

23 April 2016

## Reflections on screening of Black Christmas

I have been thinking about the film a lot in the past 10 days since seeing it. It had a powerful effect on me. It resonated with my personal journey of facing my own complicity with apartheid ideology and the structural violence of the apartheid legislation with its devastating effect on the lives of millions of black South Africans. As Afrikaner and member of the Dutch Reformed Church I had to face the many ways in which my people and my church motivated, justified and supported apartheid. I had to face the many ways in which I supported and benefitted and continue to benefit from the evil system. In Stefaans Coetzee I see much of my own life and my own people. It is painful, yet extremely helpful.

The points of resonance and learning from the film are:

- That embodied contact and the sharing of stories between perpetrators and victims is critical in the process towards forgiveness and healing – it was so clearly illustrated in the ways in which the victims were able to see Stefaans as more than just an evil racist, but recognized in him a fellow human being. I was struck by Stefaan's words when he said that the restorative justice process involved thinking about the ways in which his victims were affected by his actions, but when he met them he realized that there was just so much more pain and suffering that he could never imagine. The woman who spoke about how difficult it is for her, to this day, to go back to work and to experience a sense of safety at work was an example. He had not realized that witnesses to the bombing would be so badly traumatized...
- That the process of changing your position, when you have been taken up in an ideology like racism, is a very complex one. Yet it was so hopeful to learn about the influence that people can have on assisting you in that – Eugene de Kock's influence in Stefaans' life was a very hopeful part of the story which really gave me hope for what I can achieve in advocacy work amongst my own people. (If Eugene can do it in jail I should be able to do it in the church! I will have to think about this comparison a bit more...)
- That the journey towards forgiveness is painful, difficult, often very long and complex – I am so grateful that the pain and complexity and how people take different journeys was clearly portrayed in the film. It was very important that the one woman

from Worcester made it very clear in her comment after the screening how many people are still affected who have not been part of the reconciliation process. There is always more work to be done...

- That guidance and support on both sides of the process seemed vital. Stefaans was able to take full responsibility for his actions, he was open to listening to the victims without providing excuses, without shifting blame and without diminishing their responses or trying to coerce the victims into feeling sorry for him. He referred to the conversations with Eugene de Kock and with the effect of the restorative justice process often – he was clearly very well-prepared before meeting the victims. On the other side in Worcester the conversations with the Khulumani Support group and Deon Snyman as well as the process of the shared meals and reaching out across racial divides also clearly played a critical role in preparing and supporting the victims. The involvement and support of the wider community played an important part. I am sure that there are many stories about the ways in which the wider community had been affected by actively and compassionately witnessing the process.
- The physical transformation of Stefaans as his body starts showing the ways in which his heart has been transformed into a beautiful human being moves me very deeply. I think it is the hope that it gives me to know that evil can be transformed into beauty. Even my own...
- The need for “giving back” and “doing sorry” – that saying sorry is just a step in the process of being accountable for the evils of apartheid. The challenge of making right and of giving something back still remains. This point was made and Stefaans is doing what he can – how do we join him??? This continues to be my biggest challenge.
- I was struck by the way in which Stefaans spoke English with a strong Afrikaans accent and with grammar that clearly illustrated direct translation from Afrikaans, yet he persevered with the English. I kept wondering about the effort (he who was SO Afrikaans and not very educated) it required of him to this and am wondering about my own responsibility to take on an African language and SPEAK it – no matter how krom en skeep – in order to show my willingness to cross difficult divides??
- The fact that Stefaans said he loves and will always love Jan van der Westhuizen, the man who took him on as a son, despite the fact that it is that man who introduced him to the right wing militant ideology and life-style and influenced him to plant the bomb. It made me realize, again, how complex people are and how complex relationships are – I am reminded of Archbishop Tutu’s words: *Nobody is just good or*

*just evil*. It is a good reminder for me as I deal with people from both sides of the divide of perpetrator/victim.

- During the week there were two images that stayed with me – the one is Olga Macingwane in her kitchen with all the newspaper clippings and her clear commitment not to let this harm go, but to seek answers and some kind of justice and resolution for her life. Thank God for people like Olga – there are so many people who just accept the injustices or allow it to destroy their lives. The other image is of Stefaans urging us at the end of the film to use EVERY opportunity to dialogue with people about the injustices of the past and present – even with our domestic workers. It is so easy to distance ourselves and think that we have not been involved in such trauma and evil acts and there is nothing that we can do. I am so challenged and motivated to keep on DOING sorry and DOING hope in my small circle wherever I can.

#### **Empowered response:**

The film has raised my awareness and understanding. I would like to use this in my own circle of influence. I am the chairperson of the Season of Human Dignity, an initiative of the four churches that form the sister churches in the Dutch Reformed family of churches. We are currently starting a process whereby small groups will be formed across racial and other divides. I think this film can be a powerful tool to incorporate in the activities of those groups. I think the film can be used in other discussions and dialogues aimed at reconciliation and healing within the church.

#### **Some of the questions that I would propose for discussion:**

What was the moment that struck you most during the film?

What is the image that came to mind when you think about that moment?

How did that particular part or moment in the film connect with your own story?

How are you going to respond to what you have experienced? What actions do you want to take in your own life in response to what you have learnt of realised or experienced? (be specific and make it a small concrete and attainable goal)

(These are questions based on what Michael White developed as outsider –witness responses in Narrative Therapy)