

**RECONCILING WITH DIGNITY**

by

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At a round table, arms-length wide, two men in their late fifties sat across from one another, shifting in their seats, looking everywhere but at each other. The room was dimly lit except for the penetrating lights carefully placed by the BBC engineer, illuminating the faces of the two men. Each was the mirror image of the other—expressionless yet alert, as if readying for the first strike. One was a former member of the Irish Republican Army (Ronnie) who had served 21 years in prison for nearly killing the man who sat opposite him; a British police officer (Malcolm) from Southampton, England. In March 2005, nearly thirty-three years later, they meet again. The two had agreed to take part in a BBC television series, *Facing the Truth*, where victims and perpetrators of the conflict in Northern Ireland were brought together for face-to-face encounters.

I was present because I had been invited by the BBC to act as one of three facilitators for the encounters. My first reaction was one of skepticism; it sounded like a perfect set-up for a reality TV program. When I learned, however, that Archbishop Desmond Tutu was to be one of the facilitators, I realized that would not be the case. This was to be a worthy undertaking.

The purpose of the television series was to bring healing to a land where human tragedy abounded and the need for reconciliation between the Catholics and Protestants was long overdue. And it was done with the utmost care and responsibility. Everyone involved in making the series, from the producers to the cameramen, understood the fragility of the undertaking.<sup>1</sup> Each step in the process was carried out with professionalism and integrity. They went so far as to hire an

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Adams from BBC Belfast was the Executive Producer, John O’Kane and Janette Ballard were co-producers.

expert in trauma work, Nomfundo Walasa from South Africa, to be present in case any of the participants needed help during the encounters.

The producers of the program were well aware that, in spite of the two sides having reached agreement on many of the political issues (on Good Friday in 1998, known as the Good Friday Agreement), the human suffering created by years of violence and hatred between the communities had never been openly addressed. If there were to be a chance for reconciliation in the war-ravaged country, something had to be done about the painful losses ordinary people had endured during the conflict. Someone had to open the doors to truth and healing and the BBC took that bold first step.

The shooting had taken place in England in December 1974, during the height of the conflict between the Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) had taken its bombing campaign to England in order to bring the war closer to home for the British government. Ronnie and another IRA man had been holed up in an apartment in Southampton for several days. They were waiting for orders to carry out a bombing when they had been inadvertently discovered by the British police; the landlord had called the police after visiting the apartment and discovering the two men instead of the woman he had rented the place to.

Malcolm, one of the officers called to the scene, pursued the IRA men as they fled the apartment in an attempt to get away. During the chase, Ronnie turned and shot Malcolm. He watched Malcolm fall to the ground then continued to run for his life, avoiding capture. Ronnie eventually made it back to Northern

Ireland only to be caught by the police a few months later, in a routine road-check. Just two weeks before he was to be married, he was arrested and sentenced to spend a good part of his life behind bars.

About a foot away from where the men were sitting, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Lesley Belinda (the third facilitator), and I were seated at a crescent-shaped table. These types of encounters were nothing new for the Archbishop. He had facilitated countless discussions with victims and perpetrators of crimes of apartheid in his homeland of South Africa. Lesley Belinda was asked to join the facilitation team because she lost her husband in the Rwandan genocide. I was invited because of my years of experience facilitating discussions between warring parties all over the world.

As a conflict resolution specialist at Harvard University, I had facilitated many dialogues, but nothing could have prepared me for what was to come. What I witnessed during these encounters shifted my understanding of how to heal the wounds of conflict and deepened my awareness of the sanctity of the human heart.

A miraculous reconciliation took place that day between Malcolm and Ronnie. There was another process besides forgiveness at play during the several breathtaking hours the men spent together at that table. It changed my understanding of what it takes to put the past to rest when we have suffered painful indignities in our relationships.

What happened to Malcolm and Ronnie is not unique to indignities suffered in wars. Each of us has been on the battleground. Relationships—no

matter what kind—present opportunities to showcase our humanity or our inhumanity. And what happened between Malcolm and Ronnie was a beautiful demonstration of the triumph of humanity. Their story needs to be told—not just to honor the sacredness of their experience, but also to give us reason to believe that we, too, are capable of the same kind of healing and reconciliation in our own lives.

### *The Encounter*

The cameras were ready to roll. All eyes were on Archbishop Tutu, who was sitting between Leslie and me, wearing his stunning purple vestment and a large silver crucifix around his neck. Everyone in the room was scanning his face, searching for a signal that would quiet our anxiety and reassure us that what we were doing was right. He sat up straight in his chair, leaned forward, and with a big smile on his face welcomed Malcolm and his thirty-five year old daughter who sat with him at his side of the table. He then turned to Ronnie and with the same engaging smile, welcomed him.

The Archbishop told the men how courageous they were to agree to take part in the program and that he hoped that they would not only begin their own healing process but would, by example, help others with theirs. He told them that they would be asked to tell their stories about what happened the night of the shooting and that they could take as long as they wanted. He said that we, the facilitators, would ask them questions to get them started and clarifying questions

as they went along. The Archbishop then turned to Malcolm and asked him to begin.

### *Malcolm's story*

With surprising calmness, Malcolm started to tell his version of what happened the night he was shot by Ronnie.

“Patrol Sergeant Dodds accompanied me that night. He was the passenger in the panda car I was driving. When the call came on the radio, I recognized my colleague’s voice. He said he was being chased by two armed men who were firing at him. He told us his location on Westridge Road and that’s as much as we had. I switched the car around as fast as I could. Westridge Road was only four to five hundred yards away from where we were so we arrived very quickly.”

In slow and measured words, Malcolm told us in dramatic detail all the events that led up to the chase, starting when they arrived on the scene to when he fell unconscious to the ground after he was shot.

When he described being hit, then falling to the ground, Malcolm said, “I thought I fell forward but I didn’t. I must have passed out because when I came to, I could see Sergeant Dodds crouched over me.” His voice broke and he stopped. Head lowered, with his daughter’s hand on his arm, he wept. It was the first time in 33 years that he had talked about what had happened that night. His children had never heard his story. As with many of the victims who took part in the series, he kept his grief locked up. Who knew where this outpouring of emotion would take him? In his case, it led him to the threshold of healing.

By allowing himself to be vulnerable, in a setting that honored and protected him, he opened the safe to his locked-down wounds and revealed his uncompromised humanity. He was beautiful in his grief. Not only did he open his heart, he opened ours. We were all with him in his vulnerability, bearing witness to his strength and willingness to come face to face with his well-guarded trauma. The truth that Malcolm faced was as much his own as the life-altering story he heard when it was Ronnie's turn to speak.

### ***Ronnie's story***

“I joined the IRA when I was sixteen years of age. And unlike Malcolm, there were no wages, pension, or housing. It was a voluntary thing to join the IRA. And joining the IRA, at that time, was an emotional response to what was happening to our community. For a number of years there was discrimination, sectarianism; something like apartheid in South Africa. Nationalist (Irish) people never felt a part of the state. They felt alienated from the state and we had to assert the rights of the Irish people through the use of violence. And when you join the IRA it's not a career. In fact, you know there are two things that are going to happen to you: either you end up in a grave or in a prison cell.”

He described a life-changing incident when he was walking down the street in Belfast one day with another IRA volunteer when she was killed by his side.

“She was carrying a weapon for me and the British army shot her dead. She was shot ten times. She was twenty years of age. And the fact was, the

hatred toward the British state was there; reinforced and re-determined that the only way to resolve the situation was through the use of armed struggle.”

At the end of his remarks he looked at us and said, “I have no regrets about my involvement in the IRA; in fact, I am proud of it.”

The whole time he was telling his story, he maintained a steely resolve, determined not to falter under pressure or to admit regret or remorse for what he had done. His body language sent the message, “don’t take me to where I will not go.” His face was stern and unyielding—jaw tight and his eyes wide with conviction.

At one point, I asked him whether or not he had feelings for Malcolm after listening to what he had been through and how his family had suffered. He had snapped at me, saying, “Of course I have feelings for Malcolm. I have feelings for everyone who suffered in this conflict, and especially for Malcolm.”

And for the first time, I saw him make eye contact with Malcolm. For a few seconds, they held each other’s gaze and didn’t look away. The Archbishop saw it, too. He knew it was an opening. The Archbishop turned to Malcolm and asked, “Malcolm, is there anything you would like to say after hearing Ronnie’s story?” Malcolm turned to the Archbishop and looked at him for a few second. And this is when we entered the zone of the miraculous.

Malcolm looked back at Ronnie and said, “What I realize now after listening to your story is how difficult it must have been growing up under those conditions. And I believe that if I had grown up under the same circumstances, that I would have done the same thing.”

I looked over at Ronnie who appeared stunned. He took a deep breath, put his elbows on the table and leaned forward toward Malcolm. I watched his face soften and his shoulders drop. That steely resolve disappeared from his being as he awaited Malcolm's next words. Malcolm continued:

"I never had anyone killed along side me. If that had happened to me, I feel I could kill. I make no bones about that. I am absolutely certain you and some of your colleagues must have felt exactly the same way. What I'd have been prepared to do about it is another matter. I just don't know at this stage.

Ronnie quickly responded, "When you say you don't know what you'd be prepared to do about it, that's understandable. But if you're in a situation where there's no other road to take, no political road to take, no access to the politics, then there's going to be a vacuum, and in that vacuum, violence will erupt."

"Do you feel that had you been the age you are at the time you would take the course you did?"

Ronnie smiled and said, "That's difficult to answer. Like everybody says, you're always wiser in hind sight. And I do regret an armed conflict was necessary. I do not regret that I was involved in the IRA. To be honest, I'm very proud of it."

"How did you feel about the time you spent in prison? Do you feel it was wasted?"

Ronnie chuckled and said, "Of course I feel it was wasted. But the fact of the matter was, I never regarded myself as a criminal. I was a political prisoner. I

believed in what I was doing, I had the support of my community. Even though I lost 21 years, I felt I was doing something to help our people.”

Both men sat silently for a few seconds. Then Malcolm asked, “You have any children?”

“No children.”

“Do you have plans to have any?”

“Well, I hope so. I don’t know……”

“What I’m really leading up to is the fact that to have been in this situation and to realize that had I been killed that night, my youngest child wouldn’t even exist. And I think about what a tremendous loss that would be. I’ve got three amazing kids and I love them to bits. I feel very awkward having put them through this situation. I said I believed it was a stupid thing to do and I’ve always held that opinion. Whether I’d do it again under the same circumstances, I’d like to think I would. If I was trying to prevent something I believed was wrong, I’d like to think I’d do it again if the need arose.”

“To be honest with you, I’d expect you to. I know what you were doing that day was your job. Unfortunately things happened the way they happened, but I’m glad you had your youngest child. I’m glad you lived. I’m glad you have three beautiful children.”

“I hope you have as many at least.”

“I hope so, let’s see what happens.”

Ronnie expressed a desire to stay in touch with Malcolm, inviting him to come to Belfast and to have a talk one day over a pint. He said he wanted to know more about him, what he was doing, and what his priorities were. Near the end of the session, I asked Malcolm, “Do you think it was courageous of Ronnie to come here today?”

“Yes. To sit across the table from the person you almost killed and not be blown away by it is courageous. I have a great deal of respect for him.”

We sat in awe and silence. Finally, the Archbishop asked the men how they would like to end the session. They looked at each other for a few seconds, got up from their chairs, reached across the table, and extended their hands to one another.

### ***What Happened?***

As if what had occurred during this day-long encounter between the two men were not enough, they and their families went into Belfast that night and had dinner together. And they have seen each other many times since.

I wondered what had happened between these two men to make their extraordinary reconciliation possible. What were the dynamics that enabled them to cross the divide from human disconnection to connection? It had nothing to do with forgiveness; it was never asked for or given. But what did happen was equally as powerful: *they honored each other’s dignity and in so doing, strengthened their own.*

In no small way, the environment that was created by the BBC and the facilitation team significantly contributed to their reconciliation. The effect of the presence of a trusted, moral authority—Archbishop Tutu—cannot be understated. His dignity, consistency, and uncommon compassion created the nurturing, non-judgmental environment necessary for this difficult work. We created a place that set the stage for the dignity that the two men bestowed upon one another.

In what ways did they honor each other's dignity? First, they both agreed that sitting down together was worthy of their time and attention; that was the initial step. How common is it to withdraw from those with whom we have been in conflict, and refuse to talk to them?

Second, they carefully listened to one another without interrupting or challenging each other's story; they listened to seek understanding. How often do we listen to our adversaries only to one-up them or to prepare our attack on what they have said?

Third, they acknowledged and recognized what the other had been through. How many times have we stared expressionless at the person whom we have injured in the heat of a conflict and felt nothing if not justified?

Fourth, they honored and acknowledged each other's integrity and in so doing, created a bond between them. By identifying with each other's experience, they could no longer dehumanize one another, excluding the other from their moral communities. Our conflict-driven minds create good guys and bad guys, and when under conflict's distorting influence, we rarely see ourselves as anything but good. They expanded their understanding by experiencing each

other's humanity. As Gunther Grasse points out, "truth exists nearly always in the plural."<sup>2</sup> And because they came to understand each other's reality, the truth they finally uncovered was bigger than their separate stories. This uncommon truth revealed itself with dignity: *they were both victims; caught up in a dysfunctional system crying out for change.*

Maybe by their example, we will do better at responding to those cries in our own lives when they begin, rather than after damage has been done both to ourselves and to those with whom we are in conflict. But we may be a long way away from preventing conflicts altogether. It seems like we are more vulnerable to getting ourselves into arguments than working them out. What we could use are hopeful ways to put relationships back together again after they break down.

What Ronnie and Malcolm showed us is a way to do that. By honoring each other's dignity through careful listening, a desire to understand each others' experience, to identify with—as a human being—the choices our adversary makes, requires letting go of our death grip on the need to be right.

What it takes to decide to "let go" is something deeply personal, if not spiritual. The Archbishop, when asked to explain the magic that took place between the two men, immediately held his hands up wide above his head, looked up to the sky, smiled, and said, "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

Even though it is difficult to identify exactly what contributed to their reconciliation, I would like to attempt to outline some other factors, besides extending dignity to one another, that might have contributed to the positive outcome of not only Ronnie and Malcolm's encounter, but for the other

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<sup>2</sup> In a poem written for his Nobel Prize speech, December 7, 1999.

participants in the program as well. I am reluctant to suggest that these are universal truths, but instead, reflections on what appeared to contribute to the many positive outcomes that *Facing the Truth* enabled.

### ***Creating the Conditions for Reconciliation***

***1. Need for Public Acknowledgement:*** As Archbishop Tutu said after the encounters, “there seems to be a need for public vindication that we yearn for when we have been roughed up.” When we have been harmed, especially under circumstances that feel unjust, we have a need for acknowledgement of the pain and suffering the act created. What was striking to us all during the encounters was that the perpetrators, with the exception of one, had gone to trial and served time in prison for what they had done. But that didn’t seem to be enough for many of the victims. Trials and jail time, while serving the need for justice, is not sufficient to address the emotional wounds of the victims. There seemed to be a need on the part of the victims for a kind of public process that acknowledged their human suffering.

That acknowledgement took many forms. For some victims, they needed to hear from the perpetrators that they were sorry for what they had done, while others wanted to clear up misunderstandings about what happened to their loved ones.

For example, the sister of a Catholic man who was targeted as a member of the IRA wanted to hear that the British army officer, who killed him, made a mistake and shot the wrong man. In another encounter, the widow of a slain man

came because she did not want the perpetrator to have power over her anymore. The acknowledgement she sought came from within herself. At the end of an agonizing day with the man who killed her husband, she walked away feeling like she was the one with the power. She no longer feared him or hated him. She felt she had reclaimed a piece of herself that was taken from her 30 years ago when her husband was killed.

As pointed out above, the need for acknowledgement and recognition of the *emotional* toll the deaths created manifested in many different ways. It bespeaks the complexity of the human response to violence and loss. What appeared certain for the people who took part in the programs was that the emotional needs related to such personal loss are not sufficiently addressed with the signing of a peace accord or when the perpetrator is sent to jail. For many of the victims, more than 30 years had passed since they lost their loved ones, but judging by their emotional reactions, one would have thought it happened yesterday. Emotional wounds need a different kind of process and they don't go away with the passage of time.

The need for acknowledgement on the part of the perpetrators took yet another form. There appeared to be a need to be understood—to tell the story of the undignified and demoralizing conditions under which they were raised. Many of them talked about living in economically and spiritually impoverished settings—both the IRA men as well as the Loyalist paramilitaries. They were not seeking forgiveness, but deeper understanding of all the conditions that

contributed to who they were and why they decided to engage in violence as a means for change.

When the victims acknowledged how difficult it must have been for the perpetrators growing up under the conditions they had described, it shifted the dynamics between them. The acknowledgement enabled them to connect at the human level—restoring the humanity to the relationship.

It was always a profound moment when the victims acknowledged their perpetrators—what they had been through and suffered. I wondered what enabled their uncommon compassion and generosity toward the people who had caused them such suffering. One thing I learned for sure; *never underestimate the power of a victim.*

**2. *Need for Nurturing:*** Judith Herman, in her often quoted book, *Trauma and Recovery*, described three stages of recovery from traumatic loss: *establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community.*<sup>3</sup> The process that we designed for *Facing the Truth* took these factors into consideration. The BBC producers went to great lengths to assure the safety of all who took part. They spent time developing relationships with the participants months before the programs, and were available to them at a moment's notice to answer questions they might have had. By the time they took part in the programs, the participants knew exactly what was going to happen and they voluntarily decided to take part. There was no pressure whatsoever on the participants to participate.

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<sup>3</sup> Judith Herman (1992). *Trauma and Recovery*. Basic Books.

The facilitation team also met with everyone before the filming. We did as much as we could to reassure them that we were there for them and that our job was to serve their needs.

Upon reflection, there was another factor besides *safety* that I believe contributed to the positive outcomes of the programs. Once the safety factor was established, the participants needed to believe that they could make themselves vulnerable—not worry about being re-traumatized by the process or be shamed by it. Along with the feeling of being safe, the participants needed to feel *nurtured* by the facilitation team. It was critical for their ability to move forward in the process that they felt our compassion, care, and tenderness toward them. As the Archbishop said, “*the participants must feel that they are precious and important and that something irreplaceable would be lost if they were not there.*” Any harshness or judgment on our part would have destroyed the sanctity of the space shared by the participants. My experience was that we needed to communicate to the participants, most often non-verbally, that we could handle whatever comes up during the discussion and that we would be there to nurture them and to protect them.

**3. Need for Control:** In the many discussions we had as a team before we started the programs, one issue became clear: we were not going to have an agenda for the participants. Regarding the issue of forgiveness, we maintained that if it emerged spontaneously for the participants, it would be wonderful. Given the lack of control most victims suffer when a loved one has been killed, forcing them to forgive if they are not ready is another way of controlling them, if not re-

traumatizing them. We felt that the victims needed to be in control of their process, not an external prompter. The only structure we set in place was for them to tell their stories about what happened and how that affected them.

As I mentioned above, each participant came voluntarily to the programs. They were not coerced in any way, nor was there anything about the process that was forced. It appeared, for many of the victims, that being in control of what they wanted to say to the perpetrators empowered them. And they knew exactly what they wanted to say. There was no loss of words. They were articulate, insightful, and without exception, showed an uncanny clarity when talking to the perpetrators. Their exchanges felt fragile but forceful. They all walked away feeling that something had shifted within them. They described feeling relieved and that a burden had been released from their shoulders.

**4. *The Need to be Vulnerable.*** At the end of every session, the Archbishop said to both the victims and perpetrators, “*thank you for being vulnerable.*” The biggest lesson I learned from these encounters is that vulnerability is where the power lies; the magic happens when one exposes the truth to oneself and others and is ultimately set free by it. That’s quite a paradox. Our instincts fool us into thinking that deception and cover up is a good strategy for self-preservation. When our self-protective instincts overpower us—and they can at a moment’s notice when something threatens us—it feels like our life is on the line. This hardwired instinct knows nothing but to eliminate the source of the threat.

Evolutionary psychologists explain this knee-jerk reaction by pointing out that we have inherited instincts from our early ancestors who roamed the

savannah 100,000 years ago.<sup>4</sup> Because genes take so long to change, the part of our brain that controls our emotional reactions are the same as our ancestors. They were wired to have strong emotional reactions to threats because it meant survival to them. With a tiger on their heels, their lives could have been over. Even though today, we do not have tigers on our tails, our brains are still wired to react, violently if necessary, if a threat looms large. The difference is, of course, that today, the threats to our well-being are more likely to come in the form of psychological threats than physical ones (although this is obviously not true for those who are living in war zones). They are most likely to be *threats to our dignity*. It is why we react strongly to protect our self-image at all costs. When we perceive our dignity is on the line, our old brains take over and in the service of our self-protection, we often violate the dignity of others. The old brain does not like to admit it is wrong—what it knows is that survival is on line and that it has to do whatever it takes to stay alive. Admitting wrongdoing feels like a shameful death wish.

At the end of one of the other long days of filming the encounters, the Archbishop turned to me and said, “Aren’t human beings funny creatures. We all do the same thing—we just hate to admit we’ve done something wrong.” This is the impulse that stands in the way of reconciling with dignity. If we understood the unconscious, evolutionary legacy that tries to prevent us from taking responsibility for our actions—if we could can take the hardwired shame out of admitting we have done something wrong—we would be so much better at

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<sup>4</sup> Steven Pinker. *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*. Viking Press, 2002.

healing ourselves and our relationships. *Fighting the impulse to save face could save our relationships.*

Fortunately we are more than just our instincts. We are also spiritual beings with other resources of wisdom, if we choose to recognize and employ them. A spiritually intelligent person knows that only the truth will set us free. And the cost of avoiding the truth is painfully high; we become imprisoned by our own deception, and what is worse, the deceit keeps us from connecting to others.

When the participants made themselves vulnerable by exposing to the world the raw material of their grief and human suffering, there was nothing pretty about it. It was graphic, uncensored and disturbing. All the gruesome details of the killings were revealed along with the torment it caused the victims and their surviving families. But strangely enough, even though most of us had never experienced such painful losses, we were all affected by it. There was something all of us could emotionally identify with. It is the *feeling* of loss that is *universal*; the fear of it, the dread of it, the hurt of it. When we can open ourselves to those feelings—either our own or others, we are rewarded with the opportunity to connect in the most beautiful way. The walls of separation disintegrate and we join together in a shared awareness of the painful aspects of our humanity.

This was true of the perpetrators as well. The more honest they were about what they did, the more our hearts opened to them. My experience was that the more vulnerable the perpetrators were, the more we could connect with them.

## *Conclusion*

These conditions that were set in place while making *Facing the Truth*: creating the space for acknowledgment, nurturing, control, and vulnerability were all designed to promote and restore human dignity. The process we created stayed focused on the human dimension and the human cost of the 30 plus years of violent conflict in Northern Ireland. While we did not want to discuss the political issues, we did acknowledge the role politics played in creating the conditions for the conflict—the inequality, the discrimination, and unjust policies. In fact, inequality, discrimination, and injustice are violent acts in and of themselves. The injuries that they create are as damaging as a gunshot wound. For this reason, it was important that the perpetrators described the disempowering and humiliating environment in which they grew up. It was not meant to justify their violent behavior, but to re-create the tableau in which the events emerged and took place.

We wanted to showcase the human suffering—in all of its forms—that violent and unjust political environments create. We wanted to hold it up for full viewing—every aspect and every angle of it. And we wanted to make it *personal*. Because the truth of the matter is that the human suffering these conflicts create rarely gets acknowledged and addressed. In fact, the emotional distress that people suffer is often ignored, diminished, and even trivialized at the political level. And ironically, it is just these kinds of unprocessed losses and psychological traumas that maintain the divide between warring communities, even after a peace agreement is signed.

We wanted to dignify their suffering by giving it the attention it needed in order to put it to rest. We wanted to give them a chance to be heard, seen, recognized and

understood. We wanted to give them control by letting them say whatever they wanted to each other. We wanted to create a sense of possibility for both communities in N. Ireland—to demonstrate what a healing process looked like so that they could imagine a future together, living along side one another, in dignity rather than indignity.

We were looking to create a process that was humane and non-judgmental. We did not want to be the arbiter of truth; we wanted to enable it to emerge. We wanted the perpetrators to hear, in the victims' own words, what the loss of their loved one felt like: the shock, the horror, the disbelief, and the rage; and what it felt like to miss someone so profoundly. And for those victims who survived an attack, we wanted to give them the chance to speak directly to the men who came so close to taking their lives. We wanted the victims and families to be able to ask questions of the perpetrators—questions that were haunting them since the death of their loved ones. We wanted to create the conditions for every aspect of the truth to be told.

And for the perpetrators, in addition to telling their background stories, we wanted to give them an opportunity to come face to face with the people whose lives they so deeply affected. We wanted to give them a chance to see their victims as normal human beings living with abnormal loss. We wanted to humanize their politicized actions by having them look into the faces of those whose suffering they created.

All of the perpetrators said that they had to dehumanize their victims in order to carry out the killings. What they failed to point out was that they de-humanized themselves in the process: they had to disconnect from the part of themselves that *felt* the horror of taking someone's life. We wanted to create the conditions for them to *feel* the effects of their actions. And ironically, the victims were the ones who helped them do

that. Having to listen to the details of the heartbreaking victims' stories and all the suffering their actions created was an opportunity for them to experience the *feeling* of what they did. It was an unintended gift the victims gave them.

Because when the feeling returns, perpetrators have an opportunity to re-connect with their full humanity—what I believe true healing is about. They have a chance to re-integrate all aspects of what it means to be human—the capacity to love and to hate, to connect with others and to violently disconnect from them. When one is a member of a paramilitary organization, part of one's job is to kill. According to the perpetrators, it is necessary to disconnect from the targeted enemy as a human being. And it is also necessary to disconnect from one's own humanness—from the feeling that results from taking someone's life. If one is connected to one's own full humanity, one feels the pain one inflicts on others. It is what we call remorse; maybe even shame. And if *healing* is the goal, then one must reconnect to those painful feelings, integrating them into one's self-image. And if *reconciliation* is the goal, then both the victim and the perpetrator need to reconnect to each other through *feeling* one another's loss.

More happened during the encounters than my mind is capable of describing. But what I can say is that what I experienced reassured me that *with the right conditions*, it is possible for people who have suffered unspeakable losses in violent ethnic conflicts to heal and reconcile with one another. .

At the same time, it is also clear to me from this experience that even if one creates the right conditions for healing and reconciliation, not everyone is ready for it. There are steps along the way that are more difficult for some than others. For some, the reasons were personal and emotional, and for others, it was political. And what was

healing for a few participants was much less than reconciliation. For two of the victims, clearing their loved ones' name of involvement in paramilitary organizations was enough. For others such as Malcolm and Ronnie, it meant more than that. It meant genuine re-connection.

I'd like to think that we all have the capacity to reconcile as they did. When we get into an argument with our colleagues or our loved ones and end up knowingly or unknowingly violating each other's dignity, will we be able to look them in the eye and say, "I want to understand you. I want to listen to you and hear your story as much as I want you to hear mine." I'd like to be able to say to my partner that our relationship matters to me as much as my need to be right.

This is a very different approach than forgiveness. It assumes that we are both in need of understanding—that we have both contributed to the breakdown of our relationship, that we both played a role. In our day to day lives, the line between victim and perpetrator—who is right and who is wrong—is often blurred. Having a dignified process at our disposal whose goal is to seek mutual understanding and re-connection to our shared humanity would be invaluable. Because if indignity tears relationships apart, dignity is what can put them back together again.