way of saying yes, I forgive you. I hope that when he sees our tears, he knows that they are not only tears for our husbands, but tears for him as well ... I would like to hold him by the hand, and show him that there is a future, and that he can still change.”

It may be difficult to comprehend how such a statement of forgiveness is humanly possible. More challenging is to understand the *process* involved in forgiveness. There are certain basic elements that are common in most acts of forgiveness: acknowledgment of wrongdoing, contrition, apology, and remorse. I think all are necessary for forgiveness to happen. But I think that crucial among all of these are expressions of remorse, for remorse leads to what I would like to call the paradox of remorse. The painful feelings of remorse seem to be a crying out by a perpetrator not only to undo the deed, but also to be readmitted to the world of moral humanity. The offer of forgiveness to a remorseful perpetrator is similar to situations that evoke empathy from another, a reaching out to somebody who is feeling pain. The paradox, and the gravity of the moment, I think, occur when the victim is drawn by the sheer humanness of the moment—that is, a perpetrator genuinely experiencing the pain of remorse—to reach out with empathy and understanding, and grant him the forgiveness he so desperately needs.

After my interview with the women, I wanted to interview de Kock to learn more about his apology and remorse. Privately I wanted to see for myself that he was worthy of the forgiveness and that he had meant his apology sincerely. I went to interview him at the maximum section of Pretoria Prison, where he is serving his sentence. De Kock described his first appearance before the TRC as an experience that had left him feeling as if a burden had been removed from his shoulders: “It was like shedding a cloak,” he said. When I asked him to tell me about the meeting with the widows of his victims, his face dropped and he became visibly distressed. I could hear the clatter of his leg chains as he shuffled his feet. Sitting directly across from me in the small prison consulting room, his heavy glasses on

the table that separated us, he started to speak. There were tears in his eyes. In a breaking voice, he said: "I wish I could do much more than 'I'm sorry.' I wish there was a way of bringing their bodies back alive. I wish I could say, 'Here are your husbands,'" he said, stretching out his arms as if bearing an invisible body, his hands trembling, his mouth quivering. "But unfortunately ... I have to live with it."

Relating to him in the only way one does in such human circumstances, I touched his shaking hand, surprising myself. Then I pulled back, and for a moment recast my spontaneous act of reaching out as something incompatible with the circumstances of an encounter with a person who not too long ago had used these same hands, this same voice, to authorize and trigger unspeakable acts of malice against people very much like myself.

In the couple of weeks after my first visit with de Kock, I was tormented by questions of whether I had crossed the moral line, whether I had betrayed my people and the many victims killed by de Kock, and whether I was guilty of feeling empathy for him. My feelings went back and forth; the news reports of the terrible things he had done were hard to take—I felt ashamed that I had allowed myself to feel sorry for him, and angry that he was both the person who had done these horrible things and the person whose human vulnerability I had encountered at the prison in Pretoria.

I had seen the two sides of de Kock, one evil, and the other, the one I was afraid of confronting: a human being capable of feeling, crying, and knowing the pain, the side where I had shared a common idiom of humanity with him, and I needed to find out why and how that side of him had been silenced.

Two weeks after my first interview with de Kock, he came to the TRC offices in Cape Town, where I was based, for his second appearance before the Amnesty Committee. During an adjournment in the hearings, I received an urgent message that de Kock wished to see me. I wondered whether de Kock called for me out of a need to escape from the gory confessions he sat through earlier that morning, which told of the grimy world he once inhabited, or because he had something important to tell me. I went to meet him in the tearoom that was reserved for perpetrators, their guards—for those

like de Kock, who were serving prison terms—and their lawyers. He rushed through the obligatory greetings, and it seemed he had something important to talk about. With an intent look on his face, he thanked me “for the other day,” a clear reference to our first meeting in the Pretoria Prison consulting room where I had reached out to touch his trembling hand. Then, with an expression that seemed genuinely incredulous, he said:

“You know, Pumla, that was my trigger hand you touched.”

I have not, up until now, been able to remove myself from the clutch of that statement nor soften its visceral impact. It was a statement pregnant with so many confusing contradictory messages. At first it seemed to unveil the dark pleasures of a man who, at one point, not only had enjoyed inflicting considerable pain on others but perhaps had relished imagining and reimagining how they must have felt, and had drawn strength and pride from watching others express revulsion when he regaled them with graphic stories from the field. Standing in the corner of this tearoom, faced with de Kock and surrounded by some of his former comrades in murder, and by their lawyers, de Kock’s face and tone had not betrayed any obvious malice; but perhaps he was too professional a killer for that. Did he say it with the tone of a self-shaming confessional, the cry of a leper in ancient times shouting “unclean, unclean”? Or did it have the depraved relish of a Hannibal Lecter looking to make a voyeuristic foray into the mind of a black woman? I could not say.

In the film *The Silence of the Lambs*, Hannibal Lecter (played by Anthony Hopkins), an evil psychiatrist in prison for cannibalism and murder, befriends a young investigative agent, Clarise (Jodie Foster), and enjoys making disturbing statements that penetrate beneath her psychological defenses and touch raw emotions. At one point he makes momentary contact with her hand through the bars of a cage. It is left to the imagination of viewers to wonder what went on in his mind; but the moment is a chilling one because of the long, pathological relationship Lecter has had with human flesh. It was the question mark left at the touch that makes the scene so chilling. What was it for him? Sexual? A power move? Sheer psychological torture? And for her?

De Kock had succeeded in raiding my conscience and making short shrift of any sort of boundary between interviewer and subject. He had penetrated beneath my defenses. I felt invaded, naked. Angry. It was hard to believe that in the days following our prison visit, while I had been struggling with emotions of sympathy and empathy, *he* had been thinking about—no, plotting—ways to spook me, to gain the upper hand by stemming the momentum of my moral crusade. Yet my motives had been unpremeditated; my intentions had been sincere. The unfairness—the sheer asymmetry of it—left me feeling as if the rug had been pulled out from underneath me.

In touching de Kock's hand, I had touched his leprosy, and he seemed to be telling me that, even though I did not realize it at the time, I was, from now onward, forever infected with the memory of having embraced into my heart—braced to my bosom—the hand that had killed, maimed, and blown up lives. It was as if he wanted to make sure, to insist, that if I intended to visit his cell and talk with him, then I should have the courage to do it not by retreating behind the professional façade of the Truth Commission's ritualized, courtlike proceedings but with the full knowledge that in engaging him, I was engaging a man who still carried his evil with him. He wanted his evil to be real to me, because it was still real to him. But at the same time it seemed as if this was a plea. He seemed to want me to reassure him that despite his murderous past, I would still be willing to reach out to him. He was exposed and alone in a country that, ironically, had employed mechanisms of denial to enable a regime of terror to thrive, and was now using denial to avoid facing responsibility for the past. *He* was not able to disown his past.

I must confess that I did not feel a chill when I touched de Kock. The chill settled in on me later as his ghosts (or mine) collected around me, first on the way driving back to Johannesburg, and then at home the following morning. When I woke up I could not lift my right hand, with which I had reached out to touch de Kock. For a long anxious moment I had lost the function of my hand. It felt numb. I could no longer *feel* with it. It had lost its "cunning": to feel, to reach out to others with love and compassion, to lend a helping hand to others, to soothe others' pain. In a sense, my hand had lost its essence, and by extension, the essence of what it is to be

human. The words of the Psalmist offer a powerful metaphor: "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning" (Ps. 137.5). Had I wasted the gift of compassion on someone who was not worthy of it?

It is remarkable that de Kock seemed also to be wrestling with the implications of the "touched" hand. It was clear that he too, was struggling to comprehend what being touched meant. It seemed to have evoked a trail of thought that brought him not so much to what it meant to be touched, but what it meant to be touched on *that* hand. It was clear my touch had triggered something, and this caused him to excise the part of his body that did the killing, as if the "trigger hand" went off on a killing rampage independently of its owner. He was resorting to a well-known psychological mechanism, splitting off the bad and evil part of the self to avoid facing his own demons. "That cannot be me," the voice of denial within cries out. "It was my 'trigger hand' that killed." It was an attempt at self-preservation. But it was also an illustration of how fragmented he was—a person in broken pieces, struggling to achieve some wholeness.

There were other psychological messages going on in de Kock's mind, and his statement "That was my trigger hand you touched" seemed to carry underlying subtext. It may well have been the first time a black person had touched him out of compassion. Perhaps de Kock recognized it as a kind of threshold crossing, a new event for him. But he was not sure how to take it. Perhaps being touched placed him in a position of weakness, and so drawing my attention to the power of the "trigger hand" was his way of reclaiming control of the situation. For the very act of drawing attention to the significance and the function of the "touched" hand that had killed innumerable blacks deified it and confirmed its legendary status: The Legendary Trigger Hand. But what to do with a black woman's decision to break the skin barrier (not only the skin barrier, but also the moral barrier) and touch the Trigger Hand?

It seemed that the statement was an instinctive reaction to pull up barriers in his mind. And so he returned to familiar ground: From the head of a covert operations unit, a crusader for apartheid, and a strategist of mass violence, the statement seemed to suggest that he was more comfortable seeing himself as an actor or initiator than as the object of my compassion.

Perhaps he was uncomfortable with being on the receiving end of human emotions. He could not relate to the experience of my touching him as a wholesome experience, and my gesture simply as that of kindness, because he could not reach out in return with a human appreciation of what my gesture meant. Even if he knew what the gesture meant, he could not comprehend it emotionally—because it was not him I had reached out and touched. It was his “trigger hand.”

At the same time, his expression had a tinge of excitement, that I had touched the “untouchable” part of him. That simple act of empathy had drawn me into complicity with him through some kind of contagious quality. This too is possible. For the contradictions inherent in divergent interpretations of de Kock’s trigger-hand statement do not undermine them but tend rather to reinforce their validity. For if evil is humanity turned against itself, then conflict and contradiction are fundamental to its nature. And if evil is in essence self-contradictory, then the interpretive conflicts engendered by his statement—the turmoil that seems to burst from its surface—merely point to the urgency of de Kock’s inner wrestling and the psychological instability inherent to the state of mind we call evil.

His terrors were real, for his trigger hand was still attached to his arm. He longed to be able one day to shed this intolerable shirt of flame, this cloak that burdened him, a first layer of which he said had begun to slip off with his initial appearance before the Truth Commission. Yet he also recognized that day might never come, because in some ways, the cloak was a part of him. Condemned and isolated under it, perhaps de Kock, when I was drawn under its shadow for a brief moment of communion, saw some hope. Perhaps he longed to embrace the moment, as proof that he was not alone in his universe, yet he did not know how to do this. He was too diseased to grant himself that privilege. His world was a cold world, where eyes of death stared accusingly at him—a world littered with bodies and graves, graves of the unknown dead, disembodied or blown-up bodies. But for all the horrific singularity of his acts, de Kock was a desperate soul seeking to affirm to himself that he was still part of the human universe. “If only they could see my heart...,” he had said, referring to the widows who agreed to meet him to hear his apology.



De Kock's story presents contradictions that I believe compel a reexamination of notions of evil. It was clear to me that de Kock was experiencing feelings of remorse. But in order for remorse to be present, I think, one has to have a working conscience. Can conscience coexist with evil? What really happened to de Kock? What were his perceptions and motivations? What were his thoughts and feelings when he returned from his operations killing enemies of the apartheid government? How did he end up with a job description that not only included but centered on murder?

The covert operations program that he was in charge of was the program that "officially" did not exist, but one that was necessary for the system of apartheid to survive. And to the extent that a bureaucrat like de Kock was able to maintain his two personas—his private life and his life as apartheid's assassin—to the extent that he managed to buy into the ideology and mission of apartheid, he presumably could persuade himself that there was in fact something morally right about apartheid's covert program. But in the isolation of his cell, abandoned by his immediate superiors and those who crafted the laws that supported his operations, a different truth was revealed to him. Now he was alone with his conscience, and his conscience spoke to him in clear language.

It was not the first time de Kock had felt the stirring of his conscience. In the past, the language of his conscience had been symbolic. From his prison cell, he related an experience that seemed to reveal cracks in the shell of evil he had constructed over the years and to expose deep-seated anxieties. One morning he was driving back home, having finished killing some members of the ANC's armed wing in a cross-border operation. He had done this many times. In fact, over the years he had lost count of how many people had died at his hands. But today seemed different. As he drove back from the killing field, he felt increasingly uncomfortable. He began to notice an odd smell on his body. At first, he dismissed it as the normal smell of discharged gunpowder on his clothes, perhaps a little more caustic than usual this time but nothing particularly out of the ordinary. By the time he reached home, however, the acrid smell—and now his clothes as well—had become so unbearable that as he walked into his living room he ripped off his clothes and threw them in a pile on the floor. He headed straight for the shower.

He took a very long shower, he said, but it felt as if the pungent metallic smell were still clinging on to his body. "It was like the taste of metal in the mouth—the smell of blood all over my body. I couldn't get it off." His gestures had become extreme; he motioned in an exaggerated way, his eyes bulging, pulling at his arms as if he were struggling to remove something irremovable, something attacking his flesh, something undetachable from his skin.

Finally, he toweled off and waited. To no avail. The overpowering odor still clung. In all, he said, he ended up taking three or four more long showers, each time being careful to use a new towel. Unable to rid himself completely of the odor of death, he gathered the killing clothes into a plastic bag together with the first towel he had used and simply dumped them in the garbage bin.

It was a haunting story vividly told. In my mind, it painted a clear picture of someone struggling with guilt, with a shadow that would not leave him and whose existence he had tried to deny for too long. In that moment, I thought I saw a human being—a person finally acknowledging the debt he owed to his conscience. De Kock had once again invited my understanding and my empathy.

This shower episode, like the trigger-hand statement, is a classic illustration of psychological splitting. It is interesting that the two unconsciously motivated incidents—the projection of guilt and its transformation into something concrete (a smell on his skin and on his clothes), and excising his killing hand—occur at different stages of his life. Yet both reflect the coping style of his unconscious mind. It is probably the case that feelings of guilt had slowly been building up in the back of de Kock's mind for months or years. But his training, and the Afrikaans Church's biblical justification of violence against the opponents of apartheid, who were considered as the Antichrist, had erected a massive barrier against the feelings' entry into full consciousness. But on that fateful morning, the dam broke—and a flash flood of guilt intruded so suddenly and strongly upon his conscious mind that he had to take, as it were, emergency action against it and symbolically sever—disown—the part of the self that had committed the murders only moments before.

Splitting, of course, occurs deep in the recesses of the tortured mind, but it projects itself in a physical or visual parallel: His evil, suddenly too large and too heavy for him to cope with through such long-term normal channels as remorse, repentance, and self-forgiveness, had to be forcefully expelled from the self. So suddenly, it was no longer a part of him: It was something outside him, like a topical ointment, an annoying stench, some smelly gunk that had inexplicably found its way onto him, intruding on his space and skin. And to the extent that he now saw his guilt as something more akin to a layer of slime on his body, the deposit could be “washed away.” But the multiple showers belie the effectiveness of splitting as a psychological defense to preserve a clear conscience. Instead, they point to the difficulty of trying to split off from the self an accumulated reserve of guilt so deeply rooted that it has infiltrated and embedded itself within the person’s character.

The internal disintegration and emotional chaos illustrated by this incident suggest that de Kock is unlikely to have been motivated purely by sadistic and antisocial (psychopathic) intentions. It suggests that there were stirrings of the conscience, which is not known to exist in antisocial personality disorder or psychopaths—curious for somebody who has come to be seen as the embodiment of evil. This, and the fact that de Kock showed remorse, suggests that he has a conscience; perhaps he can be rehabilitated. It raises many questions about de Kock in particular and about the nature of evil in general.

To what extent was de Kock a normal, ordinary citizen corrupted by the apartheid system, and to what extent was his mind already corrupted by his own upbringing under a physically abusive father? When a person, as part of his job, must carry out orders that continually involve him in crimes against humanity, to what extent can he remain simply a person carrying out instructions, and at what point does evil intrude into and compromise the integrity of his conscience? How strongly does action—however mindless—reconstitute perspective, and perspective character? At what point did Eugene de Kock cross the moral line and take over—and upon himself, as a personal cause—the evil of the system for which he became known as a crusader?

In my research and professional practice, I have time and again come across two fundamental positions—partly philosophical, partly empirical—regarding the nature and evolution of violence and personal evil. The first view is

that individuals are predisposed toward becoming evil as a result of early childhood experiences of violence that made them suffer shame and humiliation, leaving them with unresolved anger. In this view, the dynamics of evil that evolve from this psychological history often explain the roots of revenge, where anger and hatred for the trauma suffered in the past are carried inside until the feelings of aggression can be enacted toward another in an act that becomes the individual's moment to reclaim the "honor" lost during the shaming experience.

What an individual suffered at an early age, however, may establish the basis for a lifelong pattern of revenge-based behavior because the choice to become an aggressor does not authentically resolve the very issues that drive that choice, the psychological feelings that lie within. Violence does not confer the honor it promises, and what promised to be a moment of honor reclaimed may draw itself out into a lifestyle of bondage to aggression as the person moves from one short-lived feeling of honor and satisfaction to another. Each subsequent act lowers the threshold for committing the next by desensitizing the perpetrator. This plunges him once again into a spiral of violent behaviors, liberating him even further from society's taboos against aggression.

The second position taken on the issue of violence and evil is that evil is not a result of a predisposition, since most who have suffered unspeakable trauma do not turn out as evil monsters. In this again partly philosophical, partly empirical view, people have free choice. The sovereignty of the heart is essentially inviolable. And although the decision to pursue what is right may on occasion be horrendously difficult, people not only can choose *not* to commit evil but also can make the kinds of choices that later on make it easier to avoid committing evil.

My own position is that the issue of evil is more complex than either of these two positions portray. Those who have been traumatized *are* vulnerable to falling into a mode of psychological repetition of the aggression they suffered. Whether individuals turn out this way or that depends on a complex set of factors, one being a political system that creates a culture of violence, another being whether they are exposed to positive experiences that can help mend the humiliation they suffered and restore their sense of identity.

When in addition to the presence of vulnerability an individual is plunged into a system in which his career is defined by violence, then the issue of choice may not be as easy as it seems. Violent abuse damages—and yes, even corrupts—the individual's psyche. It intrudes upon and invades the victim's unconscious mind, so that in an environment that rewards evil, there are few resources upon which the person can draw to resist evil.

The sophistication and subtlety with which the apartheid government drew its followers to support its mission is another factor that throws into chaos the idea of free choice. Apartheid turned religion on its head and through various church-based structures in the military, the police, and academe, and in the church itself, provided theological vocabulary to disguise the naked evil of what was going on under apartheid. Chaplains who prayed that they defeat their enemy encouraged de Kock and many like him, in addition to the theoretical coaching. Whole congregations throughout the Afrikaans Church praised them for what they were doing for their country. Voices that spoke a different language from within the church were muted. But when some of these voices rose from silence on the stage of the TRC, it was a sign of hope. Hope is not enough to bring about the transformation that makes change meaningful for people at the grassroots level. But symbols of hope may be all that is necessary to change people's hearts. The challenge is for leaders to seize the moment of hope and translate it into lasting gains.

When an Afrikaans Church appeared before the TRC to apologize, it was just such a sign of hope that moves people who have been traumatized. Perhaps it is more than a sign—perhaps a sacrament?—for those who are apologizing, for those who are witnesses, and for those to whom the apology is directed.

Bethel Muller, a professor of religion at the Afrikaans university in Cape Town, Stellenbosch University, was one of three members of the Afrikaans Church who came to apologize for their church's role in providing biblical justification for apartheid. His response to a question I asked him about what it was like to testify about the role of the Afrikaans Church before the Commission was as follows: "I was freed by participating in making this statement. I became part of a process where we could tell our story ... It

was a privilege but it was not easy at all because you have to look deep into your own heart and you see the evil in your heart.”

What is the appropriate response to the despair, the pathos, through which perpetrators and bystanders show their human side? How should the question of empathy be handled? If showing compassion to enemies is something that the mind repels, what can society do in order to hear perpetrators' cries for mercy, the cries that tell us their hearts are breaking, and that they are willing to denounce the past? Should society turn its back on them, and hold on to hate, passing on seeds of hate to its young people and to their children? Is perpetrators' remorse enough to break the cycles of vengeance? If the goal is to transform relationships in a society whose past is marked by violent conflict, how can hate be transcended? And how real can forgiveness be in the context of tragedy? In my work on the TRC, I found that often victims wanted to forgive, but somehow there seemed to be something inappropriate in forgiving someone who had brought about their tragic loss. And it is not difficult to see why.

To maintain some sort of moral compass, to hold on to some sort of clear distinction between what is humanly depraved but conceivable and what is simply off the scale of human acceptability, there is a desire—an inward emotional and mental pressure—not to forgive, as if forgiveness somehow signals acceptability, and acceptability signals some amount, however small, of condoning. Yet how do you forgive, unless you can find claims of remorse credible? And how do you find them credible, unless you first attempt to understand why they did it? But how do you understand, when the actions that are being retold are so abhorrent? There is a desire to draw a line in the sand and say, “Where you have been, I cannot follow you. Your actions can never be regarded as part of what it means to be human.” Yet not to forgive means closing the door to the possibility of transformation. It also means usurping the role of divine judgment.

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