



South Africa's Truth & Reconciliation Commission Comes to the United States of America

As far as I know, the United States has never fully examined its slavery past (nor the theft of land and culture from indigenous people; but here I concentrate only on slavery and racism). Only a partial inquiry, with no apologies, no national taking of responsibility, no recompense to the descendants of those afflicted millions. The nation, proclaiming principles of equality and liberty, freedom and democracy, has never called to account—granted, in absentia—those responsible for this horrific, three-century-enduring history. Nor has the nation itself fully lived up to its founding ideals. As critically, it has not yet carefully considered certain consequences of the slavery system, namely, the generation of wealth and privilege and the continuing color-dependent economic discrimination. Instead, the nation honors without much qualification such legendary figures as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and other presidents who either owned enslaved people or profited directly from the slave economy. And worse, we tolerate the enduring legacy of slavery—racism. I propose that we now lift the blanket that has long smothered this most egregious portion of our collective history.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of South Africa might provide elements of a model.

Since 1995, the new South African nation has attempted to uncover the horrors of apartheid. Many people fought the color-based system and paid with detention, torture, banishment, and death. Steve Biko, the black consciousness leader, is perhaps the best known, but thousands of others sacrificed themselves for the end of more than three centuries of oppression.

Currently, some South Africans express pride in the achievements of the TRC, saying they are a major reason South Africa has not yet succumbed to the retributive violence often characterizing changes of regime. Some are disappointed that the Commission hasn't gone further in pur-

suing culpable operatives. Others are angry that the deaths of loved ones have gone unpunished and the families uncompensated. Apparently, there is even a split amongst the current African National Congress-led regime about offering a full and unconditional amnesty, something prohibited in the TRC's charter, but, some say, vital for peace-making.

What can we in the United States learn from the TRC? How can these lessons be applied? What are the differences in the two country's experiences that require modifying any application?

Slavery is gone, as are its proponents and direct victims. But imagine calling all of these people to testify: traders, slave ship captains, complicit African leaders, the legendary Willie Lynch himself who purportedly taught a means of quelling enslaved people's unrest (leading to the meaning of the term, "lynch"?), owners of enslaved people, legislators writing and passing the laws of slavery, overseers, fugitive slave catchers, and all those in any way profiting from the slavery system. Imagine.

Not to be, one might argue, too long past. No one around anymore. All gone, thousands gone, millions—those suffering and those perpetrating the suffering. Yes, but consider: who benefits from the legacy of slavery? What exactly is the legacy of slavery?

Racism, economic exploitation, poverty, violence. All current themes in the brightly colored, spectacularly successful (on some levels) United States fabric.

So imagine extending the long arm of truth and reconciliation to the system's descendants, those alive now, suffering from racism, and those many (you and me?) benefiting from it.

What form might a Truth and Reconciliation Commission take for those of us graced to be alive today? How reveal truth, how foster reconciliation?

*"Southern trees bear strange fruit
Blood on the leaves
Blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees
Pastoral scene of the gallant south
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
The scent of magnolia sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh
Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
for the rain to gather
for the wind to suck
for the sun to rot
for the tree to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop"*

—Lewis Anderson

—sung by Billie Holiday

Cont. p. 2

One form might be workshops about the history and current forms of racism. We could learn about the system: who wields power, how that power came to be presently situated, forms of wealth and their origins, attitudes and their development. This is largely a historic approach, one I personally have found especially useful. The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, based in New Orleans, offers superb trainings in this vein.

Another is restitution to the descendants of enslaved people. This could be repayments or reparations for losses traceable to slavery and racism. (See Randall Robinson's book, *The Debt*.)

A third (and related to the second) is sharing wealth and privilege—first becoming aware of how white privilege operates, then agreeing to share it with others not similarly colored.

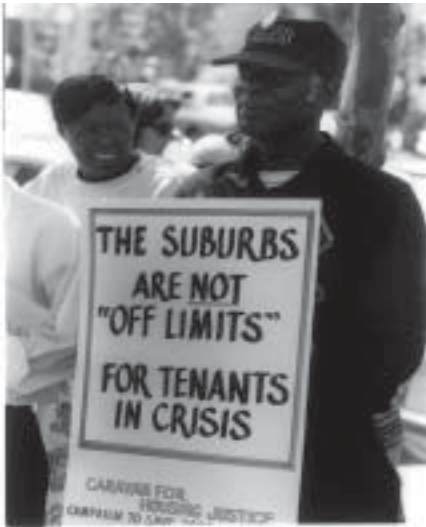


Photo by Skip Schiel

And a fourth is investigating the various atrocities committed in this contemporary era, in the last five decades: all the crimes committed during the civil rights movement (including the execution by police of Black Panthers in Chicago, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark and the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy,

Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X), right up to the recent killings of black people again, often by police.

And finally, walks, marches, pilgrimages and other demonstrations of dissent and the quest for truth and justice. Lift the suffocating blanket of silence.

In the concluding words of the study guide, "Facing the Truth"—

"What do you think? Would a public acknowledgment of past wrongs bring about 'closure'? Bring the nation closer together? What is the role of education [and the arts] in confronting the past? In uniting a nation and building democracy?"

For information about the TRC, *Facing the Truth*, a video tape by Bill Moyers and National Public Television (which includes much of the proceedings, along with interviews of such key people as Reverend Tutu) call 800-257-5126. For the study guide produced by Facing History and Ourselves and Public Affairs Television, look at the website, www.wnet.org/facingthetruth. You can search the web with "Truth and Reconciliation Commission," or use links at the study guide site. Also see the novel, "The Country of My Skull." And you'll find useful articles in two issues of *Peacework*—December 1998/January 1999 (issue #291) and May 1999 (issue #295) www.afsc.org/peacewrk.htm

For a good analysis of current social and political conditions in South Africa, see the website of the weekly newspaper, *Mail and Guardian*, www.mg.co.za

Other links & sources: www.ncobra.com (reparations); www.webcom.com/ctka/pr500-king.html (a recent article about the King assassination trial in Memphis last December, by Jim Douglass); and www.thedebt.net (the book by Randall Robinson, *The Debt, What America Owes to Blacks*): People's Institute for Survival and Beyond: 1114 North Johnson Street New Orleans, Louisiana 70116, 504-944-2354

Skip Schiel

This essay is revised from his essay series written while on or after the Interfaith Pilgrimage of the Middle Passage, a journey retracing the history of the African slave trade (Essay #67 June 22, 1999, Johannesburg, South Africa).

An Anti-Racism Section for Your Meeting's Library

The Committee on Prejudice and Poverty suggests that Meetings seriously consider developing an anti-racism section in your meeting's Library. (If you already have one, we hope you are adding to it regularly.) Of course there are many possible titles for us to suggest, but we have developed a list with which we think you might begin. These books are available to peruse and/or purchase at our table at Yearly Meeting Sessions. Some from that list are:

Books for Adults

- Hacker, Andrew, 1995. *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile and Unequal*. Ballentine Books. 283 pages.
- Kivel, Paul, 1995. *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*. New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island BC, Canada. 241 pages. Has bibliography.
- Robinson, Randall, 2000. *The Debt: What American Owes to Blacks*. E. P. Dutton, 262 pages.
- Woodson, Carter Godwin, 1933. *Mis-education of the Negro*. The Associated Publishers, Inc. (Recent paper edition, 1990, Africa World Press, Inc., 215 pages.)
- Zinn, Howard, paperback edition, 1995. *The People's History of the United States—1492 to the Present*. Harperperennial Library.

Books for Children

- Adler, David A. *A Picture Book of Harriet Tubman*. Holiday House, New York 1992.
- Coles, Robert. *The Story of Ruby Bridges*. Scholastic Inc., New York, 1995.
- Hamilton, Virginia et al. *The People Could Fly; American Black Folk Tales*. Knopf
- Lester, Julius. *To Be a Slave*. Scholastic Inc., New York, 1968.
- Wesley, Valerie. *Freedom's Gifts: A Juneteenth Story*. Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers, New York. 1997.

Committee on Prejudice & Poverty

Co-Clerks

Joyce McKelvey
Ph: 860-423-8245
Fx: 860-228-6921

Rob Yager
Ph: 603-641-2949
rdy4now@utility.net

Comments, letters, articles, etc. may be sent to the editor via e-mail, fax (508-457-2175 -- att: K Brown) or mail (155 James Circle, Mashpee, MA 02649).

Newsletter Editor

K Brown
508-539-0843
kwbrown@mediaone.net

Excerpts from “The Martin Luther King Conspiracy Exposed in Memphis”

According to a Memphis jury’s verdict on December 8, 1999, in the wrongful death lawsuit of the King family versus Loyd Jowers “and other unknown coconspirators,” Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated by a conspiracy that included agencies of his own government. Almost 32 years after King’s murder at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis on April 4, 1968, a court extended the circle of responsibility for the assassination beyond the late scapegoat James Earl Ray to the United States government.

I can hardly believe the fact that, apart from the courtroom participants, only Memphis TV reporter Wendell Stacy and I attended from beginning to end this historic three-and-one-half week trial. Because of journalistic neglect scarcely anyone else in this land of ours even knows what went on in it. After critical testimony was given in the trial’s second week before an almost empty gallery, Barbara Reis, U.S. correspondent for the Lisbon daily *Publico* who was there several days, turned to me and said, “Everything in the U.S. is the trial of the century. O.J. Simpson’s trial was the trial of the century. Clinton’s trial was the trial of the century. But this is the trial of the century, and who’s here?”

...The Memphis trial has opened wide a door to our assassination politics. Anyone who walks through it is faced by an either/or: to declare naked either the empire or oneself.

The King family has chosen the former. The vision behind the trial is at least as much theirs as it is William Pepper’s, for ultimately it is the vision of Martin Luther King Jr. Coretta King explained to the jury her family’s purpose in pursuing the lawsuit against Jowers: “This is not about money. We’re concerned about the truth, having the truth come out in a court of law so that it can be documented for all. I’ve always felt that somehow the truth would be known, and I hoped that I would live to see it. It is important I think for the sake of healing so many people — my family, other people, the nation.”

Dexter King, the plaintiffs’ final witness, said the trial was about why his father had been killed: “From a holistic side, in terms of the people, in terms of the masses, yes, it has to be dealt with because it is not about who killed Martin Luther King Jr., my father. It is not necessarily about all of those details. It is about: Why was he killed? Because if you answer the why, you will understand the same things are still happening. Until we address that, we’re all

in trouble. Because if it could happen to him, if it can happen to this family, it can happen to anybody.

“It is so amazing for me that as soon as this issue of potential involvement of the federal government came up, all of a sudden the media just went totally negative against the family. I couldn’t understand that. I kept asking my mother, ‘What is going on?’

“She reminded me. She said, ‘Dexter, your dad and I have lived through this once already. You have to understand that when you take a stand against the establishment, first, you will be attacked. There is an attempt to discredit. Second, [an attempt] to try and character-assassinate. And third, ultimately physical termination or assassination.’

“Now the truth of the matter is if my father had stopped and not spoken out, if he had just somehow compromised, he would probably still be here with us today. But the minute you start talking about redistribution of wealth and stopping a major conflict, which also has economic ramifications...”

...Pepper went a step beyond saying government agencies were responsible for the assassination. To whom in turn were those murderous agencies responsible? Not so much to government officials per se, Pepper asserted, as to the economic powerholders they represented who stood in the even deeper shadows behind the FBI, Army Intelligence, and their affiliates in covert action. By 1968, Pepper told the jury, “And today it is much worse in my view”—“the decision-making processes in the United States were the representatives, the footsoldiers of the very economic interests that were going to suffer as a result of

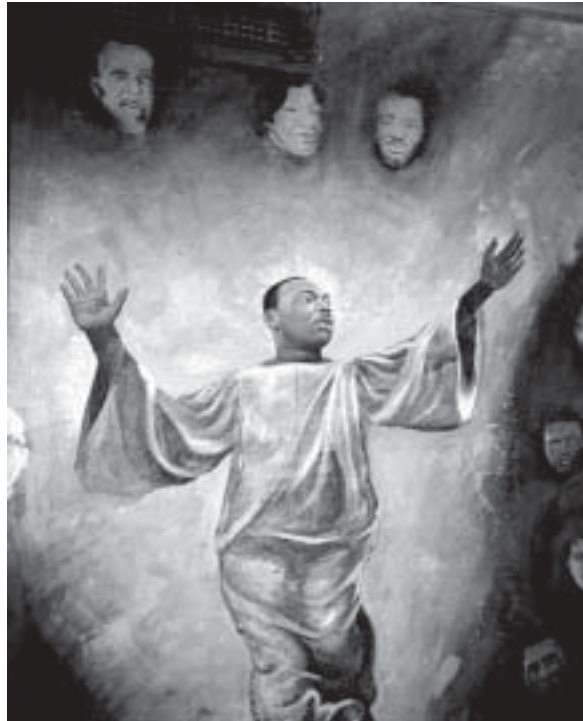
these times of changes [being acted by King].”(sic)

To say that U.S. government agencies killed Martin Luther King on the verge of the Poor People’s Campaign is a way into the deeper truth that the economic powers that be (which dictate the policies of those agencies) killed him...

...We’re not in this to make heads roll. We’re in this to use the teachings that my father taught us in terms of non-violent reconciliation. It works. We know that it works. So we’re not looking to put people in prison. What we’re looking to do is get the truth out so that this nation can learn and know officially. If the family of the victim, if we’re saying we’re willing to forgive and embark upon a process that allows for reconciliation, why can’t others?” ...

Jim Douglass, (Excerpted by Skip Schiel)

Full article in the May-June 2000 issue (Vol. 7 No. 4) of Probe Magazine. The Truth Is In Here. © www.webcom.com/ctka



Mural of Dr. Martin Luther King at Dexter Street Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama, October 1998. Photo by Skip Schiel.

World Trade Organization and Poverty

We should always keep in mind that the WTO was designed and is implemented by the representatives (private or governmental) of the worlds richest and most powerful corporations, most of them global in scope; that the WTO was created without any consultation with ordinary people; that the members of the WTO decision-making tribunals are corporate lawyers or officers appointed by the WTO, with no accountability to anyone except themselves and their wealthy and powerful friends. So here are a few thoughts about the WTO from the perspective of a former Quaker.

Prejudice and poverty are inseparably connected, and in many ways. I would go so far as to say that if the world were free of prejudice, there would be no poverty. Noah Webster wrote of prejudice: “an opinion or leaning adverse to anything without just grounds or before sufficient knowledge.”

The question arises very simply — why does this “prejudice” appear at all in our world? If we take the view that people are basically good and loving, how come we form these critical or negative feelings and ideas about other people which we call prejudice?

My answer is equally simple. We form these prejudices because we do not know these people. They are not our neighbors, our family, our friends, or our associates. They live somewhere else. They work in other settings, pursuing other goals, unfamiliar with us or our lives. We are then, by definition, “strangers.”

Webster writes – “A person who is unknown or with whom one is unacquainted. . . . Hence one not admitted to fellowship or acquaintance; one not admitted to a share in; an alien; outsider.” There is much more, but these meanings address the aspects important to our considerations.

It seems to me that the wealthy and powerful people who have designed and established the WTO are close to and familiar with one another, but they are really strangers to just about everyone else. They

live in a separate world created by themselves and other wealthy and powerful people. Ordinary people, especially poor people, live in another world; a world where malnutrition, even starvation, disease and disability are very common — a world where violent crime is much more common, and suffering of many kinds is the daily lot of most people.

Those who designed and now operate the WTO have no real contact with this world of the poor. For them it hardly exists. Their heads, and hearts, are occupied elsewhere. Where? They must keep track of their personal fortunes, and of the billions of dollars at issue in the disputes between the corporate powers who bring their complaints to the WTO for decision.

These decisions are not always easy, but the guidelines are clear: when corporate profits are threatened, the decision must be against any person, people, animal, or plant that in any way may stop or diminish profits. The bottom line is ALWAYS money. In every case that has come before the WTO tribunals, the decisions have been against the dolphins, the turtles, or the native peoples whose land or living is being destroyed by corporate activity.

How can people do such things to one another? It’s easy when the distance between you and those your decisions injure of kill is so great that those others don’t really exist. When we order a steak in our favorite restaurant, we don’t think about the slaughter of the cattle which was necessary to produce this steak dinner.

If we had to slaughter the cattle to get our steak, very few of us would ever eat steak. If the adjudicators in the dispute resolution panels of the WTO had to visit all the parties involved in a dispute — in person — face to face — and see their conditions and situations, I suspect there would be more decisions against fishing with gear which kills sea turtles — more decisions to change the aggressive activities of oil companies which are destroying the homes and livings of native peoples.

I see the WTO as simply one symptom of a world view which values property (money its most common embodiment) over people and the rest of the natural world — a world view which sees no problem when the richest one percent of the people control as much wealth as the poorest ninety percent. This enormous wealth enables these people to live in a world so separate, so insulated from the world of the poor, that those poor just have no reality for the wealthy. They are aware of the poor. They don’t want to have anything to do with them. They live together in compounds totally fenced in, with armed guards at the gates, to prevent any contact with the poor.

The WTO is so pernicious just because it supports these wealthy people in their accumulation of more and more, and implements these values on a global scale. With modern instantaneous global communication and the ability to move production facilities anywhere in the world so as to increase profits, whole towns, even cities or geographic areas, can be turned into ghost areas by a sudden corporate decision to move to greener pastures.

It is my personal view that when any group of people accumulate many times the wealth of ordinary people in any society, those wealthy people are essentially living off the labor of those with less. They are taking for themselves the product of the work of others. I consider this unjust. Thus I consider the WTO to be unjust, from top to bottom.

When I consider the difficulty of bringing the wealthy and the poor closer together so that the rich would share their wealth, I wonder. What might be a first step toward such a goal? Perhaps it will be important to just get the attention of the wealthy. Abolishing the instrument of their power would get their attention. If ordinary people can get their attention, perhaps a dialogue can begin. This is one of the many reasons I think the WTO should be abolished.

“The past has a way of returning to you. It doesn’t go and lie down quietly.”

—Reverend Desmond Tutu, Chair of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission