

Nurturing reconciliation

Masahiro Minami has developed an approach based on Japanese Morita therapy to promote reconciliation between survivors and perpetrators in post-genocide Rwanda

Illustration by David Doran

This year Rwanda and the world commemorated the 20th anniversary of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. In less than 100 days between 800,000 and a million people of Tutsi background were slaughtered by the Hutu extremist militia group, the *Interahamwe*. That equates to 10,000 people murdered every day; 417 an hour; seven a minute. Most killings were by machete. Although the Rwandan genocide is known for its huge scale, speed and horrifically brutal nature, what is less known is that it was an 'intimate' genocide. Within that 100-day period, families, relatives, neighbours and friends living in the same villages turned against each other, murdering anyone they knew to be of Tutsi descent.

Rwanda's genocide is not only owned by Rwandans; it has been shared as iconic evidence of our failure as humankind. Various international communities, including the UN, later acknowledged that they failed to intervene and we, the world, experienced a tremendous sense of anger, guilt, shame and sadness. Since 1994, international communities have accepted their failure and have been sharing, with the Rwandans, the journey of mourning, grieving and healing from the collective losses.

Forgiveness-based interventions

In 2003 the Rwandan Government announced that it was provisionally releasing prisoners who had confessed their crimes and sought pardon. This created volatile situations where perpetrators were returning to live in the same village as the survivors of their genocidal attacks. The Government attempted to put in place reconciliation support to mitigate the repercussions from this release, including the decision to revive the *gacaca*. During the colonial era in Rwanda, the *gacaca* emerged as an indigenous community court system for the resolution of inter-tribal and clan conflicts. While the *gacaca* has

brought some successes, ultimately its efficacy in promoting interpersonal reconciliation remains debatable.^{1,2}

Immediately after the release of prisoners, revenge killings and murders took place. While tireless efforts were made to promote national unity and reconciliation at a political and economical level, at grassroots level in the villages, reconciliation support between survivors and perpetrators remained woefully inadequate.

Reconciliation support for individuals in Rwandan villages was often left to a few NGOs and community organisations, such as Survivor's Fund, AVEGA, the Prison Fellowship Rwanda and REACH, with religious organisations playing an active role. While these provided invaluable and well-intended support to survivors and perpetrators, the methods of reconciliation were typically based on religious and anecdotal foundations.

It was in 2009 that I first encountered an example of such reconciliation approaches – forgiveness-based reconciliation counselling (FBRC) – being practised in Rwandan villages. In the FBRC approach, a trained reconciliation counsellor first works with a survivor and a perpetrator separately to 'warm them up' to meet together for a 'reconciliation counselling' session. During the session survivors are asked to listen to perpetrators speaking truthfully of the crimes they have committed against them. Then the perpetrators apologise and ask for the survivors' forgiveness. Parallels are often drawn between this approach and religious activities and teachings from the Bible, which speak of the importance of forgiving enemies.

However, it is often the case that survivors cannot forgive a perpetrator who has murdered their loved ones, even though they are sitting across the table from them, begging for their forgiveness. Perhaps understandably,



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the forgiveness-based intervention often meets a dead-end where no possible path can be found and all involved get stuck. The actual process of FBRC is powerfully depicted in a documentary film by Laura Waters Hinson, *As We Forgive*.³ According to the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, Catholics, Protestants and Adventists combined make up 93.7 per cent of the entire population of Rwanda.⁴ Following the religious teaching of the Bible, the majority of survivors are aware that it is virtuous to be able to forgive perpetrators. When they cannot do so, they are faced with the added torment of feeling they are not a good Catholic or Christian. They want to forgive, but their heart won't allow them to. This inability to forgive is the first and foremost challenge for survivors on the path to reconciliation.

Another major limitation of FBRC is its format – verbal exchange. Conversations typically involve a survivor asking if the perpetrator feels remorse and if they are serious about their apology. Survivors often testify that they do not feel there is any sincerity or remorse in perpetrators' apologies. They say, 'It is easy for you to say sorry. But do you really mean it? If you are sorry, why did you kill my family?' The words of the perpetrators simply do not convince survivors of their remorse. Talking therapy can only take them so far.

Morita therapy

'Who says that she must forgive? It is natural that she can't forgive. She doesn't need to do anything to change her feelings – she can leave her state of non-forgiveness as it is, and engage in purposeful action.' These were the very first thoughts that popped into my mind when I witnessed FBRC sessions. They may have partly been an instinctive reaction, but they also came from years of practising Morita therapy, an indigenous Japanese therapeutic

approach developed by the late Dr Shoma Morita around 1920.^{5–10}

In principle, Morita therapy advocates that clients become reconciled to their undesired feelings, rather than fighting against them. In the face of unpleasant feelings, our default reaction tends to be to try and control them or push them away. Morita therapists do not teach any self-help skills to control or fight against undesired feelings. Rather, we support clients to nurture a non-fighting stance towards their affective experiences, and to 'receive them' as they are. Morita therapists believe that our feelings result naturally from life experience. Thus, only a different life experience can bring about a desired feeling, not techniques or skills to control emotions per se.

It is important to understand that in Morita therapy this non-fighting stance is coupled with purposeful action. Clients are encouraged to leave whatever unpleasant feelings they have, just as they are, without trying to control or deny them, and to engage in purposeful action. Taking action creates new experiences, which result in the desired feelings. One of the key mechanisms of change in Morita therapy is the healing effect this brings about. Morita therapy is often described as a nature-centred¹¹ or action-based therapy.¹²

Applying principles of Morita therapy to Rwanda, I have developed an approach to nurture reconciliation that I have called the 'action-based psychosocial reconciliation approach' (ABPRA). Under the FBRC model, the clinical assumption is that survivors must 'reach' forgiveness first in order to proceed to action/interaction with the perpetrators. Under the ABPRA model, no attempts are made to specifically induce or reach forgiveness. Rather, the state of non-forgiveness is acknowledged, respected and left aside, so that it can follow its natural course. The key is not to try to do anything to this non-forgiveness.

Morita therapists believe such attempts actually exacerbate the pain of not being able to forgive. Instead, I invite the reconciliation dyad (the survivor and perpetrator) to acknowledge, respect and leave the non-forgiveness, and to take purposeful action and interact together to allow new experiences to unfold between them.

In following the Morita approach, I expected that the action taking and the interaction together would in turn bring about the desired affective experience in the dyad. Whether survivor and perpetrator would engage in the purposeful action and interaction together was another question.

Principles into practice

Morita therapy principles direct the survivor and perpetrator to engage in purposeful action and interaction. But how should this be done in practice? Here, I listened to the voice of common sense again. I had often heard survivors lament to perpetrators, 'You have taken so much from my life. How could you ask me to (for)give once again?' I realised that these people, who had already had so much taken from them, had nothing left to give to the perpetrators. They needed to receive.

Under the ABPRA model, perpetrators do not ask for forgiveness. Rather, they offer. They may say, for example, 'I am prepared to offer my labour for the remainder of my life. Would you please receive it?' Survivors are usually hesitant: 'Maybe one day... (silence)... You can work for me just one day.' This is of course a simplification of what can be an extremely complex and protracted interaction, but it demonstrates how something starts to move forward.

I have been implementing ABPRA for the past three years in remote villages of Rwanda in partnership with a local NGO, and learning from participants about their experiences of engaging

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with the approach. It works like this. A survivor receives a weekly session of labour from the perpetrator who has murdered their loved ones, and they work together to look after the survivor's day-to-day practical needs by, for example, cultivating a field, harvesting crops, processing food, or making bricks for house renovation. ABPRA generates productivity. After each session my Rwandan research associates conduct semi-structured interviews to hear from both survivor and perpetrator about their experience of the day. Collected interview data are analysed to reveal themes that demonstrate the beneficial effects of ABPRA.

Every survivor who has participated so far has reported that they experience a joy 'springing' from their heart when they witness how hard and tirelessly their perpetrators work for them. One survivor told me that she had 'heard' how hard her perpetrator was working. When I asked what she meant, she replied: 'I could hear him breathing very hard [she imitated his heavy breathing], as he was working so hard cultivating.' Another survivor reported that, when she paused from her work and looked up, she noticed there were large droplets of sweat on the perpetrator's forehead. Heavy breathing and the sight of sweat (ie perpetrators' actions as opposed to their words) succeeded in convincing survivors of the authenticity of perpetrators' remorse.

The giving of labour – action, not words – was important, survivors said: 'When someone works alone, she thinks about many bad and good things and all of them come into her heart. But when you work with somebody, many good things come in. You talk about many things and the actions go on. So there is an important lesson in that.' Another survivor told me: 'It helps me in my heart. When I see him I feel free with him, not only in words but also in

actions, because the words without actions are useless... it helps a person to heal the wounds very quickly.'

Seeing the perpetrator working very hard for them moved their feelings beyond forgiveness: 'I have forgiven him already... What increases is a love, not forgiveness. The forgiveness has been given. Now it is the love that increases,' I was told.

Throughout the programme it has always been my impression that perpetrators work the hardest in the fields. During a dry season in Rwanda, the average noon temperature reaches over 30 degrees Celsius, and survivor and perpetrator dyads work together for two hours in the exhausting heat. I have noticed in session after session that ex-prisoners always seem to work with smiles on their faces. I have realised that perpetrators truly appreciate the opportunity to make good the evil acts they have committed, in front of the very survivors whom they have harmed. One told me: 'The animal walks at night because it fears people harming it during the day. For me, too, that is how I was during that time [before ABPRA]... because I felt guilty and ashamed.' I asked if the forgiveness of the survivor for whom he worked brought back humanity and happiness in him; 'Yes, she (working for her) made me human again,' he said.

Hearing their words, I understood that ex-prisoners had been carrying their guilt, sense of sin, shame, tormented conscience and self-hatred throughout their lives since 1994. ABPRA provides them with a longed-for opportunity to atone for their previous deeds. No wonder they are motivated and always smile. Their conversations with survivors as they work together 'clean the wounds in hearts, everywhere', one told me.

By the end of the programme every perpetrator reports that they would take the machete and bullets for their survivor should another genocide occur.

They know what it is like to carry their corrosive sin in their heart, and they would rather die than kill more people. Many survivor and perpetrator dyads are able to forge close relationships. I often feel that, if more people could develop such special relationships, there might be fewer wars.

The future

The project has finished its feasibility and acceptability testing phase¹³ and is now moving on to the evaluation stage, involving multiple village clinical trials. ABPRA will be evaluated in eight reconciliation villages over three years. If the evaluation shows promising results, international organisations such as the UN and other NGOs could potentially implement this as the first evidence-based psychosocial reconciliation approach, to prevent future genocide, conflicts and wars, and to build peace. One thing I am convinced of personally is that all participants in ABPRA will never again engage in any acts of war. They are the evidence that peace can return to this world. ■

To learn more about Japanese Morita therapy, visit www.moritatherapy.org

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