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Restitution: Intergenerational dialogue as a way of remembering together while creating our future

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Abstract

The lyrics of the song *Another Country* by Mango Groove, released in 1993, inspired and informed this reflection. The overarching aim of the paper is to engage with restitution by focusing on two central aspects namely remembering together (collective memory) and intergenerational dialogue as an example of collective memory. The complexity of remembering is underscored by discussing the importance of both the past and the future as non-negotiable aspects thereof. It is argued that keeping a creative tension between remembering the past while creating our future, is essential. Besides diversity constituted by race, class, and geographical or spatial context, the discussion highlights the significance and urgency of intergenerational dialogue especially in a post apartheid's South Africa.

Keywords

Reconciliation; restitution; memory; intergenerational dialogue; restorative justice

Introduction

The article uses the song *Another Country* to frame the reflection on the necessity and complexity of restitution as indispensable for reconciliation. The first section describes core elements of restitution namely introspection and retrospection. This implies that while we remember the past together, we are moving into the future we envisioned for ourselves and others. In short, there should be a double movement: looking back while moving forward. Secondly, the importance and complexity of remembering is explored as a source that gives access to the

past. Thirdly, intergenerational dialogue is put forward as an essential way of keeping a creative balance between remembering the past and creating the future, together. Several examples of intergenerational dialogue are presented to demonstrate the possible gains and challenges that could be expected as part of intergenerational engagement.

The need for restitution

When considering restitution in this country, reconciliation was long seen as the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The focus of the TRC was on disclosure of the truth by the perpetrators of injuries, and forgiveness by the victims, to eventually promote peace in a very volatile situation. Although I regard the TRC as one of the bravest efforts to deal with the past in South Africa, it was not enough to deal with the scars and the damage done.

According to Thesnaar (2020:111), resistance to transformation increased since the TRC, and the focus has moved from transformation to justice and restitution. From the onset of democracy in South Africa the question of accountably was on the table, and it still is today. According to Borer (1999:303), it is important to strike a balance between justice and reconciliation, but that was not accomplished in South Africa because "… the two groups (victims and perpetrators) have fundamentally different views of what is required in order to feel a sense of reconciliation and healing".

It may be easier to talk about reconciliation when it is something we receive from God (vertical relationship). However, when it comes to our horizontal relationships, and especially with reference to our past in South Africa, it becomes a loaded and even controversial concept and reality. This is where I think restitution fits in; meaning that we cannot reconcile without in the first place understanding why we need reconciliation and what it will cost. I understand restitution as the action needed to move towards reconciliation. Restitution and reconciliation are, therefore, not understood as being the same, but as strongly related. Restitution is viewed as an integral aspect of the process of reconciliation. I find the biblical passage on Zacchaeus used by Boesak (2008:640) to explain the need for restoration intriguing because

it speaks to the heart of what could be understood as restitution. Boesak (2008:640) explains: "He (Zacchaeus) understands that reconciliation has to be transformation if it means anything: of his life, his lifestyle, his relationship with the community and especially those he has wronged". Therefore, restitution entails a movement (action) and change inside people that informs their visible actions (outside) and how they relate to others.

In a tribute to Archbishop Ndungane by Archbishop Tutu (2008:206) he argues for forgiveness and not retributive justice. He stresses that forgiveness is not an easy option and does not mean we just forget the wrong that has been done. However, he views retributive justice as focusing on punitive action and, therefore, not feasible because it does not solve the problem. Thesnaar (2008:57) makes a helpful distinction between retributive and restorative justice. Retributive justice indeed focuses on the legal process to achieve justice and could potentially create more obstacles in the process of reconciliation whilst restorative justice focuses on restoration and healing. However, restorative justice and retributive justice do not necessarily have to be understood as mutually exclusive and should therefore not be viewed as opposing or competing paradigms of justice (Allais 2012:332). Therefore, restorative justice should not be seen as a weaker form of justice. The fundamental difference between retributive and restorative justice is that it brings together all parties: namely the offender/perpetrator and the victim/survivor and focuses on how to go forward together (Thesnaar 2008:58.) In other words, it is future orientated. Another aspect of restorative justice is reparation that is focused on dialogue to restore relationships, because it is not only material things that were lost but also emotional things like dignity, sense of security and harmony. Although the parties involved cannot go back to the previous situation, they can start to build new and just relationships and communities. Such new and more just relationships are not possible without understanding it as part of the covenantal relationship Christians believes they have with God (Thesnaar 2008:61–63).

In 2016 Sharlene Swartz used the song, *Another Country*, as title for her book reflecting on how different groups (race, class, and age) view the past and envision the future. For her, such a project that results in a new or *another* country, depends largely on restitution. Her views on the meaning and importance of restitution, which I share, can be summarised as follows. Restitution is:

- One of the most important ways to deal with the past.
- Not a neutral word and therefore cannot be ignored as it provokes emotions and responsibility.
- Calling for actions that are grounded in a moral obligation. (Swartz 2016:5)
- Broader than legal action and needs new language that moves beyond that of victim and perpetrator. (Swartz 2016: xxviii)

One is tempted to ask what progress has been made regarding restitution in South Africa, after 30 years of democracy. According to Nyamnjoh, Swartz, Roberts, Gordon & Struwig (2020:13), South Africans are worlds apart when it comes to restitution on several levels, namely within racial groups, and the language we are employing for restitution. Despite this, they conclude that restitution can be framed as an individual and collective moral responsibility which rests on the shoulders of all South Africans (Nyamnjoh et. al 2020:36). If this is the case, how do we go forward without losing sight of the past, the hurt, injustice, and damaged relationships? The next section attempts to respond to this question by discussing the importance and complexity of remembering and doing so together (collective memory) followed by proposing intergenerational dialogue as a possible way of constructing collective memory.

Remembering together: Looking back while moving forward

The past is an important element of restitution; the action required to realise restitution helps not only to envision the future but to actively create it. However, there are questions regarding the past like: What constitutes the past? How do we access the past, in other words, what is an authentic and reliable way to engage with the past? Whose past counts because we remember differently? These are crucial questions that cannot be ignored. But I would like to start this discussion with another question: What shapes and informs our memory? In his quest for a response to the question if forgiveness is possible after political apartheid ended in South Africa, Forster (2020) emphasises the impact of social context on social identity. He explains that social identity is informed and shaped by different factors like race, culture, economic conditions, and religion (Forster 2020:52). I

wish to argue that the same could be said regarding remembering as part of restitution and, therefore, significant differences in these areas imply different understandings of the meaning and need for restitution. It further explains why people remember so differently and need each other to reconstruct the past in a way that makes a just future possible for all.

One way of dealing with the past is to forget about it – the belief exists that we should forget about the past because that impacts negatively on building a constructive future. However, I think that this is not an effective way of dealing with the past, because the past has left a legacy that is visible in our society and cannot be ignored. Swartz (2016:19) found that people are worried about what will happen in the future if we simply opt to stop addressing the past. Younger people express feelings of being "stuck" in a cycle that reproduces the vicious cycle of injustice and oppression. Others believe that if there is no restitution for the past, it will result in them being stripped of their human dignity. Moreover, if the past is not dealt with, it will cause us to be suspicious of each other. Apart from blaming themselves for their situation as a default position, others were conflicted about the past. "We have a past with a very long shadow over our future" (Swartz 2016:22).

The past and the present are presented to us in different ways, for instance, as statistics regarding especially economically related challenges like unemployment and poverty showing that South Africa is the most unequal society in the world. Forster (2020:52) acknowledges how the past is still present today and suggests that the term post-apartheid should rather not be used, since many South Africans still suffer the dire consequences of apartheid today.

Robert Vosloo (2012, 2015) focuses on memory and history as research area and presents valuable ideas about the meaning of these concepts and how they relate to today's reality, especially in the South African context. Since memory and history are two ways of engaging the past, clarity about the concepts is paramount. Vosloo (2012:215–216) argues that memory and history are fluid concepts of which both the connectedness and the boundaries should be recognised and confirmed – even more so in a context like South Africa that is imbued with narratives of historical injustice. To demonstrate the connectedness and difference between memory and

history, he refers to oral testimonies given at the TRC that became archived documented resources. These oral testimonies are not necessarily the same because aspects like language play a significant role in the translation process and could lead to misinterpretations and misrepresentations. Although memory and history should not be viewed as opposites, they should not be viewed as the same either, but rather as two distinct ways of representing or accessing the past (Vosloo 2012:2018).

Vosloo (2012:222) points out that memory is also vulnerable. I acknowledge the vulnerability of memory as part this discussion where I strongly argue for remembering the past to create a better and just future. Vosloo (2012) elaborates on the vulnerability of memory on a therapeutic level and describes it as wounded or sick memory, bringing memory in conversation with notions of trauma and forgiveness. Drawing on the work of Ricoeur (2004), Vosloo (2017:7–9) also discusses forgetting as an important aspect of memory. He offers three reasons why forgetting is important: 1) It would be impossible (unbearable) to remember everything; 2) blocked memories may be painful and forgetting may lead to healing; 3) memory can be abused and manipulated.

Mindful of the vulnerability of memory, it is argued that restitution is not possible without keeping the past and present in tandem. Therefore, it is important to engage with the question of how memory and history are related to the present. I wish to argue that, just as memory and history are related but not the same, the past and the present are connected although we may think of them as two distinct forms of time. In his inaugural lecture, Vosloo (2015) reflects on a future-orientated memory that takes both the past and the future seriously. Drawing on the work of Assman (2013), Vosloo (2015) points out the changed views of time in what he calls the "modern time regime". Four related issues are noted in relation to bringing about the change, of which two are important for this discussion, namely:

- The discontinuation between the different forms of time (past, present, and future) is described as the "breaking of time".
- The fact that the past is archived and "Professional experts now become the custodians of the past" (Vosloo 2015:6).

Both mentioned shifts regarding how time is viewed are problematic for the understanding of restitution in this article, where it is assumed that the past, the present, and the future are connected. The past, however, is much more than stored information (archival material) but also entails the lived experiences of people, and they need spaces where they can speak about it themselves. People's lived experiences and language (vocabulary) are, therefore, important for naming the past and creating the future. This question about who speaks on behalf of who is continuously tabled by Black Theology of Liberation (BTL). Tshaka (2020:8) explains; "… the preoccupation to speak for black people as if they are the perpetual students, while white people are the perpetual teacher, is a vexing problem that persists even today". He continues this line of thought by reminding us how the late Vuyani Vellem (2018) insisted on the importance of who our interlocutors are in formulating the theological questions of our day.

On a practical level, memory is linked with personal and collective identity (Vosloo 2012:223). Thesnaar (2013) underscore the collective nature of memory and connect it with collective trauma caused by the aftermath of apartheid. There has been a shift in the understanding of trauma as an individual experience towards viewing trauma as a collective experience by communities. Drawing on the work Halbwachs (1925), Thesnaar (2013:5) explains that individuals need society to construct the past and localize their memory. Collective memory provides a hermeneutical framework for meaningful communication. Apart from this shift in the understanding of trauma different dimensions of trauma are identified amongst others the spiritual dimension that brings to the fore the theodicy question of how to relate to a loving and merciful God amidst suffering (Thesnaar 2013:3). Therefore, remembering the past is also a theological matter as it touches us on an existential level, and we need theological sources like sacred texts and rituals to guide us in the process.

This short reflection points to the complexity of how the past and future could be identified as separate concepts and realities while at the same time they are intrinsically connected. For this reflection, diversity of conversation partners needs to include different generations; therefore, the next section will pay attention to intergenerational dialogue.

Another country in my eyes: Intergenerational dialogue

I would like to return to the song *Another Country* and indicate how the lyrics applies to this discussion.

The song reads as follows:

> If we could reach beyond the bounds of blame
> And make history blind
> And peel away the easy balm of words
> This is all we'd find:
> A mother's cries, fear in an old man's eyes,
> A child's blood on the walls
> No easy price to pay, no harder way to fall
>
> Another time, another place
> Another country, another state of grace
> You'll walk beside me, I'll tell you no lies
> And then you'll see another country in my eyes.
>
> There is a place for anger, things we won't forgive
> And I know it's not enough to face your shame with words you'll never live
> But let's begin to look within to where the future lies
> And find the strength to live beneath another country's skies
>
> Another time, another place
> Another country, another state of grace
> You'll walk beside me, I'll tell you no lies
> And then you'll see another country in my eyes

Although the lyrics could be interpreted differently, at the time of its release (1993) it was experienced as expressing something of the cruel past of apartheid in South Africa whilst at the same time formulating a vision for the future in a democratic dispensation. The first verse of the song especially reminds us of our hurtful past characterised by violence, loss, and tears. Several words/phrases in the chorus suggest proximity and its role in enabling another country. This, hopeful vision is closely related to the proximity of those who have been affected in different ways. The second

verse hints at how difficult is to forgive the wrongs of the past and suggest looking within for strength to create the future.

The question is, how do we move closer to each other? How do we get beside each other to eventually look each other in the eye? What kind of action is needed to enable us to look within and to the future? I suggest that part of on how to create a more authentic engagement with the past and envision a new or different future, is intentional intergenerational contact that could lead dialogue. Cloete (2019) argues for intergenerational ministry and draws on generational theory as presented by Jansen (1974). The understanding of how generations are formed and connected is also relevant for this discussion. Firstly, different generations could be linked to a certain period (e.g., 15 years) of time that shapes and informs their world view – hence, the expression of being a child of your time. Jansen (1974: 35) identifies five generations of which three are mentioned here, namely:

- The youth, who are aware change is needed but does not necessarily initiate it (years 15 to 30).
- The generation that initiates change (years 30 to 45).
- The dominant generation, who are in the position of authority (years 45 to 60).

I think this proposed trajectory has changed, because youth identify, articulate, and sometimes demand the change needed e.g., #RhodesMustFall (Bosch 2016). However, the coexistence of different generations facilitates change and is, therefore, responsible for continuation and discontinuation. This coexistence is, however, characterised by an asymmetric power relation because the different generations do not have equal positions and influence in society. Despite the unequal power relationship that exists between generations, Cloete (2019:69) argues that "Intergenerational engagement provides historical memory, bridging the gap with the past, and has the potential to put the future into meaningful perspective." It is precisely for these reasons that I think that intergenerational dialogue is indispensable for restitution, especially in South Africa. I do not present it as a magic act and, therefore, would like to pay attention to both the value and complexity of intergenerational dialogue in the following section.

The complexity and value of intergenerational dialogue

This section provides empirical evidence demonstrating the value of intergenerational dialogue for not only building relationships across generational lines but also impacting positively on everyday living in communities. Robinson (2021:413) proposes the value of intergenerational dialogue (including four generations of women) aimed at preventing HIV. In her study, intergenerational dialogue as a cultural medium is utilised to discuss sensitive topics around HIV, based on the lived experience of participants. The engagement does not merely entail the sharing of abstract information but rather represents a close personal encounter that could have a lasting impact on the life of participants.

Wyeness (2012:431) weighs in on the complexity of intergenerational participation and warns that we should not be ignorant about the unequal power relation between adults. For example, children, proposing that we should recognise that adults' participation may lead to children's voices being constrained or redirected. He, however, warns that, if the contribution of adults is pushed to the margins, it may lead to individualised children's participatory models that do not generate inclusiveness. Therefore, he proposes a conciliatory approach that focuses on interdependent relationships between adults and children. Drawing on the structural analysis of Alanen (2009), Wyeness (2012:435) confirms that although children and adults could be identified as two distinct categories, they do presuppose each other and, therefore, their generational identities are shaped in and through routine engagement.

Intergenerational dialogue among LGBTQ+ persons provide an interesting example of how necessary yet complex these encounters can be. In a study by Morris, Greteman & Westrate, different generations disagree on the use of the word *queer* to describe them as a community. While the younger generation almost assumes that it is an acceptable description, some of the adults disagree. A 74-year-old participant pointed out that he grew up fighting the word *queer*, while a 26-year-old believes that it is an umbrella term that is inclusive and, therefore, safe to use (Morris, Greteman & Westrate 2022:929). This specific example exposes the challenge that different generations often do not have access to each other's histories, experiences, and knowledge. Therefore, a key priority should be to arrange

and allow access for this generational history and knowledge to be shared and transmitted to the next generation.

During this dialogue, participants became aware of their positionality within history and community and were prompted to think critically about these aspects (Morris, Greteman & Westrate 2022:931). A last crucial finding is what I wish to call: Dismantling the myth of a safe or non-confronting space; as participants moved from assuming an Utopian safe space where they will always be understood to realising that they need language (vocabulary) to talk across differences and empathy to be able "to stay in the room" (Morris, Greteman & Westrate 2022:930).

Let me also provide some local examples of how the current generations articulate their lived experiences in our country and accompanied movements expressing their actions to bring about change. Thyssen (2022:96) explains how the generations referred to as "born frees" have their own struggle that finds expression in different youth organisations like progressive Youth Alliance, Economic Freedom Fighters, the South African Student Congress etc. His reference (quote) to the work and words of wa Azania (2018:8) gives a glimpse of how this generation came to realise that what was promised to them as part of a democratic South Africa was not realised:

> After years of waiting on the new country, the youth realise it was not coming – that they were the ones they had been waiting for…

This reference articulates something about how the different generations are connected and have a responsibility towards each other to create a better world, yet at the same time, how they can fail each other. Moreover, it seems each generation has its own battles and struggles to overcome and actualise change for themselves. Mahokoto (2022:72) reminds us that it is mainly black South Africans that are unemployed and poor today, while many white youths try to comprehend why the Dutch Reformed Church supported apartheid (Mahokoto 2020:75). It is, therefore, necessary to take note that the same generation can have different experiences and questions about the past, but that should not stop them engaging with each other to form a common vison for the future.

The second local example is about "white work". "White work" are described as aimed at "reconciliation and restitution through the cultivation of both spiritual capacities and a self-critical, historical consciousness amongst white participants" (Van der Riet & Verwoerd 2022:25). When I first heard about the "white work" in South Africa, I was deeply uncomfortable. I guess the wording was too close to the phrase "whites only" used during apartheid. Moreover, I simply did not trust the idea of white church people doing something on their own that could be for the common good. I however started to pay attention when I read that this project foregrounds and enables intergenerational dialogue in the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa. This intergenerational contact led to intragroup conflict as participants narrated their experiences, but it also enabled the formation of vocabulary and important skills and attitudes like listening, compassion, and non-judgement that could enable constructive dialogue. These conversations also brought to light several continuations and discontinuations in the experiences of the participants. A significant finding is what is called the "ignorance contract" according to which ignorance exists that leads to "… upholding the self-preservation of whiteness" (Van der Riet &Verwoerd 2022:31). Therefore, "white work" aim to prevent the tendency to forget about the past from prevailing.

Mahokoto (2020:79) explains that the words "sensitive, emotional and delicate" are used to close discussions about the injustices of the past. Drawing on the work of the late Russel Botman, he describes this tactic as "metaphorical locking devices" to close courageous conversations. To the contrary, "white work" aims to assist participants to take responsibility for the racialised past. Conflict was also experienced around issues like the lack of urgency that younger participants experience in older leaders in addressing the racialised ecclesiastic structures and practices (Van der Riet & Verwoerd 2022:34).

One of the important characteristics of faith communities is the fact they are communities that remember the past with the future in mind. In the Christian faith tradition, we remember, for instance, the death and the resurrection of Jesus not merely as historical facts, but we are reliving the past in some way. "The act of remembering serves as actualization of the past for a generation removed in time from those former events in order that they themselves can have an intimate encounter with the great act

of redemption. Remembrance equals participation" (Cockayne & Salter 2021:279). Christian rituals and practices are anchored in the community and the believe that God will not forsake nor forget his children. Moreover, memory in the Christian community is based on the actions of God in the past (Thesnaar 2013:8). Remembering God's action in the past brings hope in the present and courage to face the future. Therefore, faith communities are exceptionally well positioned to assist people with remembering the past and draw inspiration from it for action in the future.

Conclusion

This article argues that restitution is pivotal for reconciliation, which was the aim of the TRC. Restitution asks for more than just the admission of wrongdoing but for action that can lead to restoration where possible. Furthermore, we should address and engage the past through individual and especially collective memory. Narrating the past together through intergenerational dialogue may help us to not get stuck in the past but remember the past together while creating a hopeful future. In short, it can generate hope that looks to the future together. By doing so we open ourselves up to not see the past nor the future only from one (our) point of view and it opens new possibilities.

In South Africa we need intentional processes like intergenerational dialogue that could assist us to restore and confirm our humanity. Moreover, it can bring us closer (in proximity) to the past, helping us to name it from different perspectives while realising that both the past and future belong to all generations. It also has the potential to protect us from being captives of the (our) past and to reignite individual and communal commitment towards building a community where restitution becomes possible and visible.

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