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The Ethics of South African Identity

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It has been a year since Nelson Mandela raised his fist in celebration, greeting the uncertainty of life after prison. The country is steeped in speculation, thick air breathes anticipation into our living rooms; something is about to happen. My schoolmates compare notes about whose house is best stashed with emergency supplies—foodstuff, cans, books, cash. *What do people stock in preparation for civil war?* My white friends talk about *swartgevaar*, black-danger...crazed Africans stealing in the night, demanding European children leave their Barbie dolls and march to the sea. At home, my township friends mindlessly chant grown-up rhetoric. *One settler one bullet, this land is ours.* Television news swarm with talking heads, international opinion, censored verbiage—a picture of de Klerk and Mandela accepting the Nobel Peace Prize. *Are we at peace?* My mother's cousin is shot dead by Zulu militiamen; his blood simmers to a boil on his kitchen floor. My tear-gassed childhood knows its end has come. The only life I understand is change; the only identity I claim belongs to a volatile present. Looking in the mirror, I see quiet ripples of contradiction ebbing below the surface, always threatening to rip apart my multi-polar world. I am the little black girl in a lily white sea of faces riding ponies at pink birthday parties; the same little girl whose grandmother cannot spell; the same little girl who calls the squalors of Soweto home. I think first in English, an African who translates a foreign tongue into her own; but I always remember to call upon my ancestors during mass, where I listen intently to Catholic catechism. My contradictions are important because they shape my identity and the identity I ultimately choose defines the moral and ethical compass of my adult life.

The difficulty of my childhood cannot be boiled down to a single event. Rather, the challenges spill into provocative questions, forcing the honest responder to shed any surface level mask worn to meet and greet other faces. Am I a victim when my world bisects dichotomous identities? Do I have the right to point an accusatory finger at friends who are born into an oppressive white South African minority? In forgiving and forgetting, am I betraying my African identity? How do I forge an identity that gives tribute to a torturous heritage without harboring hatred, without adopting the selective humanity of apartheid's architects? Is there redemption in how we identify ourselves? In redefining identity, can a perpetrator become ethical? Is ethical identity cast in committed crimes or is identity fluid and subjective, allowing us to slide along a transient continuum? Do we all possess—in our darkest hour—the malice that created apartheid?

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The earliest indicator I have of life being tipped off axis is the sensation of choking, drowning in blinding clouds of tear gas. Camouflaged bulldozers mow through dust-laced streets. My sun-baked mud cake stands stoically facing the soldiers, mocking their own youth as they hoist poisonous gas in our direction. Eyes water and child play resumes: hide and seek. Littered streets strip naked as crowds disperse and children hide from flying bullets. When the crazed dust settles, there is nothing left but the bitter taste of hatred. At the age of four, I am keenly aware that white means toxic. Whites drive frightful hum-Vs through my hometown of Soweto and tear gas anything in sight, including my drying mud cake. They bark tall orders at grown men and instill hatred in children. It becomes so easy to stereotype, to judge, to hate. It's us against them. Separation along color lines perpetuates ignorance which breeds fear and only serves to

harbor the human inadequacies which allowed apartheid, “separateness”, to thrive well into the twenty first century. Inevitably, the apartheid regime crumbles, but the battle against separation— an “us against them” mentality— is not as easily won.

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As a young South African caught between diametric worlds, “separateness” extends beyond the physical, into psychological and metaphysical realms. Everything about life at school is counterculture to what I know at home. My classmates have names like Bianca, Chloe and Lauren while neighborhood friends call themselves Lerato, Neo or Kgathliso. Textbooks claim that Jan van Riebeck found nothing in Cape Town and fashioned that nothing into the Cape of Good Hope; my parents’ banned books accuse the Dutch explorer of daylight murder and outright robbery. Other contrasts are less subtle, more difficult to swallow. Despite owning a thriving automobile business, my father is legally barred from buying his family a home outside the government designated black ghetto of Soweto. My grandparents are subjected to paying disproportional “rent” on a three-roomed shack they will never legally own. By comparison, my white girlfriends live on small plots of paradise in homes that outdo the opulence of Babylon. Amidst their wealth and the humbling poverty of my background, it is difficult not to point an accusatory finger at white South Africa. It is hard not to think along identification terms of “us” and “them”. The irony is that such thinking perpetuates the premise of apartheid, “separateness”.

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In identifying ourselves as separate from the evil of white South Africa, the very farce of separation which oppresses my people, the same force against which we struggle,

is inadvertently strengthened. The danger of separation is its intrinsic lack of tolerance for the unknown, the ease this provides for blanket blame and the forge of an identity which depends on a foreign evil group, an enemy against whom anger and hatred is “justifiably” targeted. Apartheid as an institution and cultural phenomenon crumbled when the virtual and tangible walls of separation were toppled and identity was no longer defined as “us against them”. Separation ended when we recognized that we have more in common than that which divides us. As human beings, we collectively share a common identity which is spread across a broad spectrum, incorporating our lowest beast-like behavior, as well as the highest expressions of kindness and humanity. From this complex myriad, individuals and societies carve for themselves shifting identities which inform ethical and corrupt, immoral conduct.

Comprehending ethics and morality as subjective to self-identity explains incongruous behavior in individuals and societies. South African Jews’ communal apathy toward apartheid perfectly illustrates how human beings can simultaneously subscribe to contradictory moral codes because of the dynamism of identity. As whites, Jews were legally shielded from persecution and enjoyed full citizenship privileges. As a historically oppressed group, with countless members having fled to South Africa in escape of the Holocaust, Jewish South Africans were well positioned to empathize with black South Africa’s anti-apartheid struggle. But on the whole, South African Jews failed to act in a decisively ethical manner, owing primarily to a shift in an identity which emphasized skin color over historical heritage. The TRC documented the Jewish community’s position as “tacit acceptance (at best) or complicit (at worst) of apartheid’s institutionalized racism” (Friedman, 2000).

As collectively guilty as Jews and other white South Africans are of propping up the apartheid regime, black South Africa cannot forge an identity based solely on a victim-oppressor relationship. In addition to honoring the memory of exceptional white freedom fighters and martyrs such as Ruth First, all South Africans have a larger interest in claiming the past to ensure history's gross autocracies are never repeated. In varying degree, we are all guilty of endorsing apartheid, separateness, through our acts and thoughts of hatred and prejudice. If we as black South Africans distance ourselves from the collective identity of white South Africa, we implicitly exempt ourselves from the terms of self-identity which lead white South Africans into complacency and advocacy of a tyrannical and monstrous police state. To ensure that what happened is never repeated, we must acknowledge white and black identity as belonging to the same universal definition of what it means to be human—a definition which encompasses human failure and achievement. In identifying ourselves this way, we safeguard ourselves against believing that we are without capacity for abusive or oppressive behavior. Indeed, the longtime model-government of Zimbabwe has proven that without a national claim of the pasts' evils, historic victims can form destructive and arrogant identities which fail to recognize that no human being is exempt from immorality without the constant vigilance of self-defining through ethical conduct. Recognizing a common thread of humanness brings us all closer to the fallacies of being human and highlights our collective human potential for societal failure and inhuman behavior. This sensitivity to human failure, even at its worst, and the honesty to admit that we are all capable of inhuman malice without our humanity, is fundamental to the act of forgiveness.

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When I ask my family about forgiving and forgetting, it is as though I have exploded a bomb in the kitchen and expected the house to hold still. Everybody has an impassioned opinion, quoting Mandela's vision of a rainbow nation or raising the issue of unrewarded black compromise. Quizzing my grandmother on the subject, I cannot help but think asking her to forgive some sixty odd years of exploitation and fourth class citizenship is audacious. Her response is standard, typical of her generation, "If Mandela can do it, why can't I?" She is quick to point out the need for black South Africa to forgive, but is weary of forgetting, because my grandmother has countless memories that will not be forgotten. Memories of dead children, killed by the poverty and violence apartheid subjected her family to; memories of bulldozers and tear gas, the day-to-day melodrama of living under siege—a government subject in an endless policed state of emergency. *But Mandela has done it, Mandela put the memories aside, he chose to forgive.* So people like my grandmother, the unsung heroines who labored against apartheid quietly, through the dignity with which they lived their lives, also forgive.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu asks black South Africans to, "Be nice to whites, they need you to rediscover their humanity". By forgiving, my grandmother and other black South Africans teach others what it means to be human, how a human being can exercise control in defining who they are and thus impact the humanity of fellow human beings. In essence, this is a practical demonstration of *ubuntu*, an African philosophy which literally means that I am because we are—my humanity is inextricably linked to yours and unless I acknowledge your humanity in defining my own, I will never realize the highest summits of human experience. By forgiving, black South Africans allow white

South Africans room to grow, to transcend their historic identity as oppressors and find redemption in identity redefinition.

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Theoretically, I understand the need for forgiveness, for healing and progression, but in practice, the pain of forgiving has been difficult to overcome. How do we forgive activist Ruth First's murderer—she was a sister, a friend... a mother? Her body lay strewn across the walls, wasted into a million indiscernible smithereens after she opened a fatal parcel bomb. Does her murderer deserve forgiveness? Does forgiving such an act guarantee a change of heart in a self-described killer?

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Listening to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) hearings is a jarring test of faith in humanity, and a chilling report of what it means to have an identity without conscious. Watching apartheid's Special Branch policemen run through laundry lists of human rights violations as though accounting for grocery items and hearing grown men weep openly, reliving the torture of imprisonment, makes the notion of amnesty for full disclosure seem an unjust and cheap resolution to centuries of oppression. My skin crawls with discomfort as I sit in front of the television, taking stock of the bloodshed and death thousands suffered. I am particularly struck by an unassuming bald man who wears rimless spectacles and leans into a desk-mounted microphone. He states his name; *Wait...* runs through the technicalities of official procedure...*I know this man.* Craig Williams. *Surname- Williams?* My mother helps jog childhood memories: Kimberly. My youngest sister was good friends with a Kimberly, sleepover nights and pony ride birthday parties. I remember Kimberly's house because of its enormity and my family

attending her lavish birthday parties; Van Gogh's sunflowers beaming brightly on the Williams' kitchen wall. Her father chatted up mine—who knows what Dads talk about when you are eight and engrossed with Mickey Mouse? The subject of that conversation grips my mother now, who remembers Craig's probing. *So you have a brother in exile? Where? You support the ANC?* Perhaps he sipped tea here and remarked on his support of South Africa's leading anti-apartheid party, the African National Congress (ANC). Maybe tongues slip and volunteer information... whatever happened, my mother listens to the man called Craig Williams intently. He confesses to having been a spy for the South African Special Branch Police Unit, to infiltrating the ANC, to being an instrumental player in murders and the delivery of bombs. *Is this the man in whose home my sister slept?* It is difficult to describe the iced hush that shrouds our living room as we hear the first hand account; confessions of a cunning murderer; more difficult still to comprehend how a man who ignored every rule of human empathy and conscience is subsequently granted blanket amnesty and forgiveness. Is justice served when a perpetrator is shown kindness? Do justice and forgiveness coexist? Is a moral obligation to victims breached when even the most sincere oppressor is granted amnesty or the chance to establish an ethical identity?

As a child of apartheid's terror, I cannot detach my bias in grappling with these questions, but I gain courage and inspiration from other South Africans who are bold enough to forgive even the most searing scars and suffering. "A white policeman informed the TRC how he, with other police officers, tried to do away with the body of a Blackman they killed before. They put his body in a grill and started burning it. In order to hide this outrageous act, the officers made a barbeque in the same grill. When the

police officer finished his testimony, the mother of the victim stood up and embraced the officer and said: “I only wanted to know what happened.” (Flinterman, n.d)

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“It was painful, reliving it, but it helped us heal. The truth allowed us to move on, all of us”. My mother is not the TRC’s greatest fan but she clings to the widespread belief that the TRC nurtured a nation’s wounds, easing us into transition. Asked about forgiving and forgetting, she raises her voice in urgency, “The most important thing is not to forget; this is probably my greatest fear—that children will grow up not knowing, not remembering how sixteen, eighteen year old kids died in the struggle. I am afraid that our children will forget who we were and what we did. It’s good to forgive, because there is no after-life. The Craig Williams of our times will suffer the consequences of who they chose to be through their own pain. People are forgiven but they have to live with themselves. Forgiving is not blindness, it is not amnesia. I only hope forgiving will not mean forgetting”. My mother goes on to tell me the story of my uncle, her cousin, who was car-bombed in exile. Her sentences race through years of emotion, burning her tongue with passion. “I read about Vernon in Citizen Newspaper, something about an ANC terrorist killed—the Boers celebrating an activist’s slaughter. You know, I didn’t know that was him. I mean, I felt pain for the person the article described as Moeketsi, but that was his exile alias, a security cover I didn’t know. So I read this gruesome story about my cousin’s bodily remains dangling from a tree and threw away the paper, without making that association. When the exiles returned in the 1990s, I learned how that Citizen story was a piece about my cousin. Nobody in the family wanted to talk about it. There were no details, no information, *nothing*. Then the TRC: his immediate

family went to the hearings hoping to learn about his death and betrayers; who had given Special Branch information on Vernon’s movements? But there was nothing, nobody came forward to confess a thing. That was the hardest part, not knowing how everything happened, not having the truth because it almost made his murder fictional, a fragment of our imagination. That’s why the funeral this year was so important. Everyone was in tears—this is more than twenty years after the man was killed. We buried his only remains, a rib cage, in South African soil. Afterward, his mother told me she felt light for the first time in years because she felt her child was not forgotten. His memory was still alive. We can forgive, but we must never forget”. Remembering is the theme of South African musician Thandiswa Mazwai’s song, “Nizalwa Ngobani”—Who has given us life?

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“Nizalwa Ngobani” pleads with young Africans to remember the contributions of our ancestors, unsung heroes and heroines who sacrificed their lives for the liberties we enjoy today. “The world changes, revolutionaries die, and the children forget. The ghetto is our first love and our dreams are drenched in gold. We don’t even cry, we don’t even cry. Have you forgotten where you come from?” In moving forward, South African youth must reconcile the past with a new identity, acknowledging where we have been as a country without allowing the sadness of our history to dictate who we become.

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Today, we learn about apartheid like the rest of the world—in textbooks and museums, where a small fee will transport you into a slice of life under apartheid, complete with signs, “Slegs Blankes—No Blacks!” To some extent, black South Africans continue to

live at the margins of society because of economic inferiority. The stark class division is a phenomenal battle, underlying challenges of high crime, unemployment and intolerable poverty. In the new South Africa, life is cheap. “(The nation’s) murder rate, the highest in the world, is more than five times the rate in Brazil, the next highest country” (Daniels, 2007). In redefining our identity, have we learned from the past? Our nation is home to one of the world’s most progressive constitutions, yet we cannot kill each other fast enough. Have we gained moral ground since dismantling apartheid, or did the violence that littered our news reports during the struggle merely shift gears, finding a new color-blind and aggressive form of expression?

The world has changed since Mandela pierced the sky in a clenched fist, claiming freedom and proclaiming that “Never, never again will this beautiful land experience the oppression of one by another”. I am fiercely proud of what it means to be South African—our commitment to an ethical collective identity, our complex diversity and even our painful past, which we have claimed and defied by consciously choosing who we want to become. Most importantly, my South African heritage has taught me that we are all members of humanity and even on a global scale, we are only as strong as our weakest link. My fondest memory of home is the contagious atmosphere of optimism that enveloped even ineligible voters during the first democratic, free and fair elections.

I am old enough to appreciate the monumental significance of what transpires, but too young to grasp comprehensively how this single day will alter my life. I see my grandmother, my Koko. She is up by daylight and dresses in Sunday best; walks to a poll

station in Soweto; people are swarming everywhere. Koko waits patiently in line—an hour, three, six—my grandmother waits almost half a day to cast her first vote, her first vote in over sixty years. She has raised eight children and paid hefty taxes for schools without books, for roads she'll never use and citizenship in a nation that did not recognize her humanity. For the first time today, she controls a piece of her destiny. She cannot read, so she scrolls the ballot for the ANC colors: black, green and gold. Carefully, she marks the paper, walks a few more steps and casts her vote. Her voice is heard. For the first time, she matters, her citizenship counts. My grandmother voted religiously in every election since that first. The ballot box is not a miracle wand, so change has not been instantaneous. Our beloved leader, Nelson Mandela teaches that, “After climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. If there are dreams about a beautiful South Africa, there are also roads that lead to their goal. Two of these roads could be named Goodness and Forgiveness”.

I remember these things and carry them forward. Most of all, I remember “ubuntu”—that my humanity is inextricably linked to yours, that I am because we are.

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