

SUBMISSION TO THE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION - JOHANNESBURG CENTRAL POST HEARING PUBLIC FOLLOW UP WORKSHOP

I am 47 years old. I am a middle aged, middle class, South African housewife, an elder in my congregation, a wife, a mother, a nursing sister. However, I do not come before you as a representative of any of these groups. I cannot speak for middle aged white housewives, nor for the medical community, nor for my denomination, nor for my congregation, nor, indeed for my family. I am here in my personal capacity, as Lesley, stripped of my titles and my relationships.

I grew up with all the advantages and opportunities afforded me because I was white. I was oblivious of the fact that there were so many people around me who were not as privileged as I was, not because I was unfeeling, but because I was unaware. I became more aware by the time I reached high school and can remember heated discussions in classrooms because of the inequalities I was gradually beginning to notice. In hindsight, I realise the gross distortions I was taught but it is only looking back that I can see that our education system prepared me for accepting the totally unacceptable. In learning things without questioning, in obeying authority without challenge I came to accept as normal the totally and grossly abnormal.

When I was in my twenties, I had many friends at university, including young people who were arrested and harassed by security policemen. It filled me with anger, but also with a sense of helplessness. We tried so hard with no result, The feeling of uselessness was quite overpowering, The State just carried on and things just got more and more difficult.

By the late 70's and early 80's I was married with a young family. Although I was fully aware of the dreadful things that were happening all around my, fear paralysed me. I was no activist. I was afraid of being arrested, afraid of being detained without trial, afraid of being tortured or killed. I do not even have the excuse of not knowing. I was well aware of what was happening, I read the Black Sash publications and knew the terrible consequences of the Group Areas Act, the Mixed Marriages Act, the Land Appropriation Act, the Separate Development Act, the Bantu Education Act. God forgive me, I did nothing to speak out against these obscene laws.

The TRC hearings on Gross Human Rights Violations have devastated me. I have watched them on television and read about them in the Press and in magazines and they have made me weep with anger and horror. There is a strong feeling of denial, not because I don't believe what has been said, but because I don't want to believe that such cruelty and systematic destruction has occurred so near me. There is a sense of complicity, a terrible feeling of failure. I remember a quotation I read many years ago. It disturbed me then, it haunts me now - "It is sufficient for evil to prosper that good men do nothing."

In April this year, I attended the first of several meetings on the Churches' response to the TRC hearings. One of the things discussed was the fact that so few white people attend the hearings and/or made submissions. I have been thinking of nothing else **/pp1-2/** since then. I started talking about it in my community and discussion it with my friends. I started asking myself why I have not attended. I know it is causing great pain amongst the black community. I cannot imagine how it must feel to bear your pain and suffering so openly and publicly. I can imagine what it must feel like to stretch out your hand in an attempt to forgive and reconcile and have no-one there to grasp it. The hurt must be enormous and there must be anger and frustration, too.

So why have I not been there? I am a Christian and want with all my heart to make amends and start again. Why do I turn away from your outstretched hand? It is not in indifference to your suffering. It is not a rejection of your testimony. It is not a denial of what has happened over so many decades, indeed centuries. It is shame. It is a deep and overwhelming sense of shame even now, as I speak to you, I find it almost impossible to look you in the face.

When I read of the reparation that people who have made submissions are requesting, it compounds the deep sense of shame I am feeling. A tombstone, a bursary for a child's education, a proper burial for a loved one, such

simple requests, no vengeance, no desire to get even. It somehow makes it harder to face you. Given the same circumstances, I'm not sure that I would be so willing to forgive.

Last week, after a meeting at the TRC offices, I was speaking to the Chairman of the meeting and one of the Communities, relating to them how I was feeling. They asked if I would speak today. My immediate reaction was "No! I couldn't possibly!" I shall never forget the look on their faces. It was not a look of judgment or anger, rather a look of sadness and resignation. It broke my heart. I spent the rest of the afternoon agonising over this decision. I kept saying "God, please don't ask me to do this. I will make reparation in some other way." I couldn't swallow, I couldn't stop crying. At about 4:30 pm I telephoned the TRC office and asked to speak to the Commissioner. He had left for home and I was so relieved! I thought that I was off the hook, but God had other plans, and placed the Commissioner's cellphone number in my path. So here I am.

I have been thinking since then about what I would submit today. I thought about saying how apartheid had violated us all, as it had, but in the face of the submissions that have preceded mine, and the millions that have not been heard, what could I say to them? I thought I could say "I'm sorry" and that would somehow make it alright. But God kept nudging me, pulling at my arm. I was at a loss to explain how I feel, and how our past has somehow diminished me. We are so separated, you and I, our experiences so vastly different, How do we bridge that gap? I am a Christian. How do I reconcile what I believe with what I practiced?

If you had asked me a week ago about my faith, I would have said to you that I was of strong faith, that I believe in God as Creator and in His son Jesus Christ as my Saviour, who died on the cross for my sins, that through Him my sins are forgiven and that through Him I shall receive eternal life. That because of my faith, I have tried to do the best I can, that I have treated all people as human beings, that I have tried to follow the teachings of the Scriptures. I would have said that I have always loved God with all my heart and with all my strength and with all my mind. I would have admitted quite freely that I have not always been successful with loving one another, /pp2-3/but that God would know that I loved Him and have always tried to discern His will for me.

I am of the Reformed tradition. We are not given to Pentecostal or Charismatic experiences. On Wednesday, I was driving to a conference on the eradication of poverty. I drove 8kms past my turnoff on the highway. For first time in my life, I truly heard the voice of Christ. In all the years I ignored the cries of the oppressed, I ignored Him. In my fear and concern for my own safety, like Peter before me, I denied my Lord. Like Peter, the realisation of that denial has filled me with unbearable sorrow. The realisation that my faith is so small, so selfish, so empty, has broken me. It has made me understand why I feel such shame. I profess to be a follower of Christ, but have been unwilling to go where He has led me. I have realised that sins of omission are still sins.

I cannot change our past and it would be so much easier to blame apartheid for all of it. The truth is, I made my own choices. I know of so many people who chose differently. I have read the letter submitted to the TRC by Dr Beyers Naude. So many people have said "Of all people, why would he need to make a submission?" I have been greatly humbled by it. I am no Beyers Naude, but I am grateful to him for his example of humility and courage, He helped me to find my way here.

The choices I made in the past to avoid what I perceived, in my fear and cowardice, as having consequences too dangerous to deal with have resulted in consequences worse than ever I feared. Poverty has moved into my street, crime has moved in next door, unemployment is knocking at my gate. The results of the Human Rights violations have left us all with a legacy of mistrust, suspicion and anger. I will not run away from what is happening. I acknowledge my part in the creation of our present. I pray that together we will secure our future.

In conclusion, there are two things I should like to say. Firstly, that my family for supporting me today, This has not been easy for them, especially my husband and our eldest child. They are very private people and to watch and listen to their wife and mother make so public an acknowledgement of responsibility will have been very difficult for them. They came anyway.

Finally, I need to say one last thing. While making submission today has been painful for me, the hardest part is here at the end. It is so hopelessly inadequate to make right what has happened, so puny in the face of such suffering that I am overwhelmed at my temerity in even offering it, but it is all I have to give - I'm sorry.

Lesley Morgan

