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We need new ways of healing past wounds

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ON JUNE 15, 1986 a group of us North Beach regulars walked up to see the devastation that had once been Magoo's Bar, to shattered glass, torn timbers and bloodstained floors.

That morning, the night after the bombing, I heard for the first time the sense of outrage and bitterness that has characterised white responses since, focused largely on a desire for retribution against Robert McBride after he was charged with the attack.

Violence casts long shadows. For some, the bombing entailed grief at a death; for others, permanent physical and emotional scarring. It represented terror; and evoked the judgement of terrorism. Such losses do not disappear, even if it is judged that those who suffered had been on the wrong side of a divide; indeed, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission judged it as a "gross violation of human rights".

But, left here, this account is selective and incomplete; it does not deal fully with the use of the memory of violence. How we remember the past, and the pain of the past, is always a matter of decision with consequences in the present. When such memories are constructed to cast us whites as victims and never perpetrators, it racialises history, and serves to distance us from others in the society.

If we need evidence of how memory can be used, go to southern Durban, the same area that produced activists like McBride – the descendant of an Irish militant who came to fight the British. There is a neglected cemetery for the Boers who died because of conditions in the local British concentration camps (and not for the Africans from the same farms, who died in separate camps).

The way the memory of this loss was cultivated and played upon, the failure to mourn the loss and the relish in the suffering – all made the is-

sue a rallying point for a bitter and destructive nationalism from which we have still not recovered.

To avoid this trap, we first need to ask what were the losses and pain of others?

Across the country, there was routine torture and execution of anti-apartheid leaders. In Durban, in August 1985, 15 people had died in an Umlazi cinema, their crime being to mourn the death of Victoria Mxenge, herself murdered by the State.

Last year I took an employee to hospital who was suffering a hip problem dating back to when she jumped from the cinema – a 15-year-old trying desperately not to be killed.

She still searches for the truth about a cousin taken by men from her home. Again, in March 1987, seven youths were murdered at Lindelani for their political sympathies.

Around that time I would sometimes go to the funerals in KwaMakhutha of youths shot by the police. There were constant appeals to sympathisers to be there, in the hope that the presence of outsiders would restrain the police from killing yet more at the funeral. There was no rite sacred enough to be free from the terror brought by a regime and its proxies, in the name of protecting us.

McBride applied for amnesty with the TRC. Almost no one took responsibility for the other killings I describe. Why are these many deaths taken so lightly, against the attention given to Magoo's Bar?

Possibly this is because such violence had become so routinised, so poorly reported, so taken for granted, in contrast to a bombing which was characterised by its exceptional nature – a rare attack by the ANC on white civilians. But that is no defence now. How does one express outrage at

the Magoo's bombing without a sense of outrage at the other thousands of deaths? Does outrage at civilian loss take a racially selective form? Were these deeds not terrorism because the victims were not white?

I argue that if it is wrong to diminish, casually, the enormity of the loss at Magoo's for those affected, it must be wrong also not to acknowledge the onslaught of terror visited upon thousands of civilian South Africans.

For me, this is a central issue in an incomplete struggle for justice. The violence of the Magoo's bombing was overwhelmed by that of the system it aimed to challenge.

But this is not only about judging the past. There are many memories of violence at large, and they are not being resolved, or in ways we need. I often listen to young people, mainly African, talking about their experience of violence. What is disturbing is the plentiful experience of violence, but also the continued silencing, the expectation that you must take it as the way it is. These memories need acknowledgement, and ways to mourn and end the damage done.

Instead, there are leaders who see such memories as yielding useful ore to mine. Turning loss into aggression can again pay dividends.

Julius Malema with skill plays the flip side; what defines us as Africans is our history of being always the victims of whites; they can be lost to democracy.

The sweeping use of history, unexplored, brings a ready answer to unexamined experience. In the project of racialising memories of violence, there are those who can do it with better prospects than the whites can. This mining of memory will indeed pay, but at the cost of deepening the divides of society, splitting not only whites from the rest, but Africans

from the rest. Wentworth produced leading families of anti-apartheid activists, such as the McBride, Webster, Manning and Apelgren families. Some Wentworth families have relatives in nearby Lamontville, the first African township of Durban. Yet in the recent municipal election the ANC gained 12 percent of the Wentworth vote, 87 percent of the Lamontville vote – and 8 percent of the Phoenix vote.

The fact that such divisions intensify is troubling for the Mandela project of reconciliation. This anniversary almost coincides with the death of Albertina Sisulu, who brought a sense of humanity to racial and political division. For us to bring new vigour into such a project, we need new ways of addressing the memories of the past – not exhortation, nor the simple slogans of "simunye", but acts of imagination that start with a recognition of the losses taken.

Ariel Dorfman, the Chilean playwright, speaking in South Africa, said: "One of the primary causes of the extraordinary crisis humanity finds itself in is the exclusion of billions of human beings and what they remember... One of the ways out of our predicament is to multiply the areas of participation, to create veritable oceans of participation. To offer room and respect to those memories and stories is not a merely charitable, paternalistic initiative, but an act of supreme self-preservation."

Memories can keep tugging us back to the past, distracting us from the tasks at hand. Approached with imagination, they can build hope and release energy. Potentially, commemoration of the Magoo's bombing can serve not as a call for retribution, but as the opening of new ways of recognition and understanding.

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