



What is S.T.A.R.?

by

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When Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who chaired the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, left his visiting professorship at Emory University, he challenged the United States to address its history of racial violence with an effort equivalent to that of the South African process. Following the culmination of the “Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America” exhibit at the Martin Luther King National Historic site, a joint venture with Emory University, momentum built around Tutu’s charge.

The grim and violent images of lynched bodies surrounded by white onlookers were a reminder of the spectacle nature of lynching in the late 19th and early 20th century, and a testament to the complicity of entire communities that was necessary for such lynchings to occur. The exhibition of these images in Atlanta was controversial, no doubt because they were a stark reminder of a shameful part of our collective American history.

The exhibit itself provided insight into the particular challenges that Southern Truth and Reconciliation (STAR) would face in addressing histories of racial and ethnic violence in American communities. Unlike in South Africa, or other nations around the world, the truth and reconciliation processes in the United States are unlikely to occur within the lifetimes of those who experienced, witnessed, participated, or were directly affected by the violence.

When we consider that many of the lynching photographs and postcards from the exhibit were found hidden in desk drawers and attics, we come to terms with one of the most critical steps in the reconciliation process: uncovering and sharing openly a painful past that has been buried or lost to historical memory. Through these images of public

murders, we gain a sense of the community-wide conspiracies—often dependent upon the complicity of judges and law enforcement officials—that were necessary to protect perpetrators from justice, and we begin to glimpse the depths of racial terrorism.

The trauma that communities and individuals suffer under such circumstances is extremely debilitating, and it resurfaces in future generations if it is not acknowledged and given sufficient attention. STAR is about helping communities to “dig up the past,” but with the intention of helping these communities journey through conflict as a means to becoming more inclusive, whole, and functional.

However, truth and reconciliation efforts in the United States currently lack certain tools utilized by efforts in other parts of the world. Specifically, efforts in the United States lack a state-sanctioned mandate. This means that truth and reconciliation processes would be unable to offer amnesty as an incentive for those who testify, and that a truth and reconciliation commission would lack “teeth,” including search and seizure powers.

Although trials of human rights violators and other forms of retributive justice have been an aspect or an outcome of truth and reconciliation processes internationally, conceptions and practices of restorative justice have been explored. Retributive justice focuses on specific crimes and their impact on identifiable victims and perpetrators. Restorative justice, on the other hand, addresses the causes and effects of racial and ethnic violence on an entire community by: (1) analyzing and incorporating the collective needs of diverse groups in the community; (2) documenting human rights issues beyond the acts of perpetrators alone; and (3) promoting community –wide reconciliation. STAR enables local groups to restore honor and integrity to the entire community in the quest for restorative justice.

STAR does not oppose the prosecution of perpetrators. However, STAR does advocate for, and educate communities about, a menu of programs and processes that may contribute to restorative justice and community building. The fact that truth and reconciliation efforts are occurring at the grassroots level in the United States may in some sense be a blessing in disguise. Although a truth and reconciliation model has not been developed yet, investment in truth-telling and community building may lead to sustainable changes where we live, work, and play.

STAR responds to request from communities with histories of lynchings and other communal forms of racial and ethnic violence. STAR partners with communities to adapt the truth and reconciliation process to local needs, on the premise that truth-telling and acknowledgement by all stakeholders must precede healing, reconciliation, and justice for the entire community:

- STAR starts with requests from local leaders seeking justice and reconciliation for human rights violations.
- STAR starts with the South but also responds to leaders outside the South as resources allow.
- STAR starts with racial/ethnic violence and supports similar initiatives on all historic and systemic injustices.

STAR supports projects that require analyzing local community needs, documenting human rights violations, institutional reform and policy recommendations, and advancing community-wide reconciliation.

STAR's first and most significant relationship to date is with the Moore's Ford Memorial Committee (MFMC), and with the citizens of Walton, Oconee, Athens, and Clarke counties who are creating a truth and reconciliation process for their Georgia community. MFMC formed in 1997 out of a desire to address the history of Walton County's most infamous murders.

In 1946, two African-American couples—Mae Murray and George Dorsey and Dorothy and Roger Malcolm—were waylaid while driving and lynched by a firing squad of 12-15 unmasked white men in broad daylight at the Moore's Ford Bridge, sixty miles east of Atlanta. No one has ever been prosecuted for these crimes, and it is believed that some of the perpetrators are alive and still reside in local communities with impunity.

Since its creation, MFMC has made amazing strides by memorializing the dead, raising community awareness about the history of the Moore's Ford incident, building community by organizing multiracial dinners and events, and initiating community dialogue around what a truth and reconciliation process could look like in this community. The need and motivation to work toward reconciliation is clear, evidenced, in part, by MFMC's formal invitation to STAR in 2003 to initiate a consultative relationship with them.

In his book *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, conflict resolution scholar John Paul Lederach defines reconciliation as the place where truth, justice, mercy, and peace meet. As STAR evolved, we recognized that it made sense for us to function as a consultative resource for communities, and to facilitate processes and offer options that allow communities to define *truth, justice, mercy, and peace* for themselves. STAR recognizes that any truth and reconciliation process must be elicited from the community, so STAR offers a menu of options – a list of programs and events that promote truth-telling and community building – from which the community chooses.

Each individual and each community experiences trauma differently, and therefore each community we work with will have different needs around truth-telling and different opinions about the prospects for reconciliation. MFMC has been doing good work for years prior to its relationship with STAR. Some of the menu options that we suggest, such as creative service projects, memorial observations, and public forums, have already been explored and implemented by MFMC. Since STAR began its relationship with MFMC, it has been clear that some constituencies within the communities that MFMC serves are pushing for prosecution, and envision a process modeled on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, including appointed commissioners and public hearings. While this is a viable option, it has become clear that due to continued trauma and more recent incidents of racial violence in the area, public testimony may involve significant risk for some members of the community. Private truth-telling—including accounts documented during the research for *Fire in a Canebrake*, Laura Wexler’s account of the Moore’s Ford killings—continues to be a powerful medium for reconciliation. Descendants of perpetrators have in some cases expressed interest in meeting with descendants of victims.

The public events that the Moore’s Ford Memorial Committee continues to plan, including a diversity-themed carnival planned for later this year and a recent “community conversation” on the history of racial violence in Oconee county may encourage more people to speak out publicly about what they know. Ultimately, these events may help to create an environment for public truth-telling.

In addition to offering a menu of options, STAR attempts to model a sustainable and inclusive process in its relationships with community clients, allowing a critical mass of individuals and groups to engage with local history in an authentic and meaningful way. The truth and reconciliation process looks at all levels of a community: individuals, mid-level leadership (e.g., spiritual leaders, school administrators, law enforcement officials), and institutions. A successful process identifies and engages past, present, and future stakeholders in a community. By involving a critical mass of the community in this way, truth and reconciliation becomes sustainable for a community – it becomes less of a process and more of a perpetual practice.

STAR has encouraged members of MFMC to build bridges with other official and unofficial community leaders in the interest of forming a diverse coalition that can discuss options for the future of local truth and reconciliation efforts. Some difficult questions have emerged: how can MFMC increase participation of various constituencies in a truth and reconciliation effort? Can a truth and reconciliation process happen without more inclusive participation? This is why a menu of options for communities is important, and why menu options that appeal to a range of demographically diverse groups is desirable.

For reasons unrelated to guilt or fear, folks may just not be interested in attending a public truth and reconciliation hearing. (And a truth commission body in the U.S. would have no ability to subpoena witnesses.) If events such as community service projects, book clubs, or poetry readings are also included as part of a truth and reconciliation effort, it can break the ice and may create an appetite for more of the breakthrough work of re-visiting a community's history and re-visioning its future. Apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation are very personal in nature, and a truth and reconciliation process can provide opportunities for these to occur. STAR is planning to host two public forums—one in Atlanta and one in Walton County—in the coming year.

In addition to our relationship with MFMC, STAR is also in conversation with the newly formed Coalition On Unity Reconciliation and Truth (COURT), a Cobb County group that plans to address the history of the Leo Frank lynching in Marietta.

Leo Frank was a Jewish factory owner who was falsely accused of the rape and murder of Mary Phagan, a 13 year-old girl who worked in his pencil factory. The Georgia

State Supreme Court found Frank guilty in 1915, and although the governor commuted his sentence to life imprisonment, he was later taken from the Milledgeville State Farm Prison and hung from a tree outside the town of Marietta. According to Steve Oney's recent book *And the Dead Shall Rise: The Murder of Mary Phagan and the Lynching of Leo Frank*, some members of the lynch mob were from prominent Atlanta families. The events around the lynching led to both the 20th Century resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, with its first group dubbed "The Knights of Mary Phagan," and the creation of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). STAR's involvement in this community is still being defined.

Adding to our nation's rich history as a "noble experiment" (Jefferson), truth and reconciliation processes offer a new opportunity for strengthening our democratic ideals and advancing our civic virtues. Truth commission processes and events can provide recurrent opportunities to review and redress our nation's characteristic forms of human rights abuses. STAR enters into this experiment hopeful that Americans will act differently at home and around the world if we understand our own history and present from the perspectives available through truth and reconciliation processes and practices.

FURTHER READING

Bauerlein, Mark. *Negrophobia: A Race Riot in Atlanta, 1906*.
San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2001.

Hayner, Priscilla. *Unspeakable Truths: Confronting State
Terror and Atrocity*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

Lederach, John Paul. *Building Peace: Sustainable
Reconciliation in a Divided Societies*. Washington,
D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997.

Oney, Steve. *And the Dead Shall Rise: The Murder of Mary
Phagan and the Lynching of Leo Frank*. New York:
Pantheon, 2003.

Till-Mobley, Mamie, and Christopher Benson. *Death of
Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime that Changed
America*. New York: Random House, 2003.

Wexler, Laura. *Fire in a Canebreak: The Last Mass Lynching in America*. New York: Scribner, 2003.

WEB RESOURCES

www.southerntruth.org

Southern Truth & Reconciliation, Inc.
Atlanta, Georgia

www.gtcp.org

Greensboro Truth & Community Reconciliation Project
Greensboro, North Carolina

www.hopeinthecities.org

Hope in the Cities Project
Richmond, Virginia

www.ijr.org.za

Institute for Justice & Reconciliation
Cape Town, South Africa

www.ictj.org

International Center for Transitional Justice
New York City, New York

www.truthcommission.org

Strategic Choices in the Design of Truth Commissions
Cambridge, Massachusetts

www.thirdside.org

Global Negotiation Project: Third Side
Cambridge, Massachusetts

www.musarium.com/withoutsanctuary/main.html

“Without Sanctuary” Lynching Photograph Exhibit
Exhibit schedule available on-line