

FORGIVENESS AND THE
MATERNAL BODY



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An African Ethics of Interconnectedness



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Essays on Exploring a Global Dream

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In our attempt to welcome as many authentic voices to this conversation as possible, we remain committed to an ongoing dialogue of ideas. As this meaningful discussion unfolds, we responsibly note that the interpretations and conclusions contained in this publication represent the views of the author or authors and not necessarily those of the John E. Fetzer Institute, its trustees, or officers.

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PREFACE

IN 1999, THE FETZER INSTITUTE began the Deepening the American Dream project as an attempt to sow the seeds of a national conversation about the inner life of democracy and the nature of our society as a community in relationship with the rest of the world. We set out to assemble a diverse group of leading thinkers and authors to explore, in conversation and in writing, the American dream and the spiritual values on which it rests.

During the life of the project, Fetzer has extended this unfolding dialogue in the public domain, in partnership with Jossey-Bass, by publishing and circulating original essays as free pamphlets and by holding public forums. We have been concerned about such questions as “What constitutes the American dream now?” “In what ways does the American dream relate to the global dream?” “In what ways might each inform the other?” and “How might we imagine the essential qualities of the common man and woman—the global citizen—who seek to live with the authenticity and grace demanded by our times?”

To date, we have given away close to eighty thousand pamphlets to a wide range of leaders in various fields around the country, including members of Congress. In the fall of 2005, Jossey-Bass published the first anthology of these essays, *Deepening the American Dream: Reflections on the Inner Life and Spirit of Democracy*.

In an effort to surface the psychological and spiritual roots at the heart of the critical issues that face the world today, we are extending this inquiry by creating a parallel series focused on exploring a global dream. But what might a global dream look like, and where might we start? In his book *God Has a Dream*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu offers a beginning point as he echoes the words of Martin Luther King Jr.:

God says to you, “I have a dream. Please help Me to realize it. It is a dream of a world whose ugliness and squalor and poverty, its war and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts, when there will be more laughter, joy, and peace, where there will be justice and

goodness and compassion and love and caring and sharing. I have a dream . . . that My children will know that they are members of one family, the human family, God's family, My family.”

In both series, we continue to invite leading thinkers from around the world to bring their gifts to bear on the world we live in, searching for the common resources that might, if held together, repair the isolations and separations that divide us today. We hope that these essays and the spirit on which they are founded will spark your own questions and conversations.

ROBERT F. LEHMAN
Chair of the Board
Fetzer Institute

GRATITUDES

I WROTE THIS ESSAY DURING a three-month fellowship at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (Stias). I am grateful to both the former director at Stias, Professor Bernard Lategan, and the current director, Professor Hendrik Geyer, for their encouragement and their considerable support. I would like to express my deep gratitude to Mark Nepo, former project officer at the Fetzer Institute, for inviting me to write this essay. Three years ago, when Mark asked me to consider writing an essay for the Exploring a Global Dream series, I was working on a proposal to the Fetzer Institute. I was interested in deepening understanding of the web of feelings and the transformative shifts that unfold and open up the possibility for forgiveness when conditions for respectful dialogue between former adversaries are created. It was a privilege to receive support for my project from the Fetzer Institute, and I benefited greatly from conversations I have had as a guest at the Institute over the years. My heartfelt appreciation goes especially to Wayne Ramsey, project officer at Fetzer. The approval of my proposal has opened up new avenues of inquiry in my work on forgiveness and empathy, and writing the essay has been a unique opportunity to explore some of these new ideas at a theoretical level. Above all, my thanks go to Megan Scribner, editor, and to all the other editors for the series.



*For my mother, Khathazile Nobantu,
and to the memory of my father, Wilberforce Tukela.
You are blessings in my life.
Thank you for the example of kindness and care
for others you set.*



FORGIVENESS AND THE MATERNAL BODY

AN AFRICAN ETHICS OF INTERCONNECTEDNESS

Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela

OVER THE COURSE OF DAYS, weeks, and months, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of South Africa featured stories of survivors and the family and friends of victims. These stories exposed the years of suffering endured by victims, some of whom were still alive bearing scars, physical and emotional, from the trauma they suffered during the years of apartheid. As they spoke about their profound and irreparable trauma, they revealed their struggle to speak about the trauma and their continuing struggle to overcome it.

For years, the apartheid government denied its oppression and systematic violence against black South Africans, the majority of the population. The public hearings of the TRC forced all South Africans to hear the mournful wails and cries of anguish of many of its victims. It was the most compelling testimony yet to the violent years of an oppressive government. Mothers, wives, grandmothers—the main transmitters of the memory of that traumatic past—came with their brokenness to overcome the silence. They were the ones who expanded our conceptual horizons about the power of public testimony. It was these women who introduced the language of forgiveness in their encounters with the perpetrators of gross

Note: The topic for this essay is based on insights drawn from preliminary findings from a study supported by funding from the Fetzer Institute for the project titled “Healing Trauma and Promoting Reconciliation: A Global Dialogue.”

human rights violations, people who had harmed or killed members of their families. They paved the way for a new language of hope in a society trying to heal itself. As a site of testimony, the TRC was transformed into a site for healing, and survivors became wounded healers.

The public hearings of the TRC helped the nation reconstruct itself and begin healing, and women's testimonial voices were in the center of that process. In this essay, I will draw from the public testimonies of the TRC and argue, from a constructionist perspective, that the stories these women survivors brought to the TRC were stories of healing and reconciliation. I will explore how gender and the maternal body were central in shaping this discourse of forgiveness and reconciliation—in other words, not only how processes of reconciliation may be gendered but also how they may be embodied. But first I want to present some perspectives on forgiveness in politics and discuss my own views on the concept. (For a detailed background into how the TRC worked, see Boraine, 2000, and Tutu, 1999.)

The Issue of the Unforgivable

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the role of truth commissions in dealing with past atrocities and the capacity for truth commissions to create opportunities for lasting peace. For the first time in the history of dealing with atrocities, forgiveness became an acceptable, albeit contested, outcome of reconciliation processes in divided societies emerging from violent conflict. The stories of forgiveness that emerged at TRC public hearings were primarily personal; their telling in public, however, imbued them with the significance of a collective enterprise inspired at its core by a communal ethics.

The debates about forgiveness in politics, however, have been characterized by notions of the “unforgivable,” a perspective inspired by the insights that Hannah Arendt described in her book *The Human Condition* (1998) and following her analysis of the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem (1994). Arendt argued that “radical evil,” the kinds of acts committed by perpetrators in the service of oppressive, murderous, and genocidal state policies, are unforgivable. After South African stories of forgiveness at TRC public hearings and after stories of reconciliation between survivors and victims of the Rwandan genocide on the one hand and neighbors who were involved in such acts on the other, the argument that some acts are unforgivable requires reexamination.

The examples of forgiveness and reconciliation witnessed in both South Africa and Rwanda suggest that the context of dealing with the

past—particularly the public testimonies and encounters between individual victims and perpetrators—creates the possibility for the emergence of forgiveness and gestures of reconciliation. Understanding what it is about this context that opens up the possibility for victims and surviving family members of victims to reach out to perpetrators and their families would enrich the debates about alternative strategies to peace building in the aftermath of mass violence and political conflict.

Forgiveness After Mass Atrocity: Some Reflections

The stories of forgiveness that emerged at the South African TRC are significant because they set a precedent. But even more important, the stories witnessed at the TRC hearings were illustrative of the critical attempts to bring together people from two sides of a violent and hateful past. Beyond the mere gesture of words of forgiveness, when forgiveness was expressed in the context of the dialogue about the past and in response to a remorseful perpetrator, forgiveness carried with it a sense of responsibility that was driven by a desire not for vengeance but for the higher priority of responsibility to the human community. In the case of the TRC, the public hearings imbued the dialogue process with a concept of human community that extended to others—even those responsible for gross human rights violations. This inclusive concept of humanity recognizes that as an expression of being human, remorse transcends the evil deeds of the perpetrator. The capacity to recognize the transcendence becomes an important bridge for the victim or surviving families of victims to reach out to the perpetrator.

Dialogue, of course, will not solve every problem faced by a society that has suffered sustained violence on a large scale; however, it can create avenues for broadening commonly accepted models of justice and healing deep fractures in a nation by unearthing, acknowledging, and recording a brutal past. Dialogue allows victims and survivors to revisit the sites of trauma, makes tangible the suffering of the victims, and confronts perpetrators with their inhumanity as well as their humanity. Through dialogue, both victims and the greater society come to recognize perpetrators as human beings who failed morally, whether through coercion, perverted convictions of a warped mind, or fear.

Far from relieving the pressure on perpetrators, recognizing the most serious criminals as human intensifies the pressure, because society can then hold them to greater moral accountability. Indeed, demonizing those who have committed horrific deeds as monsters lets them off too easily. Managed carefully, dialogue condemns—but not too hastily, lest it

foreshorten the accountability process and, perversely, excuse the criminal by dismissing him into the category of the hopelessly, radically other. Sustained, engaged, ordered dialogue forces an offender to unearth what moral sensibilities he has buried under a facade of “obedience to orders” or righteous “duty to my country” and to face what he has done in the sobering atmosphere of reflection on ordinary human lives now shattered. Therefore, dialogue invites the perpetrator to negotiate the chasm between his monstrousness and the world of the forgiven. The act of humanizing perpetrators is thus at once both punishment and rehabilitation. Finally, dialogue creates the possibility of setting the person’s actions, through testimony and witnessing, in the broader framework of the political-ideological context that may have supported and even directed his deeds.

On the scale of horrible things that can happen to people, there are some for which the language of apology and forgiveness may be entirely inappropriate. To say, however, that horrific deeds committed in the context of systematic human rights abuses by states are simply unforgivable does not capture the complexity and richness of all the social contexts within which gross human rights abuses are committed. In South Africa and in Rwanda, for example, despite the complex challenges that these two countries continue to face in terms of healing the past, the stories of forgiveness and reconciliation that have emerged have set a remarkable precedent in the history of atrocities. Thus while there may be value in recognizing and posting the limits of forgiveness, if such exist, some societies have found it more constructive to focus on discovering and nurturing the conditions that make forgiveness first conceivable and then ultimately possible.

Of course, in order to set conditions for forgiveness, it does indeed bear asking, when someone has committed the kind of “radically evil” acts that Arendt had in mind, what does remorse mean? How do we judge the genuineness of that remorse? How does one forgive, unless one can find claims of remorse credible? In addition, how does one find them credible unless one first attempts to understand why the perpetrator did what he did? How do we know that the signs of alleged contrition are not simply the result of the perpetrator’s having been caught or of changes in the society that have destroyed his power base and support structures and have left him vulnerable?

Some of these questions have to do with the moral possibility—the psychological and epistemological possibility—of achieving authentic remorse in the wake of having performed the unthinkable. “After such knowledge, what forgiveness?” T. S. Eliot asks in the poem “Gerontion”

(1920, line 33). The question is quite legitimate. Yet it remains equally legitimate that when perpetrators do in fact express regret, guilt, or contrition, however it may be ascertained, what seems to lie, as Nicholas Tavuchis (1991) has put it, “beyond the purview of apology” (p. 21), and what Arendt (1998) has referred to as unforgivable, can in fact be transformed from an unforgivable deed into a forgivable one. In other words, the narrative that unfolds in the dialogue about the past may be along the lines of “this has happened, and we must find ways to move forward.” Philosophical questions such as the “moral inappropriateness” of forgiveness can and should give way and be subsumed to *human* questions, for in the end we are a society of people and not of ideas, a fragile web of interdependent humans, not of stances.

In this essay, I will draw illustrative examples from the TRC to discuss the unique aspects of encounters between, on the one hand, perpetrators who expressed remorseful apologies and, on the other, surviving family members of victims who responded to perpetrators with forgiveness. Specifically, I am interested in exploring the meaning of forgiveness when the forgivers are women and when both the forgiving party and the perpetrator are black Africans. I will explore how traumatic memory may be transformed through the maternal body as cultural and historical narrative and how an ethics of responsibility may be signified by the figure of the maternal body.

Embodiment of Forgiveness: A New and Unexamined Expression of Women’s Subjectivity?

The story that will provide the framework for my discussion concerns forgiveness of a black former police informant who infiltrated a group of seven young black activists from one of Cape Town’s townships during apartheid rule in South Africa. The former police informant pretended to be a member of the then banned African National Congress (ANC) sent by his commander from the ANC to train the young activists. With no previous military training, the unsuspecting activists were given a crash course by the police informant in the use of firearms. The plan—a strategy used by apartheid security police throughout the country—was to train young black activists, and once the trainers felt the activists were ready “to fight the system,” they would be lured into a police trap and killed. These incidents were reported in the media as “terrorist attacks” that were successfully foiled by the police. The aim was to instill fear in South Africa’s black population, especially the anti-apartheid movement, and to portray the security police as efficient in fighting opponents of the

state. The truth behind these kinds of stories was clearly revealed at TRC hearings, and the story of the murder of seven black activists by the security police became emblematic of the sinister operations of the security police during apartheid rule.

When the former police informant appeared before the TRC, he requested to meet with the families of the slain men whom he had lured to their deaths at the hands of the apartheid government security police. I was coordinator of the public hearings of the Human Rights Violations Committee in Cape Town, and I was responsible for preparing the families of the slain men for their meeting with the former police informant (for more background, see Gobodo-Madikizela, 2008, 2009). I will not give full details of the encounter between the mothers of the slain men and the former informant (the perpetrator) in this essay. I will focus only on a specific moment during the encounter between the perpetrator and the families of the victims, and I will then explore the relationship between the perpetrator's apology and the expressions of forgiveness that the mothers signaled for him.

The perpetrator was accompanied by his lawyer when he met with the families of the slain victims. The families of the victims included their mothers, siblings, and members of their extended families. After the perpetrator explained his reasons for requesting the meeting with the families, only the mothers of the victims spoke. They were visibly angry, and they told the perpetrator that he had behaved like "a wolf dressed in sheep's skin" and that by setting a trap for their sons, he had "sold his own blood" to the white apartheid government. Observing the event as it unfolded, the man cast a lonely figure. He was shaking in his chair, and his face was nervously twitching. At one point during the meeting, he looked at the mothers, and addressing them as "my parents," he asked for their forgiveness "from the bottom of my heart."

The room fell silent after he spoke, and after some time, one of the mothers responded to him as follows: "You are the same age as my [murdered] son Christopher. I want to tell you, my son, that I, as Christopher's mother, I forgive you, my son. I want you to go home knowing that I have forgiven you. Yes, I forgive you; I am at peace. Go well, my son." Some of the mothers and family members of the slain men also *gestured* their forgiveness. As the perpetrator went around the room shaking everyone's hand, some of the mothers got up from their seats and embraced him.

In the years since this encounter, I have interviewed the family members of the victims who expressed forgiveness for the police informant to try and gain a deeper understanding of the process of forgiveness in the

context of such irreparable loss. In my recent research interviews, however, my questions have focused on all aspects of the turning points that opened up the possibility for expression of forgiveness, including questions concerning what physical sensations the mothers experienced in their encounter with the perpetrator. Themes of an embodied response have emerged, and the mothers have described these themes as “signs” that prompted their feelings of empathy and then forgiveness. The bodily experience has been described as emanating from the womb area, and the word that the mothers have used to describe this bodily response is the Xhosa word *inimba*. *Inimba*, which may be translated as “umbilical cord,” can be interpreted to mean the feeling of motherhood.

What feels exceptional about *inimba*, as explained by the mothers, is that it allowed for an experience of empathy for their sons’ killer and, ultimately, forgiveness for him. To feel *inimba* is to feel as a mother does for a child when her child is in pain. *Inimba* may be triggered even when one’s child is thousands of miles away—as, for example, when a mother “feels” her child’s desperation and longing for home or “feels” that her child is in some sort of trouble. Thus for the mothers who felt *inimba* in response to the perpetrator’s begging for forgiveness, they were responding to him as if he were their own son.

I now want to explore the significance of the maternal body in this forgiveness encounter. Lesley Saunders (cited in Waterhouse, 1993) writes, “Far from being biologically disadvantaged, women are naturally privileged; their pro-creativity is both prototype and archetype, the psychophysical ground for all creativity” (p. 110). One might ask, When is a mother rendered an ideation: “*the* mother”? At what point is the body of a woman who is also a mother or who has borne a child rendered emblematic, paradigmatic: “*the* maternal body”? It seems that there are different, albeit overlapping, senses of the maternal at play here: the womb as materiality (flesh, biology); the womb as a symbol, idea, or metaphor (as potentiality, as creative source, and so on); and the womb as *experienced* and as the possible expression of one or more subjectivities. The boundaries between these different senses of the womb are by no means fixed or clear.

According to Elizabeth Grosz (1994, p. ix), there is no dichotomy between the “‘real,’ material body” and cultural and historical representations of the body. Rather, bodies are constituted—and produced—by such representations. Representations, in turn, are reinforced, and in some instances challenged and subverted, by lived bodies. Grosz also observes that bodies “function interactively and productively. They act and react. They generate what is new, surprising, unpredictable. . . .” (p. xi).

Ruth Waterhouse (1993) echoes this thinking when she writes:

Thus, that which has been most objectified—our corporeality—is to become the major source of our subjectivity and agency, subject and object reunited and no longer split by the Western dualist tradition. . . . Devoid of patriarchal misrepresentation, the female body would be revealed in its natural, uncoded form, centering on the womb which bleeds and drips, reproduces and ceases in time with the seasons, or the phases of the moon. But . . . the human body is never free from signification; it is always circumscribed by layers of cultural meaning, ritual and custom [pp. 110–111].

What is the place here of cultural representations of maternal bodies and cultural contexts in which bodies are embedded? If *inimba* might be regarded as a “new and unexamined form of expression of women’s subjectivity,” can it also be regarded as a new and examined form of subjectivity constructed, at least in part, *culturally*? It seems that at least a consideration of the cultural making of bodies, and consequently embodied experiences, is called for. I should point out here that by raising the question of culture, my aim is not to racialize the experience of *inimba*, thus falling into the traps of reductionism and essentialism. In my discussions of empathy and its association with other cultural forms of human connectedness (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2008, 2009), such as *ubuntu*, an African concept that describes the essence of humanness and represents an ethics of care for others, I have argued that empathy is a *human* experience. The concept of *ubuntu*, to which I shall return later in the essay, is imbued with cultural meaning because linguistically it is located within the African language. The essence of the concept, however, describes an ethic that is fundamental in human relationships of care. It is a communal ethic based on values embodied within a framework of relational empathy, and it traverses cultural, religious, and racial boundaries. Whereas the phenomenon of empathy has been defined and analyzed in the field of psychology and its subdisciplines, including cognitive psychology, psychoanalysis, and neuropsychology, as well as in phenomenology, an area that cries out for attention is a focus on cultural relational processes as a starting point of inquiry for understanding the meaning and expression of empathy. The value of conceptualizing empathy in a cultural context is that this context provides the vocabulary for articulating a wider range of meanings and expressions of empathy, including the expression of empathy through the body, that is, the embodiment of empathy. Therefore, *inimba*, as a concept that captures the embodied meaning of empathy, opens up new conceptual understandings of the meaning of empathy.

The feeling of *inimba* described by the mothers of the victims in their encounter with the man who lured their sons to their deaths invites us to consider the extent to which the body might be relevant as a site of culturally specific inscription of the meaning of empathy. *Inimba*, an embodied connection with one's own child emanating from the womb but in this case evoked to establish connection to someone who is not one's son *as if he were one's own son*, is reaching out to an Other who is a perpetrator in order to draw him into community with the wounded. The response is a way of seeking repair and restoring meaning after the disruption caused by trauma.

Following on this, then, one might ask, How does the phenomenon of *inimba* register? What is the experiential status of *inimba*, and is this embodied empathic response possible only when the one who seeks forgiveness and the forgiver both share an African cultural background? Would the mothers' forgiveness be expressed through an embodied experience of *inimba* had the perpetrator been white? Alternatively, would the embodied expression of *inimba* have been qualitatively different for a white perpetrator? To begin to answer these questions, I will consider other examples of forgiveness drawn from the TRC that present different scenarios and diversity in the race and cultural background of the victims and perpetrator.

The first story is based on an encounter between widows of black men who were killed by the apartheid state's security police and the head of the covert operations unit under the apartheid government's security apparatus, who was white. The head of covert operations, the perpetrator, masterminded the bombing operation in which the widows' husbands were killed. Following their encounter with the perpetrator, the widows described being "moved" and "touched" by the perpetrator's appeal for their understanding during the presentation of his testimony to the TRC concerning the murder of their husbands.

"I was profoundly touched by him," one of the widows told me. She explained her response during the women's meeting with the perpetrator:

I couldn't control my tears. I could hear him, but I was overwhelmed by emotion, and I was just nodding, as a way of saying yes, I forgive you. I hope that when he sees our tears, he knows that they are not only tears for our husbands, but tears for him as well. . . . I would like to hold him by the hand and show him that there is a future and that he can still change.

The act of forgiveness in this encounter does not issue out of the womb; that is, it is not preceded by a feeling of *inimba*. It is important to

note, however, that the tears and the feeling of being “moved” and “overwhelmed” imply a deeply embodied response. Empathy in these examples of forgiveness can be seen as a response to the existential distress of the perpetrators because of the disruption they have caused in the lives of the victims. The embodied aspects of this response suggest that empathy is experienced and communicated not through words alone but also through the body. In this sense, then, the body can be seen as a medium of conscious and unconscious perception in which victim and perpetrator are engaged in a dance of reciprocal responses. This dance of reciprocity is inspired by the ethical stance that inescapably arises when, on the one hand, the perpetrator confronts his guilt and shame for the pain and suffering he caused and, on the other, the victim acknowledges the perpetrator’s remorseful regret.

Earlier in the essay, I referred to *inimba* as an ethical response in which the wounded seek repair and restoration of meaning in the aftermath of trauma. It is perhaps more than this. This search for repair may not necessarily be an effort pursued consciously as such. Rather, the response transcends the bounds of human possibility, for it emerges unexpectedly and unfolds as the unexpected connection with the murderer of one’s child. Yet although the connection with the Other happens unexpectedly, the encounter requires openness from both sides in order for the unexpected to “fall” into the pathway of empathy. Here, then, is another example of forgiveness that illustrates this approach of openness to the encounter with a perpetrator.

Dawie Ackerman’s wife was killed in a bombing operation that targeted a white congregation at a church in Cape Town. The killers of Ackerman’s wife were members of the military wing of a left-wing anti-apartheid organization, the Pan-African Congress (PAC), whose rallying cry was “One Settler, One Bullet.” After listening to his wife’s killers at a TRC public hearing, Ackerman asked the perpetrators to turn around and speak directly to him about what happened when they bombed the church. He then told them that he had read the statements of apology that they submitted to the TRC but that they should face him while expressing their apologies at the TRC public hearing. He explained that he wanted them to express their apologies “in your own language,” even though he did not understand or speak it. This seems to suggest that he wanted the perpetrators to express themselves in the most authentic native form. Clearly, Ackerman’s interest is not in the linguistic meaning of the men’s words, because he does not understand the language in which the apology is spoken. Rather, he is interested in the authenticity of their expression of the apology. This calls to mind Emanuel Levinas’s

views concerning the function of an apology as an expression of responsibility to another person's pain: "In its expressive function language precisely maintains the other—to whom it is addressed, whom it calls upon or invokes" (Levinas, 1969, p. 73).

Beneath the surface of the TRC hearings, beneath the level of mere verbal exchange, something else was going on that constituted a powerful transfer of inner realities between killer and victimized relative. In these situations, the killer's words are, in a sense, performative utterances, almost palpable potent instruments that accomplish the reorganization of the victim's inner reality even as they come out, regardless of whether or not the words spoken are understood at the linguistic level. It is not the language in which the killer chooses to speak the words that makes the words so powerful; it is the very fact of the recognition of the Other's pain.

After each of the perpetrators had spoken directly to him and apologized, Ackerman then asked them if they saw his wife when they stormed into the church to conduct their attack six years earlier. "My wife was sitting next to me in the front pew," he told them. "She was wearing a long blue coat—" His voice began to falter before he finally broke down and began to weep: "I want you to tell me if you saw her," he said. "Do you remember firing at my wife? If you don't remember I will accept it, but I want to know if you saw her, if you remember firing at her."

In this encounter between a white victim and black perpetrators, the memory of the traumatic violation is confronted and brought into the present. The goal of these TRC encounters was to transform the relationship that victims and perpetrators have with the traumatic past and with each other. When Ackerman was interviewed after the TRC public hearing, he explained that he had visited the killers of his wife to show that he had forgiven them.

There is something uncanny, even perverse, about victims gaining a sense of repair and restoration by connecting with, rather than separating from, a perpetrator. Yet these encounters open up the possibility for the beginning of a new phase of relationships, effectively changing the story of past trauma—not so much by burying it but rather by transforming its meaning from a story of violation and human destruction to a story of transcendence and human connection. Again in this story we witness the primacy of the body in the encounter—the turning around of the perpetrators to face the victims, to face, as it were, the damage they caused, the engagement with the performative aspects of words of apology rather than their linguistic meaning, and the victims' embodied emotional response.

As all these examples of empathic encounters and forgiveness demonstrate, the body is grounded in relationality and experienced in community with others. The body is not just a site for cultural narrative; it is also a site for ethical reflection, a site, one might argue, for transformation. Emanuel Levinas's understanding of the ethical stance in relation to the Other is that the presence of the Other before us should evoke a sense of responsibility for the suffering Other and that this responsibility should be enacted through a framework of relational responsibility: responsibility for the Other. Such a framework requires a process of moral imagination, a certain intentional openness to the possibility of reaching out beyond the self and toward the Other. What is interesting about Levinas's position is that responsibility for the Other requires that I bear the Other "like a maternal body" (Guenther, 2006, p. 6). To bear someone *like* a maternal body suggests that one need not be a mother or even a woman to bear responsibility for the Other. Thus for Levinas, the "maternal body" is a metaphor to highlight a more general horizon for his ethics of care and responsibility and as a context for the intersubjective possibility of forgiveness.

So, for instance, the response of forgiveness by Dawie Ackerman for the killers of his wife can be seen as an act that brings together essentially the embodied aspects of the encounter with Levinas's conceptualization of the response as representational of maternal care. From this we can then apply Levinas's broader understanding of the link between the maternal body and ethical responsibility toward the Other to a conceptualization of *inimba* as a metaphor for the human capacity for an embodied empathic engagement with the Other. Thus the association of *inimba* with the Levinasian conceptualization of the maternal body allows for a clearer and expanded vision of the role and meaning of *inimba* in encounters between victims and perpetrators. In the following section, I will elaborate on this relationship between *inimba*, the maternal body, and Levinasian ethics.

The Ethics of Emanuel Levinas

In her book *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction*, Lisa Guenther (2006) explains, "This distance implied by the word *like* in this phrase, 'like a maternal body,' opens up a gap between maternity as a biological fact and as an ethical response" (p. 7). Levinas, of course, by including men in the ethical imperative to bear Others, uses maternity as a metaphor for ethics of responsibility toward others. What follows is a consideration of a view of the maternal body as *signification*,

conceived of as an embodiment of ethics. Significations and representations of course shape lived experiences, while lived experiences are in many ways more ambivalent, in many instances flying in the face of signification.

For Guenther (2006), Hélène Cixous's notions of "masculine" and "feminine" economies (Cixous, 1994)—which do not purport to equate masculinity and femininity with anatomical distinctions—"account for different ways of living the body, different modalities of fleshly existence" (Guenther, 2006, p. 55). Guenther argues that "while embodiment may seem only obscurely relevant to paternity, maternity implies an ethics *in and of the flesh*" (p. 95). In Levinas's ethics of responsibility for the Other and his use of the maternal body as a symbol for this responsibility, Guenther recognizes a feminist potential. However, she notes that although "Levinas does not exclude men from the ethical imperative to bear Others, his use of maternity as metaphor for ethics in general threatens to appropriate the generous gift of maternity without acknowledging women's very particular, historical, and embodied experiences as mothers" (p. 6). Guenther is right to make this point. Levinas, however, has introduced into his vision of ethics insights that allow us to think of the maternal as fundamental in both ethics and politics and to conceptualize the maternal and paternal body as bearing some significance for the embodied politics of forgiveness in the aftermath of trauma. The *birth* of something new—the essence of forgiving—is an idea that is very consistent with the imperative "to bear Others" and to direct them toward pursuing new horizons. And that the maternal body is at the center of this theorization is a refreshing vision of the possibility of transformation in politics.

In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas (1998) elaborates on his use of the maternal to designate his ethics of responsibility for the Other:

In proximity, the absolutely Other, the stranger [*l'Etranger*] whom "I have neither conceived nor given birth to," I have already on my arms, already I bear him. . . . He has no other place, [is] . . . exposed to the cold and to the heat of the seasons. Being reduced to having recourse to me: this is the homelessness [*l'apatride*] or strangeness of the neighbour. It falls upon me, makes me incumbent [p. 91].

The notion that we are "commanded to become like a maternal body for the Other" (Guenther, 2006, p. 7) is, of course, relevant to the experience of *inimba* described earlier. The mothers of the slain victims bear the former police informant—who, as their sons' killer, should be the Other and Persecutor exemplified—as they would their own child. As they

would forgive their own child, they forgive this man; they assume responsibility for him and in so doing bring him back into the communal fold where his humanity might be restored. This leads me to contemplate possible parallels between an African ethics of interconnectedness, *ubuntu*, and Emanuel Levinas's ethics and the extent to which both systems are signified by the figure of the maternal body.

In a cultural milieu where connectedness to others is an essential feature of human relationships, an individual's identity extends beyond self-focused individualism. A person's identity is shaped by relationships with others and is inextricably intertwined with their identities. This shared humanity with others is captured in the African concept of *ubuntu* (Battle, 1997; Mbiti, 1978; Murithi, 2009). As an ethical framework, *ubuntu* is part of the deep cultural heritage of African people based on communitarian principles. It inspires the following concept of identity: "I am because we are." This philosophy of profound connectedness to others has been contrasted with Descartes's famous quote, "I think, therefore I am," which captures the individualism usually associated with Western culture. The ethos of *ubuntu* entails an appreciation of and commitment to one's community. Like Levinasian ethics, the guiding principles of *ubuntu* are based on a morality that is Other-directed, concerned with promoting the ethical vision of compassion and care for others. Therefore, *inimba*, as an expression in which one extends oneself to reach out to the Other, signifies the expression of *ubuntu* through the body.

Ultimately, the following questions remain: To what extent do the body as signification and the body as experienced overlap or diverge? To what extent is one influenced by the other in mutually enriching ways? If the existential phenomenologists are correct in "locating consciousness and subjectivity in the body itself" (Young, 1990, p. 161), how do different lived, embodied experiences and different bodies give rise to different subjectivities? And what of bodies that experience in unanticipated ways and give rise to unanticipated subjectivities? "To write about the body," Gail Weiss (1999) observes, "is a paradoxical project" (p. 1).

In writing about the body and the embodiment of phenomena such as empathy and forgiveness, one should avoid treating the body as a singular entity separated from events around it (Weiss, 1999). There are other variables, other shades of lived experience that must be taken into account when contemplating what potentialities motherhood and the maternal body might give rise to. Motherhood has undergirded or motivated everything from murderous vengefulness to radical forgiveness. This complex matrix of emotions is captured most poignantly by Liz Stanley's portrayal of Charles Goddard's ceramic sculpture on wood of

the Boer (white Afrikaner) mother in her 2006 book about commemorative sites and concentration camps of the South African Anglo-Boer War. The sculpture shows a woman with sunken eyes and a face that simultaneously expresses pain, grief, and anger. On closer examination, the woman's face is composed of very small contorted faces of babies, with tiny baby hands around her neck. Reflecting on this representation of a Boer mother, Stanley writes:

When looking at Goddard's Boer mother, it is possible to see grief and mourning sunk into sorrowing pain, to view it as the embodiment of suffering. When looking again, it is possible to see grief projected into vengeful anger, to view it as the embodiment of retribution. But what leads one to be seen rather than the other? . . . Is she now a woman who grieves and mourns, who engages sympathies, occasions empathy and invites restitution? Or is she instead a woman expressing anger and vengeance who uses the deaths of children to support white supremacist politics? Her children certainly died—but what does this emblematic Afrikaner that Goddard has represented *do* with this down the years that followed? [p. 25]

Conclusion

Granting forgiveness may be a principled commitment to a communal ethic based on values embodied within a certain kind of “cultural” framework. Such a framework would advocate care and responsibility for the Other. Thus the capacity for forgiveness in transitioning democracies may require a process of moral imagination, to paraphrase John Paul Lederach (2005), which, as I noted earlier, would mean an intentional openness that allows one to reach out beyond the self and toward the Other. The maternal body signifies this ethical vision of the self-transcendent position.

The image of people facing each other, the mother of a victim and the man who killed him, is extraordinary. This is something from which some may want to avert their gaze, because this is not a normal encounter. The complexity of this meeting is something that cannot be explained adequately. Perhaps there is a word that captures the meaning of these encounters between victims and perpetrators: *grasp*. To *grasp* means both *understanding* and *taking hold of*. In order to take hold of something, one has to *reach* for it. And here may be found echoes of the phenomenological notion of intentionality.

When adversaries face each other, innumerable possibilities—both destructive and restorative, and then some that cannot be reduced to

oversimplified categories—arise, both “within” and “between” bodies. That is to say, those on each side of the encounter will be *affected*; whether they will necessarily be affected in a way that will move them not only to forgiveness but also to a new relationship or in the opposite direction cannot be predicted with certainty. The potential for the unexpected, unforeseen, and thoroughly creative, endemic to the human condition, is always present.

The reasons to *face* the wronged or offending Other or to search that person out are often clearly stated as to elicit “the truth,” to ask for forgiveness, and the like. And yet there seems to be more in play (for example, Dawie Ackerman’s telling his wife’s killers what she was wearing when she was killed and his asking whether they remember shooting her; the black police informant’s request to face the parents of the men he lured to their deaths). It is a *grasping* for *understanding* that is inherent in these intentional acts, which is also a tacit recognition that understanding must involve the Other and is dependent on the Other.

Emanuel Levinas’s ethics of responsibility to the Other have given us an important framework within which to contemplate these dialogic encounters toward understanding in the aftermath of mass trauma and systematic violence. By locating the essence of our ethical responsibility in the heart of the body, as symbolized by the maternal body, Levinas’s ethical observations call us to respond to the traumatic disruption of the past not with the moral force of righteous aggression but with the moral force of love, *as we would the child from our womb*. In this context, the image of *inimba* is an evocative one because it draws us to respond to the suffering of the Other as if the Other were the child that one carried in one’s womb. Thus the body, be it paternal or maternal, points us toward understanding the body as a site for ethical engagement, a site for forging human links across time and space with the Other—even an Other responsible for one’s irreparable loss.

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CULMINATION OF THE EXPLORING A GLOBAL DREAM SERIES

THIS ESSAY BY PUMLA GOBODO-MADIKIZELA BRINGS to a close the Fetzer Institute's Exploring a Global Dream series. Through this project, various authors have brought their wisdom and experience to address the question "How might we imagine the essential qualities of the common person—the global citizen—who seeks to live with the authenticity and grace demanded by our times?" Gobodo-Madikizela's essay is a vivid and thoughtful reflection on the incredible depth of empathy that enables victims of the atrocities of South African apartheid to recognize the humanness of the perpetrators. She evokes the word *inimba* in her native Xhosa language, which can be translated as "umbilical cord," to locate the origins of the response of empathy in the body. Through this embodied empathy, victims are able to offer forgiveness and call on the perpetrators to take responsibility for their actions. It is a remarkable ending to an engaging and powerful series.

From 2003 to 2010, the Fetzer Institute has been fortunate to engage a wide range of thoughtful leaders from many fields in this project. As you can see from the names and titles on the list of publications in the next section, many aspects and experiences of a dream for a better world have been explored. As we draw to a close a project that asked people from all walks of life to explore the relationship of the inner life of spirit and the outer life of service, we ask you to reflect on what constitutes your dream for our world today.

We are grateful to Jossey-Bass for its partnership in creating these pamphlets, over one hundred thousand of which have been shared with thought leaders around the world, many of whom have praised the quality workmanship, flexibility, and creativity that served to enhance the content of the essays. And our deepest gratitude goes to all the authors who brought such a rich, thoughtful perspective to their essays.



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Anthology on Deepening the American Dream

Deepening the American Dream: Reflections on the Inner Life and Spirit of Democracy, edited by Mark Nepo. A collection of reflections on the spiritual meaning of being American in today's world from some of our most respected thinkers: Gerald May, Jacob Needleman, Elaine Pagels, Robert Inchausti, Parker Palmer, and others. The book explores the inner life of democracy and the way citizens are formed and considers the spiritual aspects of the American dream—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

This thought-provoking volume of essays challenges us to ponder the American Dream and discuss the spiritual values that can help transform the country. The interplay between history, spirituality, and current events is what makes this volume such a soul-stirring experience. It is indeed hopeful and salutary that this cultural document puts so much emphasis on spiritual values as being crucial to the health and enduring value of democracy in the twenty-first century.

Spirituality & Health Magazine

Deepening the American Dream communicates a determined and magnanimous solidarity to a fragmented age of confusion and escalating resentments. The collection is . . . a gesture of peace and goodwill that summons us to come together. It's a powerfully uplifting book that shines light in the direction of incarnate hope. That rare happening of people actually talking to each other. I highly recommend it.

David Dark, *The Christian Century*

Essays on Deepening the American Dream

Essay #1, Winter 2003: Two Dreams of America, Jacob Needleman. The inaugural essay in the series posed an important question: “What of the American dream?” Is it a vision or an illusion? Do we need to deepen this dream or awaken from it? Can anyone doubt the importance of this question? In one form or another, it is a question that has been gathering strength for decades, and it now stands squarely in the path not just of every American but, such is the planetary influence of America, of every man and woman in the world. What really is America? What does America mean?

Essay #2, Spring 2003: From Cruelty to Compassion: The Crucible of Personal Transformation, Gerald G. May. This essay is a compelling journey to the perennial bottom of who we are, at our best and our worst, and how to use that knowledge to live together from a place of spirit and compassion.

Essay #3, Fall 2003: Footprints of the Soul: Uniting Spirit with Action in the World, Carolyn T. Brown. This essay speaks deeply about the gifts and frictions that exist between our authentic self and the society we live in and grow in, and how returning to the well of spirit keeps forming who we are in the world.

Essay #4, Winter 2004: Created Equal: Exclusion and Inclusion in the American Dream, Elaine H. Pagels. In this essay, the renowned religious historian Elaine Pagels provides a convincing exploration of the ways we have interpreted equality as expressed in the Declaration of Independence. More than ever, she says, we need to ask, who is included in the American dream? What do we make of this dream in a waking reality? How shall we take this vision to shape our sense of who we are—as a people, a nation, a community? She calls us to deepen our understanding of the American dream and commit ourselves to extending it to all people worldwide who would share in its promises, blessings, and responsibilities.

Essay #5, Spring 2004: Breaking the Cultural Trance: Insight and Vision in America, Robert Inchausti. This essay is a convincing look at how we see and, just as important, how living in America has impaired our deepest seeing; it also recognizes education as the sacred medicine that is entrusted in each generation with restoring the deeper sight that lets us know that we are each other.

Essay #6, Fall 2004: The Grace and Power of Civility: Commitment and Tolerance in the American Experience, David M. Abshire. In a time

when our country is more polarized than ever, David Abshire, a former ambassador to NATO and a historian himself, traces the history of commitment and tolerance in an effort to revitalize the respect, listening, and dialogue that constitute civility. “Which . . . is the true America?” he asks. “The America of division or the America of unity? The America of endless public and partisan warfare or the America of cooperation, civility, and common purpose? The America of many or the America of one?”

Essay #7, Winter 2005: Opening the Dream: Beyond the Limits of Otherness, Rev. Charles Gibbs. This essay explores America’s relationship with the rest of the world. As executive director of the United Religions Initiative, Rev. Gibbs proposes that “the future of America cannot be separated from the future of the rest of the world. There are no longer chasms deep enough or walls high enough to protect us or to protect others from us. So what do we do? We might begin by seeing ourselves as citizens of Earth and children of the abiding Mystery at the heart of all that is.”

Essay #8, Spring 2005: The Politics of the Broken-Hearted: On Holding the Tensions of Democracy, Parker J. Palmer. With his usual penetrating insight, Parker Palmer speaks to the conflicts and contradictions of twenty-first-century life that are breaking the American heart and threatening to compromise our democratic values.

Essay #9, Winter 2006: The Almost-Chosen People, Huston Smith and Kendra Smith. In this far-reaching essay, Huston Smith, a renowned historian of religion, and his wife, the scholar Kendra Smith, trace the American sense of liberty as a spiritual concept that has both inspired us and eluded us through a checkered history in which we have trampled many in the name of the very equality and freedom we hold so sacred. They trace the erosion of the American dream in the twentieth century and look toward our inevitable membership in the global family of nations that is forming in the world today.

Essay #10, Spring 2006: Prophetic Religion in a Democratic Society, Robert N. Bellah. Steering between what the distinguished sociologist of religion Robert Bellah calls “Enlightenment fundamentalists” on the one hand and religious fundamentalists on the other, this essay argues against both the common secularist view that religion should be excluded from public life and the dogmatic view that would exclude all secular and religious views except one. Instead it proposes a more moderate, nuanced, and robust role for faith and religion in the common life of America and Americans.

Essay #11, Fall 2006: The Common Cradle of Concern, Howard Zinn.

In the winter of 2004, the legendary historian Howard Zinn explored the nature of being an American today with Mark Nepo through several conversations. This essay gathers the insights of those conversations, edited by both Zinn and Nepo, into a meditation on America, moral progress, and the myths of freedom.

Essay #12, Spring 2007: The American Dream and the Economic Myth, Betty Sue Flowers.

This provocative essay examines the limitations and deeper opportunities of the economic myth that governs our society today. It asks how we might articulate a common good through which we might treat each other as citizens and not just consumers. We are challenged to imagine ourselves anew: “We can’t hold up a myth of community and wait for it to take hold. We have to work within our own myth, however impoverished it seems to us. To deepen the American dream is to engage the imagination—to create better stories of who we are and who we might become.”

Essay #13, Fall 2007: The Truth Can Set Us Free: Toward a Politics of Grace and Healing, Rev. W. Douglas Tanner Jr.

The founder of the Faith and Politics Institute traces his own journey, from growing up in the South to his own formation as a spiritual leader to his commitment to supporting the inner life of those called to govern our country.

Essay #14, Winter 2008: Is America Possible? A Letter to My Young Companions on the Journey of Hope, Vincent Harding.

This elder of the civil rights movement suggests that the dream is never finished but endlessly unfolding. He suggests that America’s most important possibility for the world is not to dominate, threaten, or compete but to help each other in a search for common ground. He suggests that when we simply attempt to replicate our free-market materialism, we miss our most vital connections. From this, he opens the possibility that a new conversation may begin—one that might initiate a deeper journey concerning the possibilities of human community across all geographical lines.

Essay #15, Winter 2009: Maturing the American Dream: Archetypal American Narratives Meet the Twenty-First Century, Carol Pearson.

This essay is written out of concern about the great challenges facing the United States and the world today. Its purpose is to identify the strengths that can help us tap into what is best about us and guard against our weaknesses so that we might use our power as wisely as possible and in ways that promote the common global good.

Essay #16, Winter 2010: Opening Doors in a Closed Society, Gov. William F. Winter. In this essay, former Mississippi governor William Winter reflects on the long journey from the closed society of the South when James Meredith became the first African American student at the University of Mississippi to the election of President Barack Obama. Though progress has been made, Winter points out that there are still forces that threaten to divide us and speaks to the importance of informed and responsible participation of the public in order to fulfill the American dream for all.

Essay #17, Winter 2011: In Search of the Informal Capital of Community, Hanmin Liu. Hanmin Liu, president and CEO of Wildflowers Institute, writes of his exploration and understanding of the often invisible strengths and resources in communities, what he calls informal capital. He then describes models and processes to support communities in their efforts toward realizing their goals and their dreams.

Essays on Exploring a Global Dream

Essay #1, Spring 2006: Bridges, Not Barriers: The American Dream and the Global Community, Abdul Aziz Said. As the inaugural essay in the global series, this leading peace studies educator and scholar examines both the American dream and the emerging global community with insight into the complex state of international relations while envisioning a shift in world values that might give rise to a common world based on the spiritual conception of love and cooperation.

Essay #2, Spring 2009: The Power of Partnership: Building Healing Bridges Across Historic Divides, Ocean Robbins. The founder and director of YES! (“Helping Visionary Young Leaders Build a Better World”) and coauthor of *Choices for Our Future: A Generation Rising for Life on Earth* writes of his experiences in meeting and working with people from diverse backgrounds and countries and how, even at times of conflict, they have built bridges of friendship and understanding.

Essay #3, Winter 2009: Milestones for a Spiritual Jihad: Toward an Islam of Grace, Asra Q. Nomani. In this essay, Asra Nomani, a former reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* for fifteen years and the author of *Standing Alone: An American Woman’s Struggle for the Soul of Islam*, writes of her personal journey as a Muslim American journalist and single mother. Drawing on her own experience and the teachings of

Islam, she calls on the universal values of Islam that carry with it grace, compassion, and love.

Essay #4, Fall 2010: The Poetic Unfolding of the Human Spirit, John Paul Lederach. John Paul Lederach, widely known for his pioneering work on conflict transformation, writes of the remarkable people he has met in his work around the world, people who face violence and yet respond with peaceful means. This poetic travelogue contains many touchstones that will open your heart and mind.

Essay #5: Spring 2011: Forgiveness and the Maternal Body: An African Ethics of Interconnectedness, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela. In this essay, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela draws from her experience and observations as a member of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. She discusses the relationship between empathy and the victims' capacity to forgive perpetrators and argues that empathy toward others is the essence of our ethical responsibility. She evokes the word *inimba* in her native Xhosa language, which can be translated as "umbilical cord," to locate the origins of the response of empathy in the body. She draws insights from Emanuel Levinas's ethics to argue that the maternal is fundamental in both ethics and politics and that it bears some significance for the embodied politics of forgiveness in the aftermath of trauma.