

Bearing Witness to Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Margaret Wheatley December 26, 2021

I had several opportunities to be with Archbishop Tutu in varying degrees of intimacy over two decades. Here is some of what I witnessed:

In 1997, I learned what forgiveness feels like as I sat in the Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) session in Cape Town, witnessing Archbishop Tutu question the killers of the young American activist, Amy Biehl. Amy had been in South Africa to support the struggle against Apartheid. On her last night there, she drove friends to their home in the township of Guguleto. At a gas station, her car was surrounded by incensed black youth who stabbed and stoned her to death. I recall Tutu questioning her four killers, clarifying that they had been to a rally earlier that had activated their mob rage. At their earlier trial, they had denied killing her but now, in this hot and overcrowded room, they admitted stabbing her as she fled from her car for safety. I remember Tutu's precise, courtroom questioning that exposed the full story of that dreadful night.

I sat directly behind Amy's parents as they absorbed the details of their daughter's murder. For me, it was unimaginable that they could absorb this. For them, it led to many years of serving children in that township. Later, I read that her mother spoke of their beneficent work, saying that she and Amy's father hoped that "our daughter is proud of us." I noted this strange reversal of roles as a mother myself.

A year later, influential friends arranged for me to meet "The Arch" at his Cape Town office. I had recently learned from black South Africans that when you were invited anywhere you brought with you any people who were with you at that time. If they were with you, that was reason enough for them to join the party. So I brought along the woman friend who had driven us there. (I remember the shock on Tutu's secretary's face, a white South African who obviously was not familiar with this custom.) We had a brief time with The Arch because Mandela's wife, Gracia, was calling him. He was gracious, funny, apologetic—even those few minutes with him were memorable.

The next year I was with him for three days of retreat at an Anglican Conference Center in the U.S. In this intimate setting, we heard many tales of the fight against Apartheid. I vividly remember his joking reverence -- how could it be that God had chosen South Africa for the role of awakening people to the inhumanity of racism?! Later, he led us in a Mass--we had been trained as drummers for this service, playing cardboard boxes or clapping. We had started our percussionist training as simple fun until the teacher told us we were preparing to accompany the Archbishop in a Mass.

I carry many images from that weekend. An American man from the deep South came and knelt in front of the Archbishop, asking for his forgiveness—he had known nothing of the

struggle until it had been won. When I began working in South Africa in 1997 (and still continue), I met many of those engaged in fighting apartheid and learned things in great detail. I wondered why I had been so casual about paying attention or offering support in the 80s and 90s. I made up for my ignorance and indifference by being actively engaged in supporting leaders there, both formal and informal, from 1997. But I remember this man kneeling at Tutu's feet, asking to be forgiven.

I also remember watching the Arch as he left the grounds of this retreat center. I was some distance away when I saw him walking to the exit, wheeling his own luggage. Why did I not run over and take that handle to help him?

I knew his daughter, Naomi Tutu, because of her deep friendship with a friend of mine. We spent good times together at the Dalai Lama Center in Vancouver where we were both speaking. We were sitting next to each other signing books when I witnessed a young man come over to Naomi and give the most sensational self-introduction: "Your father nominated me for the Nobel Peace Prize." Doesn't get any better than that.

And then there was the incredible and heady invite in 2010 to meet with the Archbishop in Hawaii for several days to discern how his teachings could be molded into an offering for leaders. I had several conversations with his friend and student about how his leadership model was a true paradigm shift. There was great promise in what might be offered, but for reasons I don't recall, this work never went forward. Soon after, I went on my first long meditation retreat that was far better for my ego.

What does it mean to forgive but never forget? This is the essence of what Archbishop Tutu embodied at the TRC. The Commissioners of the TRC had to determine whether to grant amnesty to those who confessed to their terrible actions and to the victims of these terrors. Listening to the perpetrators and the victims, listening to inconceivably barbaric and inhumane behaviors, the Commissioners acknowledge that it was only Tutu's faith in God and the human spirit that got them through.

I remember the incredulity he expressed at the retreat: How could humans be so debased that they roasted the body of one they had killed on a barbecue and partied while it burned? How could he, how can we, know what they did and yet still forgive them? How could we listen to pure barbarism and still recognize, as he did, that the telling and the listening had created holiness? Sometimes he stopped the proceedings to notice "we are on holy ground here."

Archbishop Tutu defined forgiveness in ways I still aspire to. I paraphrase what I vividly recall him saying and writing: I do not forgive your actions, but I see beyond your actions and recognize the being that you are. Your actions do not define who you are, only what you did.

As I aspire to live from unshakable faith in the human spirit, his clarity and compassion keep summoning me forward.

I heartily recommend *The Book Of Joy*—conversations between him and the Dalai Lama

and this New York Times obituary:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/26/world/africa/desmond-tutu-dead.html>