The challenge of moving on after a history of violence

Crispin Hemson

ONE NIGHT in 1986, I visited a student of mine, an activist from Inanda who had become a security man in a block of flats in central Durban. In his penthouse hovel, he showed me two young guys, sleeping. “Can you shelter one of them? They are going to get killed and I can’t keep them here,” he said.

 Foolishly, I did not question why if they needed help desperately, I should help just the one. Indeed, the next day, Teenage Zuma, aged 16, went back to Inanda and was killed by vigilantes.

 His cousin, Thulani Nkweze, became my friend. He was then the crisis officer of the Inanda Youth Organisation. Soon I realised that no one was safe with everything that happened in the local struggle against apartheid, as everything was a crisis.

 A major role was organising the funerals of fallen comrades, killed by vigilantes and security forces. The first event I helped with was that of Teenage’s funeral, a tense event — we were circled by armed defence force members.

 We both had problems with each other’s language, but we made ourselves understood. Thulani told me how he made sense of the deaths: “Between us and liberation there is a deep hole, and we will only be able to go across when enough people have died and filled that hole.”

 I protested, though frankly I felt I had little alternative to offer him.

 I asked Thulani to tell me his life story, and wrote it down. It was a tale of constant violence. He was sent to his father’s rural homestead from the township when he was five. As he did not know how to stick fight he became the best boxer.

 In rural impoverishment he was the lowest of the low, made to do the chores in the morning, always late for school and always beaten for being late. He had so little contact with white people that when he first saw a train driver, he wanted to go and touch him.

 Yet contact there was. When he was 12, a white official came with men to demolish the house that his mother had built illegally. Then she fell pregnant and he began selling fruit and nuts on the train to keep the family going. He would be caught by the railway police and forced to eat everything that he was selling, and once thrown off the moving train.

 Once Thulani became an activist, the violence stepped up. He never hid his own involvement: “We were directed to make the country ungovernable, and we did,” he said. Yet, later, he described this time as one where “we were strangers to ourselves... everything that happened there was part of the war.”

 Once he handled pamphlets, and a man in a car fired at him, the bullet going through his neck and lower jaw. He can only expect to die, but survived. Later he was detained.

 And yet despite all of this, he remained no one. He managed to get to negotiate with the vigilantes; they made agreements with him and then joined him. Once I watched the AWB marching on TV and said, this is bad. “No, they are trying to achieve something. We could work with them,” he said.

 I wondered how it was that someone who had had so much violence directed against him could keep focused on building the society he wanted to build, and not be distracted into hostility.

 As the transition to democracy came, Thulani would argue passionately, using his remarkably expressive Isizulu, for people to change to non-violent methods, arguing that human life was always connected to other human life, that we all lost something when someone was killed. In some ways times were harder. His organisation was dissolved, new and strange leaders were in place. Activists dispersed, some into crime. His views were radical, and his politics principled. This was not appreciated; people from various groupings plott ed to kill him.

 In the end, though, he survived all that and became a city councillor in the eThekwini metro, only to die of illness in 2008. At his funeral, I heard those who had treated him with hostility praise him for being such a disciplined comrade.

 I once asked if someone had inspired him when he was very young. He responded: “My grandmother would say to me: ‘Thulani, when you go out that door, the world is watching to see what you do. When I went out, I would feel so proud.’”

 When I look directly at our history of violence, I sometimes think it easier to explain the violence that continues, than to explain people’s commitment to non-violence. Some can hold on to the positive messages from grandmothers.

 For those with no such messages in their lives, the challenge is to find ways to recognise the violence, move on from it, and find ways of reawakening their sense of connection to other people.

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