

Angry land heals with Tutu's help

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This column was written by Craig Kielburger.



The guest of honour smiled as he began to tell us a joke.

"A man's car rolls off a cliff, but he manages to grab onto a branch and avoids falling to his death. Desperate, he calls out, 'Is anyone there?' At that moment, the clouds part and a booming voice says, 'Yes, my son. This is God. Let go and I will catch you.' After a long pause, the man yells out, 'Is there anybody else?'"

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has always had a way with words.

I recently had the privilege of attending an intimate dinner with the archbishop at the house of a friend. As a hero of the anti-apartheid movement, he inspired millions with his message of peace and unity. Rev. Tutu is a person I deeply admire, so I was excited to have the opportunity to hear him reflect on his life.

With humility and grace, he told us about living through decades of brutal racism in South Africa, winning the Nobel Peace Prize, and chairing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Slowly I realized that his tale about the man on the cliff was much more than just a joke.

When the official segregation of minorities ended in 1994, South Africa was perilously close to the edge of its own cliff. No one knew what the future held. Was it possible to overcome so much hatred, or would the country descend into violent revenge? Like the man in his story, Rev. Tutu had his doubts.

But that's when the archbishop found a branch to grab onto, one that saved him and many others from falling into despair. It was forgiveness.

In 1995, Rev. Tutu was appointed chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, set up by the new unity government in an attempt to stem the overwhelming feelings of animosity in the country. The victims and perpetrators of apartheid were encouraged to come forward and share their stories, not out of hostility, but with the desire to heal.



FREE THE CHILDREN

Craig Kielburger, left, shows Archbishop Desmond Tutu a copy of *Me to We* in Dallas, Texas, last summer. Tutu contributed a personal story to the book that outlines a philosophy of compassion and civic engagement.

And that's what people did. Over a span of two years, more than 20,000 South Africans stepped forward to share stories of abuse and torture at times so brutal they left the room in tears. Some told of the suffering they faced, while others, including former president F.W. de Klerk, apologized for their role in the nearly half century of systemic racism.

Throughout the course of the commission, something remarkable emerged. There were courageous stories of forgiveness – prisoners forgiving their jailers and mothers forgiving their sons' killers.

Rev. Tutu explained to us that forgiveness and the admission of guilt had a way of liberating people from pain and hatred. South Africans could not change their history, he said, but they did have power over their future. Letting go of their animosity was a way of ensuring that people regained control over their lives.

Of course, not everyone was willing to make that leap, and some were angered by the amnesty granted to those who confessed crimes. The sins were not wiped away, but as Rev. Tutu saw it, reconciliation allowed South Africa to move forward.

As I listened to his words, I couldn't help but think how they applied to the rest of us. All too often grievances toward one another are based on our unwillingness to take ownership of our actions. But Rev. Tutu showed that the simple acts of saying "I'm sorry" and "you're forgiven" can heal even the largest wounds.

Since the commission, the archbishop has remained an international voice of moral reason, speaking out against everything from poverty and exploitation to HIV/AIDS. At last month's World Social Forum in Nairobi, he suggested that the war on terrorism could not be won "as long as there are conditions in the world that make people desperate."

For Rev. Tutu, true peace can be achieved only by providing a basic level of humanity for every person. Education, clean water and medicine are his tools for a better, safer world. That's the goal of the Desmond Tutu Peace Centre now being planned in Cape Town. Inspired by the life and work of the archbishop, it will house educational and leadership training facilities for South Africans, a peace museum and public forums on sustainable development.

Back at dinner, a guest asked Rev. Tutu if he thought peace was possible. He did, of course, but said it would take an extraordinary effort on behalf of all of us.

That's when I began to think about the kind of humanity Rev. Tutu has spent his life preaching. From fighting apartheid and encouraging reconciliation to advocating for the poor, the archbishop has had one clear message: Once we see each other reflected in our own eyes, and once we commit to listening and co-operating, we can live in peace.

Craig and Marc Kielburger are founders of Free the Children and co-authors of Me to We.