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White Collective Guilt, Black Innocence, and the Gender Parallel

by Diane Salters

Two excellent articles on race and racism by William Gumede (2015) and Buhle Zuma (2015), published in the South African newspaper the Mail & Guardian, prompted me to add a third voice to the discussion: a white female perspective. An edited version of the article here was published by the Mail & Guardian on 23 January 2015 under the headline "Blacks Gave Whites the Gift of Freedom: South Africans Need to Work with Each Other to Resolve Our Collective Guilt and Innocence."

Buhle Zuma makes the point that blacks gave whites a huge gift in 1994: the gift of forgiveness. He is correct but underestimates the extent of the gift. Blacks also gave whites the gift of freedom. I vividly recall the palpable sense of liberation of most whites (not all, of course, and this is the problem with racial generalizations) during the elections as we all queued to vote. For many whites, it was also their first time to vote, and there was a sense of liberation, not just relief, in the air. As Mandela reminded us, the oppressor too is imprisoned. Black South Africans freed themselves and in the process freed the whites.

The gift of freedom thus added to the collective white guilt both Gumede and Zuma address. How do we deal with this guilt? As one of the not insignificant number of white people who opposed apartheid in ways great and small, I paid the price of 25 years of exile but was still aware of the extent to which I had benefitted from the apartheid system [FROM WHAT, THE APARTHEID SYSTEM?]. I returned in 1993 determined to offer restitution in whatever way I could. But can any individual act lift collective guilt? I grieved that de Klerk's apology was so grudging and so inadequate. I had never voted for him but in so far as my whiteness made me an accomplice, he was the person who could have uttered the heartfelt apology I deemed necessary. I regretted too that there was not a once off reparation tax that would have addressed, however inadequately, the need for restitution. It was talked of but never implemented. Perhaps that would have gone some way toward lifting white South Africans' burden of collective guilt.

However, when some years ago a group of white people, many of whom had been active in the struggle against apartheid, started the "Home for All" movement, they were shouted down by many whites who simply refused to face their guilt. On the other hand, the initiative was scorned by many black intellectuals as "just white guilt." Black people cannot have it both ways, they insisted. Either collective white guilt is valid and reparation appropriate or it is not. Would they prefer whites did not feel any guilt? Or is the implication that the crime is so vast that white people can never make adequate amends? There is truth in this, and that is precisely where forgiveness comes in. Forgiveness frees the forgiver of bondage to the oppressor and also gives the oppressor the opportunity to engage in a new way with at least the possibility of a sense of absolution. Have whites taken up this opportunity? Some I meet have, but far too many have not.

This valuable gift of freedom also brought burdens of individual responsibility that many, both white and black, have found difficult to carry. So, the other side of white collective guilt is something I identify as *black collective innocence*. William Gumede (2015) referred to this in his article, although he did not actually call it that. If all guilt rests with white people, then all innocence rests with black people—never mind that Bantustan chiefs and functionaries benefitted greatly from apartheid or that individual blacks were spies or collaborators or that some current black leaders are incompetent or corrupt. Just as individual whites are blanketed within white collective guilt, so individual blacks are blanketed within collective innocence. Sadly, this has, as Gumede made clear, allowed for levels of guilt within the ranks of the liberators to be excused and brushed over. He wrote, "...There is often the temptation for black people to hide behind racial solidarity to support undemocratic practices by black leaders or organisations, merely because they are black and publicly condemn global white privilege" (para. 19) He contends that when wrong doing by South African leaders is challenged they should not be allowed to "use racism to hide their own incompetence, personal self-enrichment and oppression of their own black people." (para. 33).

So what do we do with this collective guilt/innocence? Buhle Zuma (2015) suggests that we should go our own ways: "Let us focus on solving our own problems—and let the white community attend to its own" (para. 16).

I disagree. Steve Biko's principle that black people have to free their own consciousness still holds true. However, we must remember that Biko saw black consciousness as a tool for freeing humanity, not just black people. I am afraid black people still have to keep on giving here, brother. White consciousness still needs your challenges and an active engagement with black people and opinions if there is to be any real transformation. It is no use for you to ask, "Why should we go on giving?" That is just how it is.

I say this because of my work in gender reconciliation, to which there are many parallels. Men share a collective guilt for centuries of patriarchy that have damaged (and continue to damage) women so profoundly. Of course, like white oppressors, men too are damaged by this oppression even as they benefit from it. Like whites, they find it hard to understand and acknowledge the collective pain of women or the collective guilt of men. As individuals, many find ways to listen, apologize, and change their ways. In this there is work to be done by men in their own groups to come to terms with how they need to change, but, ironically, it is women's determination to free themselves from patriarchy that will also set men free.

Collectively, for men there is no possible way to undo the centuries of damage to women. All they can hope for is that women will forgive them. This is hard for women to do while the abuses continue, and yet it is only through the forgiveness of that collective guilt that women can both free themselves from bitter bondage and begin to hold individual men accountable for their individual, current actions. In gender reconciliation workshops, women frequently ask, as Zuma did, "Why should we keep on giving?" The response is, "Sorry sister, that's just how it is."

In doing this work to free and heal themselves and their oppressors, women are also required to forego collective innocence and fully account for their own wrongdoing. Recently, a female judge in the United Kingdom raised a storm when she suggested that young women should refrain from becoming drunk and helpless in order to protect themselves from the likelihood of abuse or rape. She was castigated by women's groups for "blaming the victim." As I see it, she was calling on women to empower themselves through assuming personal responsibility rather than taking refuge in collective innocence.

What I have witnessed in gender reconciliation workshops is the deep healing that comes from men and women engaging with each other in truth telling, deep listening, and forgiveness of both self and other. In this process, collective guilt and innocence are acknowledged, admitted to, and dissolved in the healing work of meeting each other as human beings and taking personal responsibility for our lives.

This is what we need between blacks and whites. Let us not go our separate ways, let us engage honestly, robustly, and generously with each other. This is the real transformation we need if we are all to heal.

References

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