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Human Dignity: A South African Story

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- “re-authoring” the own story
- constructing identity
- racism in South Africa

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Looking for personal dignity

Disqualified?

I am using a narrative approach in this lecture and therefore will be starting with my own story. When talking about human dignity in South Africa, I firstly ask myself the question: do I have dignity? What gives me the authority (audacity?) to address such a topic? What is the basis on which I allow myself to present this paper?

Before trying to tell any other story, I must, in the first instance, be trustworthy to my own narrative.

When I consider my own story in retrospect, I find that I am not qualified. I am disqualified. I have an apartheid background. I went along with the system, and therefore I ask myself the question: how can I participate in this conference with dignity? How could I prepare this paper and continue this morning with its reading, and talk about human dignity in South Africa, with honesty and integrity?

As a young minister I associated more with my own people (white Afrikaner), than with members of the black community, or even the non-Afrikaans community. I became a member of the Afrikaner Broederbond, and I remember well how, in many conversations, I vehemently defended the cause of the Afrikaner and the moral justifiability of apartheid. After I was appointed as pastor to students in 1978, at the Universiteitsoord-congregation in Pretoria, a gradual change in my orientation took place. Obviously, I was under the influence of more young and fresh thinking and began to disassociate myself gradually from conservative, ideological Afrikaner thought. I remember accompanying a group of students to Soweto during one winter holiday, and the wretched living conditions of the people there made a deep impact on me.

Today, when I think back, I am ashamed that I did not come to other insights sooner than I did. In 1997, when I, along with a group of ministers, co-signed an open letter, which we submitted to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I

had exactly this reluctance to accept change and blindness to reality, in mind. I had wasted valuable years as a pastor to students and did not do enough to promote a social-ethical conscience under young Afrikaners.

Soon after I had been appointed as a lecturer in the Dutch Reformed Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria in 1990, I had opportunity to attend a consultation in Nairobi, Kenya, along with a number of lecturers from Stellenbosch and Pretoria. We entered into dialogue with a delegation from the All Africa Council of Churches. I was greatly impressed by their intellectualism, genuine spirituality, and general attitude towards us. This happened before Mandela was freed. We were still not able to obtain visas for Kenya, and therefore special arrangements had to be made to allow us to enter the country.

During this visit to Kenya, I developed, for the first time, a deeply felt need to apologize for my involvement with the apartheid structures. I had had already realized intellectually that we had made mistakes and that change had to happen. As a member of a group of Christians in a strange country, this became an emotional confession, which I expressed in a group meeting. I believe that this was a watershed moment in my attitude to - and view of - the situation in our country.

Afterwards, along with a number of my colleagues, I began to speak and preach differently. I wholeheartedly aligned myself with renewing thought, and when attending synods and meetings, I defended consequent non-racial and inclusive positions. I pleaded that the Dutch Reformed Church needed to make a full confession of its role in the apartheid structure, and that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission should serve as the forum for this. I used more than one of my columns (Church and Media) in "Die Kerkbode" to state this point. I was deeply disappointed when the General Synod Commission declined to take such a decision, and therefore, I decided to sign the open letter, which was circulating amongst ministers. In this way I expressed my deeply felt need to confess my guilt for my part in the apartheid- ideology. During this period (1997), and after years of inactivity, I allowed my membership of the Afrikaner Broederbond to lapse. I do not have feelings of guilt regarding my involvement with the brotherhood. Sometimes, it was precisely in these circles that I discovered some of the most liberal thinking. However, as a servant of the gospel, it slowly became clearer to me that it was no longer appropriate for me to associate myself so strongly with the Afrikaner- establishment.

For too many years I had found myself in the role of the one in charge. Naturally, the development of a political system such as apartheid is a complex issue. Many factors contributed to its development over many generations. The little black friend of my youth, Daniel and I were both products of social patterns, which had been established a long time ago. I was a part of the "haves" and he a part of the "have-nots" and it was neither of ours' fault that it was so. It was neither's fault that we were born into the roles of "boss" and "servant". However, I can never plead innocent to the charge that for too long I was insensitive to the position in which he and his group found themselves. I too easily accepted my privileged position for granted, and did not seek to empathize with them enough. Therefore I am ashamed, and once again, would like to confess my guilt for my part in an inequitable and unjust situation.

“Telling a past and dreaming a future” : the basis for qualification

I believe that the qualifying authority for anyone to speak does not lie in a faultless past, but in a story of integrity. The wholeness of the story, the renewing flow from past to future, are the qualities that provide a story with integrity, and not a past without errors. A re-authored story, a story dealing with the past in such a way that it again becomes the basis on which new story development can take place, can be a story of integrity.

No story has a fixed content. Stories are interpretations. Stories are not about what happened, but about what is developing on the basis of what happened. I can become qualified, not because of the *content of my story*, but because of my *story itself*. The qualification lies in the *process* of telling and dreaming. That means, a process of re-authoring.

Telling a past

While I was working on this paper, two things happened to me, which helped me in the re-authoring of my story. I read an article in a newspaper and I had to accompany a group of Americans to the Voortrekker Monument.

The renaming of a German military base.²

According to the *New York Times*, a German military base was recently renamed. The name of a famous army general, Günther Rüdell was replaced by that of a soldier in Hitler's army, Anton Schmid, who disobeyed orders, and by doing so saved the lives of hundreds of Jews. The Nazi's executed him during the war for his actions.

Indeed, a brave decision to make, and one with many consequences. As could be expected, not all in German society were in favour of this renaming. In his speech at the ceremony, the German minister of defense, Rudolf Scharping, defended the decision and said: “We are not free to choose our history, but we can choose the examples we take from that history.”

I was moved when I read this story and it struck me again that re-authoring is a never-ending process. Sixty years after World War Two, the German people are still struggling to interpret and re-author that part of their history.

Some people in South Africa feel that the past has been told efficiently and sufficiently enough. Perhaps the majority of white people were skeptical about the processes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and they feel that they have heard enough of the shameful stories of apartheid. Even one of the leading feminist theologians, Christina Landman, professor at the University of South Africa, said in a lecture at the Afrikaans Arts Festival³ that the time has come for the Dutch Reformed Church to end confessions about apartheid and move on. Ac-

¹ Brueggemann, W. 1993 *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*. Nashville: Abingdon, 120.

² According to an article in *The New York Times* of May 9, 2000, page A3.

³ The paper was presented on March 28, 2000 at the Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees, Oudtshoorn.

ording to her, the church should now start to take a more active role in the discourses about morality. I think she verbalizes the feelings of many white South Africans.

It is ironic that during this same time, Pope John Paul II did the opposite and made an apology of wrongs committed by Roman Catholics centuries ago (during a Mass of Pardon at St. Peter's Basilica). He implicitly talked about the Crusades, the Inquisition and the terrible inaction and silence in the face of the Holocaust. Of course, one can be skeptical of this confession. As *Time*⁴ pointed out: "It is awkward: How does infallibility own up to its fallibility and yet remain infallible? The Pope's solution: by being vague about the actual sins and by attributing them, in any case, to men and women who are Catholics and not to the Catholic Church itself." *Time* also referred to the insufficient attention given to the wrongs done against women and homosexuals, but it gave credit to the Pope and said: "In the apology, the Pope does what a leader ought to do. He sets an example."

To my mind, the challenge of the church in South Africa is to create a dream for the future, but not by terminating of the telling of the past! The future must be created by, and through the telling of the past. There is no way to imagine a better future without the telling and the retelling of the past. The pastoral challenge is to facilitate a situation where re-authoring can take place. The stories of the past, although gruesome and shameful, must be told and told again until the new dream can take form.

Re-authoring is not a quick fix method. A premature ritual, as was proposed by Landman, cannot bring about re-authoring. To re-author the story, in order for the two South African tales to become one, takes time. It is a lengthy process in which the church and church leaders should take the lead. At the moment, not even all the mainline churches in South Africa have joined in the confessing on the sins of apartheid. The Dutch Reformed Church has only recently come to a full confession of the sin of apartheid. This same Church is involved in a difficult struggle to create structural unity among the so-called Family of Dutch Reformed Churches. While there are so many uncertainties about the future of the church, and while other churches are still debating about the need for a confession, it would certainly be untimely for the Dutch Reformed Church to establish a final ritual of confession, and try to stop the continuing telling and therefore, re-authoring of the story of the past.

On the other hand, it is definitely a pastoral challenge to move on to the task of creating a vision. The telling of the past must also contain re-authoring, and therefore the ability to imagine a better future. The pastoral challenge is to facilitate dreams about better things for the future. In his book, *Helping People Forgive*, Augsberger⁵ warns about a forgiveness that is only a *returning*. That can be dangerous and harmful. It can be "a restitution of an old order, a backward movement, a regression to the previous situation with the old injustices that motivated the original action or injury." When forgiveness and reconciliation are mistakenly seen as a "forget and get on with your life", there is this real danger of conveniently returning to the old order.

To forgive and to reconcile is a painful process. It is painful because it consists of the telling and the retelling of the painful past. But there is no way around it.

⁴ *Time*, March 27, 2000. 41.

⁵ Augsberger, D.W. 1996. *Helping People Forgive*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 21.

When we try to prevent the pain, the danger of merely returning becomes a reality. In South Africa this is a real danger. Sometimes I am afraid that things are simply falling back into the old order.

Taking the group to the Voortrekker Monument

On July 6, 2000, we, at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria, were honoured by a visit of colleagues and students from the Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, USA. Unexpectedly they asked me to accompany them to the Voortrekker Monument. The request came from my friend and colleague, Professor Erskine Clarke, whom I accompanied a few years ago to the same monument. I immediately agreed and we left for the monument. It turned out to be a painful experience for myself. It was the first time in about three years that I went to the shrine of Afrikaner nationalism. While I was taking the group around and trying to explain the history of Blood River and the religious meaning that was given to the victory of white people over black tribes, I realized that I had changed. Although there are still meaningful story examples I can cherish, I don't want to live on the basis of the main examples found in the Voortrekker monument any longer. In the process of the re-authoring my own story, I started to choose other examples from the South African history more than I did previously.

When driving home that evening I was in a state of shock. The situation caught me in a double bind. On the one hand, it was my history and I found myself telling the story of the Afrikaner people and the struggles of the past, in the same language with which I grew up. I had the feeling that I was expected to tell *that* story, and I tried my best to tell it as I was taught. On the other hand, I could no longer identify with that particular old story. I have the desire to re-interpret the story of indigenous black groups and their struggle against the white people invading their land. But to the group of foreigners I felt obliged to try and explain and even defend the past in the old language.

In the days after the visit to the Voortrekker monument I thought once more of the story of the German military base and its renaming. I tried to give an account to myself of my own choices and my own interpretations of our history. I tried to think of names, people I would like to remember as examples on the basis of which I would like to build my own future. And although there are many examples in the history of South Africa, of which Mandela would be the most obvious choice, I decided to choose names out of my own immediate history and out of my own group. Two names came to my mind: Beyers Naudé and Ben Marais.

The choosing of examples

Beyers Naudé

When I was in grade 12, in 1963, my father was a delegate elder to a synod meeting in Pretoria, which was held in the old synod hall, called the *Voortrekker Gedenksaal*. It was school holidays, and on one afternoon I went with my father to the meeting and sat in the public gallery. I listened to a debate in which Beyers Naudé, the moderator of the synod, was accused of all kinds of negative things because of his involvement with the new monthly journal, *Pro Veritate*, launched

by him. He and a group of supporters to try and lead the church away from apartheid used this journal⁶. It was a heated debate and one of Naudé's main attackers was a minister, Dawie Beukes, who was a high-ranking *Afrikaner Broederbond* member. At the end of the debate a voting through the raising of hands was held, and a motion was accepted by the synod, which condemned *Pro Veritate*. I remember my father voting against the motion and from the gallery I saw the uneasy situation in which my father was, voting against the minister delegate sitting next to him. I still remember how proud I was of my father taking his own stand, even against his pastor sitting next to him.

In later years during my university years and in the early years of my ministry, I became involved in the ideological thinking, which formed the basis of the apartheid policy. For many years I was convinced that the policy of "Separate Development", as it was called, could be defended theologically. In this process Beyers Naudé became a name that symbolized anti-patriotism and the enemy of the Afrikaner. During that time I personally chose to forget the afternoon in the synod hall and how impressed I was by both Naudé's contribution to the debate and by my fathers decision to vote in his favour. I was taken away by the stream of popular thinking in the ranks of my church and cultural group. Today I regret it.

History has proven that Beyers Naudé was a man who was ahead of his time. He saw the unethical elements in the foundations of the apartheid ideology, when nationalism and fear for a black majority blinded many of us. He was willing to take the risk of going against the group to defend a minority point of view. In the process of re-authoring my own story, I would like to honour him and choose him as one of the examples for my life.

Ben Marais

Ben Marais was my professor in Church History. When I came to the Theological Faculty at the University of Pretoria in the sixties, he was already held in disregard under a large part of the Dutch Reformed Church, because of his political and theological point of view. It is interesting that Beyers Naude was at an early stage influenced by the minister of the congregation where he was a member, Ben Marais. Marais wrote a book, *Die Kleur Krisis in die Weste (Colour, the Unsolved Problem of the West)*, and Naude was disturbed by the book which challenged him to re-examine his understanding of race and human dignity.⁷

Ben Marais managed to remain true to his convictions, and at the same time be accepted as an honored member of the church. He was controversial, but loved. As a student I was impressed by his humanness, friendliness and by his great intellect.

I remember his classes vividly, but there was one incident, which stands out in my memory. On that particular day we received a visit by someone from a missionary organization from the United States. The man pleaded a cause, of which I forgot the contents, but I remember being very convincing. After the lecture, professor Marais thanked him, and in a very friendly manner, explained to him and to the class why we do not agree with his theological position. I was impressed by his firmness and by the friendly way in which he showed self-assertiveness. I suppose

⁶ Roy, K. 2000. *Zion City RSA*. Cape Town: South African Baptist Historical Society. P 151.

⁷ Roy, K. 2000. *Zion City RSA*. Cape Town: South African Baptist Historical Society. P 150.

it is precisely this characteristic that made it possible for him to decide on his own independent theological position against that of colleagues and friends.

I cannot choose my history, but I can choose the examples from that history. These two men, Beyers Naudé and Ben Marais are persons I would like to choose as some of my examples. With them in mind, I would like to reshape my future as minister and theologian. I believe they also provide examples for many South Africans in the re-authoring of our stories.

Dreaming a future

I dream of more human dignity for South Africa, and I would like to use a metaphor in order to give content to this dream. I found a metaphor in the wonderful book by James McBride, *The Color of Water. A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother*⁸. The following is a part of the conversation between the black son and his white mother:

Does he (God) like black or white people better?
He loves all people. He's a spirit.
What's a spirit?
A spirit's a spirit.
What color is God's spirit?
It doesn't have a color, she said.
God is the color of water. Water doesn't have a color.

To my mind, the challenge to find more human dignity in the South African society will only be accomplished when we can more truly worship the God who is spirit and therefore the colour of water. When we truly worship this God, we will not be satisfied with a situation where people are still judged according to the colour of their skin.

Although we have moved away from the legalized system of apartheid, the attitude of racism is still deeply embedded in society. The task of the church is now even more difficult than it was during the times of apartheid, because there is no longer an evil system to address, but attitudes, the fixed patterns of society that is not ruled by law, but by custom. These are difficult issues to address. The church must regard it as its task to teach people to think in terms of the “color of water”.

The white churches find this difficult because their members expect mainly comfort from the church, and with good reason. Many members of the white middle class have suffered because of affirmative action, which causes the loss of jobs and privileges. Feelings of racism are just under the surface, and will come to the fore with the slightest provocation. Pastors and churches are thus under pressure to comfort and soothe only.

Black churches on the other hand also find it difficult to address issues of racism, because their members are still suffering due to social injustice. Black people often don't see any real changes and they are frustrated with the still widening gap between the “haves” and the “have nots”. They are still longing for the message of

⁸ McBride, J. 1998. *The Color of Water. A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother*. London: Bloomsbury.

“black is beautiful” and “black power”. At this stage in their story, it seems more appropriate to emphasize Blackness rather than unity.

It is a real challenge for the South African churches to make progress towards structures of unity. In theory, we have made progress, but in practice, we are often hampered because of distrust and fear.

We continue to make our interpretations on the basis of the South African tales, the black one and the white one. The challenge for South African pastors and churches is to work towards wholeness, to promote the “colour of water” instead of the colour of skin. Pastoral workers and church leaders should rise above the common wisdom of their church members and facilitate the forming of a new vision.

Human dignity is not to be found in achievements of the past, but in the integrity of the story being told. Dignity has to do with the telling of the story and not with the purity of the story as such. And for a story to be told with integrity and dignity, it also needs to flow into a dream for the future. When the story of the past becomes the basis for the future dream, it has been told with integrity and we have moved closer to dignity.

The South African story is, in many instances, a shameful one. But if we can make progress in re-authoring our story by choosing new examples from our rich history, we don't need to be ashamed. In the act of re-authoring we can find human dignity, and therefore, we will have to continue with our task of “telling a past and dreaming a future”.