Narrating our Healing
Narrating our Healing
Perspectives on Working through Trauma

By

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The inspiration for this book comes, firstly, from the many conversations we have had together and with others over a three year period. In our discussions we have tried to deepen our understanding of the effects of massive trauma on individuals and on communities, of how people register the unspeakable traumas they have been exposed to in their lives, how they remember, and the tendency for traumatic memory to intrude unremittingly in the lives of victims and perpetrators. We feel privileged to have witnessed the working of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and to be able to draw from the insights of that important historical moment in South Africa.

One of the critical lessons we draw from the TRC is the lesson of hope: that in a country like ours, with a horrendous history of fierce racial divisions and gruesome stories of human rights abuses, it is possible to engage with and to be in peaceful human dialogue with one’s former adversaries. Ordinary people, under certain circumstances, are capable, it transpires, of far greater evil than we would have imagined. But they are, too, capable of far greater virtue than we might have expected. Our humanity is strongest when we are led by the compassion that unites us as human beings. The TRC paved the way for us to the road that leads to a more humane humanity.

The second inspiration for this project was a course we offered at the University of Cape Town Summer School in 2004. The course was called “Narrative, Trauma, and Forgiveness”. The class was a diverse group of about a hundred mature students from various disciplines who came from around the country, mostly from Cape Town and other parts of the Western Cape region. Ten years after the first democratic elections, and with the recent publication of its final amnesty report still a fresh memory, the TRC was a daily backdrop to our class discussions. Our classes during the week-long summer course became a place of engaging and stimulating intellectual discussion about trauma, narrative, and the various representational forms of traumatic memory. The discussions, however, went beyond the intellectual to a level of dialogue dealing with the question of what memory about “the past” means for us as South Africans with a range of experiences of that past, and differing identifications with it.

An extraordinary thing happened at the end of the summer class; people did not want to stop the dialogue. The class had run its course, but people expressed a desire to continue talking with one another. We made a special request to the
organisers of the Summer School who moved us to another room, where dialogue continued. This was not the usual intellectual class discussion that is a natural part of university lecturing. The conversation was happening at a much deeper level with a richness of narrative and profound emotional engagement that we had not seen in our classes before. It seemed to us that what was unfolding was an important moment of witnessing; we were bearing witness to the memory that people carried about the past and their struggle with it.

The experience of massive trauma, such as the trauma associated with gross human rights abuses, usually overwhelms an individual and evokes a range of complex responses aimed at self-preservation. The experience of trauma impairs the capacity to register events fully as they occurred. The ability to integrate the objective events with the affective component of the experience is lost. Trauma has been described as the “undoing of the self”, and as loss: loss of control, loss of one’s identity, loss of the ability to remember, and loss of language to describe the horrific events.

The struggle with trauma is a struggle with memory. It is common for traumatised people to be confronted with painful traumatic memories long after the traumatic event occurred. Trauma is not remembered in the same way as normal events, but is often relived as flashbacks, as if it were recurring in the present. This is because, unlike normal events which are easily integrated into mental life, traumatic events are not easily assimilated. The repetitive intrusion of traumatic memory into the lives of survivors renders victims and survivors powerless, without any internal resources to control the intrusive traumatic memories.

Traumatic events, especially if they remain unacknowledged, continue to disempower victims, and intensify the feelings of shame and humiliation that are part of the legacy of trauma and its internalisation. This “internal” dimension of trauma is an important one: while the source of trauma may be external, the recurrent effects of trauma, and the impairment of the memory function—the “unfinished business” of trauma—are primarily reflections of an inner breakdown of the self and of an inner emotional conflict. The intrusive memories and the re-experiencing of trauma are the most distressing features of the aftermath of trauma. Victims and perpetrators of trauma feel helpless and at the mercy of the intrusive and fragmentary memories of trauma, unable to control these memories and completely victimised by them. Thus, healing of trauma, that is, the restoration of the self and the reclaiming of one’s sense of control of memory, of the capacity to reflect, understand, and to perceive things as they are or were, requires transformation of traumatic memory into narrative memory.
Paul Ricœur and many other philosophers have shown us that we tend to regard our lives as narratives, with a beginning, middle and end. Some events seem insignificant to us and are forgotten, while others take a central place in the story we create from our lives. Life takes on the form of a plot with causal links, where one event leads to another—a plot that can, to a certain extent, be planned by us, the authors of our own lives. Trauma, however, destroys the belief that we are in control of our lives; it leaves us shattered and powerless. This book deals with the process of regaining control; it is about the search for meaning after trauma and the rewriting of life’s narrative to incorporate the catastrophe.

In the first chapter, various meanings of the two key concepts in this book, “narrative” and “healing”, are explored. “Narrative” could refer to the narrative structure that we confer on our lives, or the communal narratives created by a nation or an ethnic group, or to individual narratives about personal experiences, or to the narratives of Literature. “Healing”, we will argue, does not imply an end to all pain and suffering, but rather facing and work through trauma, so that the tragic loss caused by trauma is balanced by a gain in meaning. On this issue, our arguments are linked to Viktor Frankl’s plea for a “tragic optimism”.

Trauma victims have a contradictory desire to suppress their trauma as well as to talk about it. To talk about it, would mean an extremely painful reliving of the event—so, for inner survival, they normally suppress the memory. Yet, paradoxically, it is precisely confrontation of the suppressed memory that is needed for inner healing. Instead of working through trauma, victims of trauma typically re-enact it, but with a reversal of roles: with themselves as perpetrator, where they have the power and are in control, so that they can transfer their revenge onto a new victim. This reaction to trauma can often lead to an endless repetition of violence: at either individual or communal level. It is vital that both perpetrators and victims should transcend their respective roles; that they be reconciled and start exploring their common humanity. The tension between silence and disclosure, and ways of working through trauma are the central themes of chapter 2.

A large part of chapter 3, entitled “Searching for Closure: The Crying Voice”, contains a traumatic story where closure keeps evading the victims. The crying voice referred to could be seen as a symbolic representative of the many crying voices from South Africa’s traumatic past, searching for attention and closure. One of the ways of dealing with these voices is then discussed in the chapter, namely to make public spaces intimate, to share stories by people from different backgrounds and histories. In this process of reconciliation, forgiveness plays a crucial role—it liberates both the victim and the perpetrator and opens up the way to a future free from the divisions of the past.
The links between literary narratives and trauma are discussed in chapter 4. Since trauma is characterised by a loss of plot, the traumatic experience cannot be immediately “translated” into the narrative structures of our mental memory; therefore, according to Ernst van Alphen, trauma signifies a “failed experience”. However, literary writers invent new narratives through which the traumatic memory of readers can be vicariously expressed, so that they can experience a catharsis. Literary narratives can help us to confront our traumas, to bring to light what has been suppressed; it also imagines new possibilities of living meaningfully in a changed world.

However, the reading of literature should not be seen as a “quick fix” for trauma. The healing process is a complex, continuing process. We cannot prescribe one book that would provide a general cure for trauma: one and the same book could be harmful to one reader and meaningful to another, and the same book could have different effects at different stages of a person’s life. Books are like friends, they have to be chosen carefully according to the individual traits and circumstances of a specific reader. We do not, of course, advocate reading innocuous narratives with happy endings to console traumatised readers; on the contrary, such stories would not ring true and could actually aggravate the trauma. On the other hand, gruelling stories could provide some kind of consolation for a trauma sufferer who finds validation for her own experience in the narrative.

The healing potential of literary narratives can be seen from the point of the writer, who could find a catharsis through the (indirect) expression of suppressed pain, or from the viewpoint of the reader, who could find some kind of healing through discovering points of identification residing in the narrative. There is certainly room for the study of the connection between the writing of stories and the healing of the psyche, but we will focus here on the reader’s side in the literary communication, on the dialogue between text and reader. Thus in the last chapter of this book, the novel *Disgrace* by J M Coetzee is examined as an example of a literary narrative about traumatic phenomena and ways of working through them. Many people have found *Disgrace* a disturbing text and would be surprised at the choice of this book to conclude our discussion on narratives of healing. Yet the novel brings together many of the threads in this book: the loss of plot and the rewriting of one’s life narrative; the creation of new communal narratives in South Africa; the role of forgiveness in bridging the divides in the country; and last but not least, the importance of the great “archetypes of the mind”, the ethical concepts without which individuals and societies would fall apart.

In this book, we advocate collaboration between the disciplines of psychology and literature, to examine jointly the nature of trauma and ways of dealing with it. In studying relevant literary texts, scholars of literature and
psychology can complement each other in understanding thoughts and emotions embedded in the text and their relevance to trauma. Literary texts can also be used by therapists to facilitate discussion on trauma and help the patient to work through it. This kind of cooperation between scholars from psychology and literature is, obviously, not the only way to approach literature or deal with trauma, but it could prove fruitful to both disciplines.

Other forms of narrative art could also be used in working through trauma. The narratives told in film, drama, video and television could be extremely helpful in dealing with trauma; also, in a different way, fine art and music contain narratives of trauma. But that is material for another book.

Events like rape and bodily assault, earthquakes and floods, are clearly traumatic in nature. However, we would argue that trauma is not restricted to these extreme events. If trauma is seen as the shattering of a life narrative, it is an experience common to all. We all know of shattered dreams, of life treating us contrary to our desires; we know of illness and the death of loved ones. Therefore we will also deal with this more “everyday” appearance of trauma, with the search for meaning familiar to all people.

The theme of this book, namely the importance of narration for the healing of trauma, has had a marked influence on its form. After the explication in chapter I of concepts central in our argumentation, narratives seep into the arguments more and more. Chapter 2 contains two stories; a large part of chapter 3 is a story; chapter 4 begins and ends with a narrative; and chapter 5 contains an analysis of a literary narrative. Stories illuminate key issues and central ideas explored in the book. Often, we have found, narratives are more effective in conveying the complexities of trauma than rational argument. Our topic has greatly determined the style and structure of our book.

Democracy has been with us in South Africa for twelve years now. Yet the ghosts of the past have not been laid to rest, at least not completely, and new challenges lie ahead. The task of putting together the pieces of a society shattered by violence is not easy. Reconciliation cannot be condensed into a quick project, it needs consistent work, on a personal and on a public level. Perhaps the most enduring effects of totalitarian rule and the systematic oppression under apartheid cannot be measured in terms of the numbers dead, but in immeasurable losses of the human spirit. That is what has to be restored.

It is our sincere hope that this book will make a meaningful contribution to the discussion of a topic that will continue to challenge our country and our world in the years ahead: how to narrate our healing.

University of Cape Town
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CHAPTER ONE

LIFE AS A NARRATIVE

Life in search of a narrative

“Stories are told and not lived; life is lived and not told.” This sounds like common sense; and yet, says the French philosopher Paul Ricœur, it is only partially true (Ricœur 1991: 425). For stories are also lived, and life is told. The point that stories are lived, is the topic of chapter 4; the topic of this chapter is the transformation of our lives into stories.

Ricœur finds in human experience a “pre-narrative quality”; he sees life as “an incipient story … an activity and a desire in search of a narrative”. [All quoted emphasis is original unless noted otherwise.] He suggests that we tend to “see a certain chain of episodes in our lives as stories not yet told, stories that seek to be told” (434). We tend not to leave daily experiences “as they are”, but to examine and interpret them, to link them to one another. Socrates asserted that the unexamined life is not worth living. Ricœur agrees, but says, in addition, that to examine a life means turning it into a narrative: “Socrates’s life examined is a life narrated” (435).

For most of us, our experience does not consist of unrelated elements; present, past and future seem to be intertwined. Alasdair MacIntyre talks of “the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as a narrative [links] beginning to middle to end” (MacIntyre 1981: 191). However, it must be emphasised that we have a choice about the nature of the narratives into which we transform our lives. Narrating a life means becoming the author of one’s life. Although one cannot control the events in one’s life completely, one has a choice how to interpret the data of one’s life and how to act on the basis of that interpretation. Although we cannot absorb the overwhelming amount of information within and about us, we can distinguish between the significant and the insignificant and, led by that distinction, decide on our future actions. Like authors, who create narratives by selecting and structuring life’s data, we too can turn our experience into narratives, as is explained by Willie Burger:

We are always planning for the future and reviewing the past. Therefore we are always, in the light of our future plans and our past experience, busy selecting
certain sensory data and ignoring other information. In this sense we are always narrating our own lives (selecting and structuring information), not only after actions and events, but also while we are acting and experiencing. My actions are the result of my plans for the future and my story of my past experience. (Burger 2001: 83)

We are the narrators of our life stories, and we also play the part of the main character in them—therefore our stories are “autobiographies”, unified by the actions of a main character striving towards a future and determined by a past. Furthermore, not only are we the narrators of our lives and the main characters of our stories, but we are also the “readers” of our lives. Like the readers of a literary story, we search for links between the different events of our lives. In “reading” our lives, we use techniques similar to those of a literary reader; we move from specific scenes to general themes, and from the general back to the specific.

Turning one’s life into a narrative is a vital way of finding meaning: in discovering causal links between different events we create a coherent plot from our lives which leads to an understanding of how “things fit together”. ‘Emplotment’ is a way of creating coherence in the seemingly confusing course of our lives. We examine our lives to find central themes and patterns which permeate our diverse experiences—patterns which could make sense of life as a variety of “enactments” of recurrent themes. The discovery of a plot and of recurring thematic patterns enables us to distinguish between the significant and the insignificant. Significant events are those that have a strong influence on the plot and form part of fundamental patterns in the narrative.

Transforming the events in one’s life into a narrative structure is a way of counteracting the transience of life. In a narrative, every small component forms part of the whole: when one episode has been narrated, it is not over, because it keeps reverberating, influencing the rest of the plot, commenting on central themes and reflecting the values incorporated in the rest of the story. Every part is reflected in the whole, and vice versa.

Narration confers identity on the narrated life. The writings of Paul Ricoeur are full of insight on this topic. In his discussion of the concept of “narrative identity”, he distinguishes between two Latin words for identity: *idem* and *ipse*. *Idem* refers to an abstract, formal identity, *ipse* to a dynamic identity; *idem* refers to that which is always exactly the same; *ipse* on the other hand is “self-sameness”, constancy within a variety of circumstances—it is a “narrative identity” which creates cohesion within a life which would otherwise fall apart. “Self-sameness, ‘self-constancy’ (*ipse*), can escape the dilemma of the Same and the Other to the extent that its identity rests on a temporal structure that conforms to the model of a dynamic identity arising from the poetic composition of a narrative text … Unlike the abstract identity of the Same
Life as a Narrative

From the above it becomes clear that narrative identity involves a willingness to take responsibility for one’s own life, an ethical choice to remain constant.

Self-constancy is for each person that manner of conducting himself or herself so that others can count on that person. Because someone is counting on me, I am accountable for my actions before another. The term ‘responsibility’ unites both meanings: ‘counting on’ and ‘being accountable for’. It unites them, adding to the idea of a response to the question: ‘Where are you?’ asked by another who needs me. This response is the following: ‘Here I am!’ a response that is a statement of constancy. (Ricoeur 1992: 165)

The development of life’s narrative is fundamentally directed by the ethical values of the narrator; if there is constancy in the ethics, it provides coherence to the narrative. At the end of one’s life, one’s narrative is a storehouse of ethical choices and values, and the value of one’s past life is determined by the values incorporated in it. The idea of turning one’s life into a narrative is deeply involved with the question of what the best kind of life is. Ricoeur says: “The idea of gathering together one’s life in the form of a narrative is destined to serve as a basis for the aim of a ‘good’ life, the cornerstone of (our) ethics”. (Ricoeur 1992: 158). For him, the highest possible goal is “aiming at the ‘good life’ with and for others, in just institutions” (172).

The creation of a narrative from the data of our lives does not mean that we can ever completely comprehend the meaning of our lives. We are still in the midst of our stories, striving towards a desired end. We do not know what will happen to us, we do not understand why everything that has happened has happened to us; much darkness envelops us. Even at the end of our lives, a full understanding will still elude us. So, narrating our lives does not mean to come to a full understanding of life, but rather to strive towards a meaningful existence and to live the best of possible lives.

Different meanings of the narration of life—the communal aspect

We should distinguish between different meanings of the concept of “life narrative”. It can refer to the structure that I have consciously conferred on to my life, but it is possible that I have suppressed traumatic aspects of my life into the subconscious mind, so that the actual narrative of my life encompasses much more than the narrative I have consciously formed; it also includes the personal subconscious mind, the trauma that I have failed to confront. Ideally, everyone
should go through a process that Jung called “individuation”, that is, becoming “a separate, indivisible unity or ‘whole’”; a process in which consciousness and unconsciousness become integrated (Jung 1968: 275). “Consciousness should defend its reason and protect itself, and the chaotic life of the unconscious should be given the chance of having its way too—as much of it as we can stand. This means open conflict and open collaboration at once. That, evidently, is what human life should be” (288). When this happens, the narrative of my life reflects an inner wholeness, an integration of the conscious and the subconscious mind.

The narrative of my life is linked to a multitude of other narratives, and its interaction with these other narratives forms part of its total meaning. Narrating my life is not merely an individual matter. I am not only the main character of my own story, but also a minor character in the stories of others; my story is intertwined with those of others. My story is embedded in family histories and in the history of a city and a country; my story is part of our story. David Carr puts it as follows:

To inhabit a territory, to organise politically and economically for its cultivation and civilisation, to experience a natural or human threat and rise to meet it—these are experiences and actions usually not properly attributable to me alone, or to me, you and the others individually. They belong rather to us: it is not my experience but ours, not I who act but we who act in concert. (Carr 1997: 18)

We inherit a communal past from our families, cities, countries; it is never possible to make a completely “new beginning”. According to Alasdair MacIntyre, the legacy from the past constitutes

the given of my life, my moral starting point … I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualistic mode, is to deform my present relationships. The possession of an historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide. Notice that rebellion against my identity is always one possible mode of expressing it. (MacIntyre 1981: 205)

Communities and nations also narrate their past; they create histories (stories!), with heroes and villains, to make sense of their present and guide them into the future. We form—to use the title of Benedict Anderson’s influential book—“imagined communities”. In divided countries, different stories are made of the same historic material. Thus, in South Africa, the struggle from the 1950s to 1990 was called, on the one hand, a liberation struggle against the racist oppression of the apartheid regime, and, on the other hand, those in power spread the narrative of a struggle to protect the country’s civilised, Christian values against the onslaught of Communist terrorists.
We are born into stories, and have no choice in that matter—in a fundamental way, they determine our identities. Yet I do have a choice about my position in relation to the conventional narratives; I can decide on points of identification in the transmitted stories. In the interaction between individual and collective narratives, the personal identity is continually created and recreated. Stuart Hall puts it as follows: “Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made with the discourse of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning” (Hall 1994: 395).

The narrative that I form from my experience is my legacy to the community and to the world. In a famous Dutch poem, “Oinou hena stalagmon”, J H Leopold poetically describes a drop of wine flowing from a bottle broken on the prow of a ship to ensure a safe journey. (The meaning of the Greek title is “A drop of wine”.) The drop falling into the ocean is absorbed in the sea water; mixing with the ocean, it gradually spreads itself, until its influence is felt, in a new equilibrium, throughout the enormous expanse of water. This, for Leopold, is an image of the wide-spread influence that can flow from one powerful thought of a poet.

Not all of us are poets, but as narrators of our lives something akin to poetry emerges within us. My small narrative is submerged in larger narratives, where it exerts a never-ending influence. My life influences those who come into contact with me, but it does not stop there; in an ever-spread influence, like ripples caused by a stone thrown into a dam, my narrative spreads further, from those in contact with me to those in contact with them, in a never-ending movement. The effects brought about by my narrative change the present and can open up new possibilities for the future. Even the past is not left unchanged. Cartoon character Charlie Brown said, “What I am hoping for is a better yesterday”; and my narrative may do just that, because by being linked to the narratives of the past it may give a new significance to them. For instance: the achievements of Nelson Mandela give a great significance to the lives of his parents (and to their parents, and so on.) I am not Nelson Mandela, but even my small narrative, like Leopold’s drop of wine, has a greater influence on present, past and future than I may realise. It is impossible to cancel that influence. Even people committing suicide, pronouncing the death sentence on themselves and cutting themselves off from the world create a legacy of grief; even the person living in isolation is not without effect, because the isolation creates a vacuum, a gap which affects others who might otherwise have been in touch with that life. Ultimately, my choice is not between narrating my life and not narrating it, but between creating a good, bad or indifferent narrative. “He who has been, from then on cannot not have been: henceforth this mysterious and profoundly
obscure fact of having been is his viaticum for all eternity” (Vladimir Jankélévitch – quoted as motto in Ricœur 2004).

**Trauma and life narratives**

Narrating one’s life is about finding structure, coherence and meaning in life. Trauma, in contrast, is about the shattering of life’s narrative structure, about a loss of meaning—the traumatised person has “lost the plot”. A fundamental issue concerning trauma is the regaining of meaning after trauma, the rewriting of one’s life narrative to incorporate the traumatic loss in the new narrative. Ricœur mentions the duty of the psychiatrist, when someone comes to him or her with the “bits and pieces” of a broken life story, to help the patient to recreate it into “a story that is both more intelligible and more bearable” (Ricœur 1991: 435). Typically, victims of trauma, when relating the experience, begin with the time before the trauma. For them, a crucial matter is the abyss between the time before and after the trauma, an abyss that has destroyed all feelings of continuity and order, and they need to include the abyss in their story. Overwhelming trauma is like an earthquake, wiping out the world as it was known; and the daunting challenge is to build a new narrative that connects the trauma with the life coming before and after it.

Extreme trauma leads to a loss of words, because language is insufficient to describe the experience. Charlotte Delbo (1990: 3–4) distinguishes between “intellectual/external memory” and “deep memory”. Intellectual memory can be verbalised; deep memory cannot, because the language has been torn apart by trauma:

Deep memory preserves sensations, physical imprints. It is the memory of the senses. For it isn’t words that are swollen with emotional charge. Otherwise, someone who has been tortured by thirst for weeks on end could never again say ‘I’m thirsty. How about a cup of tea.’ The word has also split in two. Thirst has turned back into a word for commonplace use. But if I dream of the thirst I suffered in Birkenau, I once again see the person I was, haggard, halfway crazed, near to collapse; I physically feel that real thirst and it is an atrocious nightmare.

Therefore, although she knows for a fact that she was in the concentration camp at Birkenau, she cannot recall it in everyday language, because the language is insufficient—therefore “I no longer know if it is real” (Delbo 1990: 3–4). In chapter 4, we examine how Delbo uses literary techniques and language to express her traumatic experience. Not only does everyday language seem incapable of expressing trauma, but talking about trauma leads to the reliving of the traumatic event. That is why there are conflicting desires in traumatised persons—they want to talk about their trauma to work through it, but they also
want to suppress it into the subconscious and conceal it—which is the topic of chapter 2.

At this stage it is necessary to make further distinctions between the ways in which the word “narrative” is being used here. “Narratives” can refer to literary narratives; it can also refer to autobiographical stories, stories in which people tell what happened to them (like Charlotte Delbo telling of her life in Auschwitz). Furthermore, “narrative” can be used figuratively, as Ricoeur uses it, to describe the search for coherence and meaning in one’s life—the desire to transform one’s life into a “plot”. Although one should distinguish between the different usages of the word, they are all linked to the creation of coherence and meaning. Language is of fundamental importance in all the usages, for when life’s narrative is destroyed by trauma, it leads to a loss of words, an inability to narrate a central episode in one’s life; and finding the language to narrate is vital for the refiguration of one’s life narrative.

Fitting the pieces together is not only an issue for individuals, but for societies too. In her book *A Human Being Died That Night*, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela tells of her interviews with Eugene de Kock—“Prime Evil” of the apartheid era. It is the story of two people from opposing life narratives, with opposite views of right and wrong and of heroes and villains, who get together and discover a common humanity. That, on a micro scale, suggests a way for the reconciliation of a nation. The book also discusses the importance of forgiveness in bridging the divisions between the victims and the perpetrators of the past.

We mentioned that conflicting narratives have been told of South Africa’s history preceding the first fully democratic election in 1994—on the one hand, it was regarded as a struggle for freedom from racist oppression, on the other hand as a combat against terrorists threatening civilisation. Both these narratives lost their meaning in 1994, when the armed struggle ended and the need for the building of a new society arose. Apart from being traumatised by apartheid, South Africa is at present a country traumatised in another sense: the loss of guiding narratives has left a void in its wake. Political and religious leaders have made efforts to fill the emptiness and new narratives have emerged, narratives about the “rainbow nation” and the “African Renaissance”.

Writers, who have the necessary imagination and the power of words, could play a key role in the creation of new narratives: by questioning existing narratives, where necessary, and imagining new stories to live by. The role of literary narratives in the healing of a nation is the topic of chapters 4 and 5.
The Lamentation of Job

A natural tendency, for individuals and for communities, is to turn their present and past into sentimental, romantic stories with reassuring conclusions. We like to believe the best about ourselves—maybe a flaw or two, but “our hearts are in the right place”. We like to believe that life is good: people are basically benevolent, and justice will ultimately prevail; we like to agree with Robert Browning: “God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world”. But trauma fundamentally challenges these assumptions.

Perhaps the most famous example in world literature of this kind of challenge is to be found in the Book of Job. Job’s life narrative initially made total sense: he was a good man and was justly rewarded by God for his goodness: he was healthy and wealthy, and his good fortune was shared by his large family. Not only was Job “blameless and upright” but, to be completely on the safe side, he also regularly made sacrifices to God for the sake of his children, in case they had, without his knowledge, sinned against God. Not a finger could be pointed at him, and yet, out of the blue, he loses his children, his wealth and his health—and with this trauma, he loses the basis of his life narrative: the belief that goodness is rewarded and evil punished.

These events are told in the first two chapters of the Book of Job; after that, in the next forty chapters, the fundamental questions flowing from the calamity are faced, when three of Job’s friends (later also a fourth one) turn up and argue about the reasons for Job’s sudden misfortune. There are a number of points emanating from this text which are relevant to our discussion of life narratives and trauma:

1. When the friends arrive at Job’s home, they preserve seven days of silence. They have the wisdom to realise that, after experiencing intense pain, one does not want to talk about it straight away; it is too painful. They understand that what Job needs at this moment is to have sympathetic friends who are willing to sit with him quietly and patiently, sharing his pain. They know that great trauma leads to a loss of words.

2. After this promising start, the friends become less understanding. Job breaks the silence by cursing the day of his birth and blaming God for his misfortune. To his friends, this is blasphemous, and they regard it as their duty to defend the Name of God. God is a just God, they maintain, and if bad things happened to Job, he must have done bad things that offended God. This reveals the crux of their own life narrative—a narrative that has given them security, one that they do not dare to let go of. They do not realise that they are merely offering Job’s shattered life narrative back to him—the narrative based on the belief that God is just, that He rewards goodness and punishes badness. Instead of opening their minds up to Job’s real calamity—the loss of a life narrative—
they force their own life narrative on to him, a narrative that, in Job’s experience, has proved to be false.

3. The friends nonetheless play a positive role in Job’s dealing with his trauma. They serve as a sounding board and provide him with an opportunity to express his pain and vent his anger; actions which are essential before he can ultimately find peace.

4. Job never comes to a complete understanding of why he was struck by calamity. The dialogue between God and Satan, their decision to test the virtue of Job (in chapters 1 and 2) takes place before the throne of God, so that Job knows nothing about the heavenly agreement preceding his misfortune. At the end of the story, God makes His appearance and addresses Job and his friends; but He never justifies His ways to Job, He only reminds Job of the greatness of creation and, by implication, of its Creator. God puts Job in his place, reminding him that, from a Godly perspective, he is a minute creature, created by the selfsame God whom he has dared to accuse. Job then finds peace in the acknowledgement that he is not God’s equal and has no right to blame God or demand justification of His ways.

5. After Job’s magnificent accusations of God, bravely asking the questions that no-one else dares to ask, this resignation comes as an anti-climax. But there is another turn in the discussion: surprisingly, God commends Job for the harsh way in which he spoke about Him, and condemns his friends for their incorrect way of speaking about God (Job 42 v 7). God values Job’s sincere, brave speaking of his mind, and dislikes the friends’ “justification” of God with their naive assumptions. God appreciates Job’s faith, which has gone through a period of deep and honest doubt, and survived.

6. The Book of Job has a “happy ending”. Job gets back more than he possessed before calamity struck: increased wealth and offspring, and health. In a way, the ending runs contrary to the fundamental idea of the book: that good people are not always rewarded with prosperity. Also, one could question the implication that Job was completely recompensed for his original losses: although he had other children, those who died were irrevocably lost. However, one should not overlook what is perhaps the most crucial aspect of the “happy ending”, which goes beyond the naive idea that the just will be rewarded with prosperity: the fact that Job’s circumstances were changed when he prayed for his friends (Job 42: 10). Having worked through his personal grief, he is no longer enveloped in his own trauma, and is able to look at his friends with empathy and care. The good man is rewarded with goodness.

7. Even more important than Job’s finding of peace, is the fact that the trauma of Job is the thematic material that leads to the creation of a literary masterpiece. Trauma may be a stimulus for the creation of art. “The wound is a talking mouth”, says one of the characters in Etienne van Heerden’s novel
Kikuyu (Van Heerden 1998: 153). In the “Afterword” to his two books on his Holocaust experience, If This is a Man and The Truce, Primo Levi says:

If I had not lived the Auschwitz experience, I probably would never have written anything … [O]nto my brief and tragic experience as a deportee has been overlaid that much longer and complex experience of writer-witness, and the sum total is clearly positive: in its totality, this past has made me richer and surer. (Levi n.d.: 397–398)

Trauma does often lead to the expression and narration of pain. This not only applies to writers like Primo Levi or the author of the Book of Job; it can also be true of all people going through trauma and rethinking their life narratives. Trauma may lead to the re-imagining of conventional narratives, the creative “rewriting” of one’s life story to make it uniquely one’s own.

We have brought together the lives of ordinary people and of a literary character like Job; we have linked the re-creation of life narratives with literary narratives. That is not surprising, since a basic assumption of this book is the connection between trauma and language. Trauma means a loss of language, we have maintained; creating or re-creating a life narrative means that one has a story that can be narrated. When one struggles with a shattered life story, literary narratives can help to find words for one’s trauma, as will be discussed more elaborately in chapters 4 and 5.

The Book of Job contains the laments of Job, and the genre of the lament is a valuable vehicle to help ordinary people with the expression of trauma. Denise Ackermann writes about the ways in which the language of lament can be used for the expression of a wide spectrum of human emotions. According to her, lament is a coil of suffering and hope, awareness and memory, anger and relief, a desire for vengeance, forgiveness, and healing that beats against the heart of God. It is our way of bearing the unbearable … It is, in essence, supremely human. (Ackermann 2003: 111)

Lament is like a hot poultice applied to a festering boil. At first it is painful; it burns, and one application does not do the trick. Gradually, the inflammation becomes localised, the poultice draws the pus out, the angry redness subsides, the pain is relieved and healing begins. (121)

Two kinds of trauma

Before we continue our argument, we should distinguish between two kinds of trauma, as Dominick LaCapra (1991) does:
(a) historical trauma, which refers to a single huge disaster, which can be personal (for instance, a rape) or communal (like a flood);
(b) structural trauma, which refers to a pattern of continual and continuing traumas.

It is interesting to note that people suffering from structural trauma may gradually become so used to the traumatic situation that it becomes traumatic to move out of it; what most people call “normal” has become abnormal for them. In a lecture at the University of Cape Town, Valerie Sinason told of her experience as a young psychologist, when a girl who had been raped repeatedly, came to her consulting rooms. As she entered, the girl started taking off her clothes, ready to be raped. Sinason tried to console her, assuring her that the consulting room was different from her “normal” surroundings, that she was safe there. Then, surprisingly, all hell broke loose, because the girl was terrified by the thought of “normality”.

Structural trauma and historical trauma are harmful in different ways. Structural trauma is not only painful in itself, but leaving the well-known framework of that situation may be—at least at first—even more painful; historical trauma, on the other hand, causes its pain by the shattering of a protective framework that had seemed so safe. Our discussion here will focus mainly on historical trauma, but it will also be related to the issue of structural trauma.

**Disasters ingrained in life**

It is necessary now to return to the fundamental question of the relation between trauma and life narratives. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, two disasters happened that dominated the news media for weeks: the fall of the Twin Towers in New York on 11 September 2001 and the tsunami disaster of 26 December 2004. In a dramatic way, these events remind us of the suffering caused by human inhumanity to other humans and by the destructive forces of nature. They both caused trauma on an enormous scale, with the tsunami killing hundreds of thousands of people, and both plunging even more people into deep mourning and leaving survivors with overwhelming, meaning-shattering memories.

Such disasters evoke age-old questions about the meaning of life. For believers in the providence of God, questions related to those asked by Job, arise: Does God really exist? If so, why did He allow this to happen? Why do the innocent have to suffer? Is God really in control of events? Why does God not control the forces of nature properly? Why does He not protect the innocent against the cruelties of the wicked? Is God maybe not almighty? Or worse, is God not benevolent? These terrible events can easily suggest that God is either
not in control, or He is not good. God apparently transgresses against His own laws: according to tradition, God demands justice from humans and forbids them to commit cruelty and murder; but on a tremendous scale He seems to harm and kill people by fire and water, and through cruel human hands. Such events can shatter the framework of beliefs of those who believe that “God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world”, and lead to a severe loss of coherence in their lives.

Because of the enormity of disasters such as those mentioned above, we tend to regard them as exceptional events. We tend to say determinedly, especially after catastrophes due to human cruelty, such as the extinction of Jews by the Nazis: Never again! Yet the reality is: Yet again—alas! The end of the Second World War did not bring an end to human atrocities—in the next decades, they happened in Russia, southern Africa, Vietnam, Rwanda, and in many other places. Natural disasters like floods, earthquakes and fires continue to inflict suffering and death. In South Africa, according to UNAids, 456 000 people died of Aids in 2003—almost two tsunamis! Catastrophes on a huge scale, like the tsunami of 2004, are not as exceptional as they seem; they are like a magnifying glass that can help us to see the suffering that is ingrained in human life. Even people with calm and relatively predictable lives have to cope with the ubiquity and often the unexpectedness of death. Of course the fact that disasters have no end should not stop us from trying to remove and alleviate, as far as possible, the causes and effects of the catastrophes; but we should not allow ourselves to be placated with the hope that suffering can be removed from the world.

For Hindus, suffering is an inherent part of life. When a Hindu was asked to comment on the effect of the tsunami on his religious faith, he replied that the catastrophe was completely in accordance with his beliefs. The god Shiva in whom Hindus believe is both destructive and creative, and the symbolic dance of Shiva suggests the continual destruction as well as the continual renewal of the world; it indicates the inextricable intertwinemnt of life and death. And indeed, the tsunami was followed by new activity and restoration. The world’s dormant compassion was awakened, and the ruined areas received food, clothes, money and assistance in abundance; old feuds were forgotten as people united to rebuild the devastated regions.

**Frankl’s search for meaning**

This brings us to the crux of the topic explored in this chapter: the links between trauma and the search for meaning, between the shattering and recreating of life narratives. In 1945, after surviving the horrors of Auschwitz, Viktor Frankl wrote, in nine days, a book that would make him famous and would later be published in English under the title *Man’s Search for Meaning.*
In the edition of 1984, a postscript was added: “The case for a tragic optimism”. In reaction to his experiences in Auschwitz, Frankl expounds his views about logotherapy, a therapy based on the necessity of finding meaning in order to survive physically and mentally in the midst of severe suffering. Quoting Nietzsche, he maintains: “He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how” (Frankl 1985: 97).

In his postscript of 1984, Frankl mentions the “tragic triad” that makes it difficult “to say yes to life”, namely pain, guilt and death (161). He then discusses ways of finding meaning within the tragic triad, which make it possible to live with “tragic optimism”, that is, with optimism in spite of the tragic aspects of life. He bases his theory on “the human capacity to creatively turn life’s negative aspects into something positive or constructive”. The tragic triad can be counteracted by: (1) turning suffering into a human achievement and accomplishment; (2) deriving from guilt the opportunity to change oneself for the better; and (3) deriving from life’s transitoriness an incentive to take responsible action.” According to Frankl, “a human being is not one in pursuit of happiness but rather in search of a reason to become happy … through actualising the potential meaning inherent and dormant in a given situation” (162).

Frankl gives a number of examples of meaningful responses to suffering. Suffering may lead to meaningful action, for instance when a person who has recovered from a terminal illness starts helping others with a similar illness. (One could add many other examples of meaningful, active responses to suffering: to protest against human injustice, cruelty and violence; to support efforts to control the forces of nature; to alleviate the effects of a natural disaster by sending food and clothes to those in need, and so on.) Suffering, according to Frankl, may also enrich our existence through meaningful new encounters and relationships.

Of the utmost importance, furthermore, is the possibility for personal growth created by suffering—it can for instance lead to increased compassion and greater strength of character.

In accordance with our views on the importance of ethical values in life narratives, Frankl notes that our past always remains part of us, and its quality is determined by the values realised in it:

> Just as life remains potentially meaningful under any conditions, even those which are most miserable, so too does the value of each and every person stay with him or her, and it does so because it is based on the values that he or she has realized in the past. (1985: 176)

More important than the fact that we suffer, is the way in which we respond to suffering. Unlike Freud, Frankl notes great differences in our responses to it:
Sigmund Freud once asserted, ‘Let one attempt to expose a number of the most diverse people uniformly to hunger. With the increase of the imperative urge of hunger all individual differences will blur, and in their stead will appear the uniform expression of the one unstilled urge.’ Thank heaven, Sigmund Freud was spared knowing the concentration camps from the inside. His subjects lay on a couch designed in the plush style of Victorian culture, not in the filth of Auschwitz. There, the ‘individual differences’ did not ‘blur’ but, on the contrary, people became more different; people unmasked themselves, both the swine and the saints. (178)

Frankl admits that the saints form a minority group, but he challenges his readers to join the minority, and warns them to be alert, because:

“Since Auschwitz we know what man is capable of. And since Hiroshima we know what is at stake.” (179)

Frankl’s search for meaning does not imply that one can discover a final meaning that will last, unaltered, for the rest of one’s life; neither does it suggest the possibility of finding a single, all-encompassing meaning which will provide the right answer to all life’s problems and which is applicable, without adaptation, to all people. On the contrary, he says, “the meaning of life differs from man to man, from day to day and from hour to hour” (131–132). The search for meaning is never-ending, and it requires taking individual responsibility.

The search for meaning also does not imply that it is possible to reach a complete understanding of life with all its complexities and contradictions; its primary objective is not to find answers to questions such as: Who is to blame for my suffering? Did God plan it? Does my trauma fit into a greater scheme of things? Rather than looking from the trauma “backwards” and brooding over these unanswerable questions about the (human, heavenly or diabolical) causes of the suffering, Frankl points from the trauma forward, to the future, suggesting ways of responding to the trauma that may transform it from tragedy into a life-enriching experience. Ironically, by looking forward from the suffering to the future and not backwards in search of reasons for its happening, one may indeed, by one’s creative response to a trauma, create a valid reason for its occurrence. In our terms, Frankl sees trauma as a stimulus to re-imagine one’s life story; he suggests ways of recreating one’s life narrative to incorporate the trauma; to create a narrative which will, when completed, be filled with value.

We have given much attention to Frankl’s views because they are so relevant to our discussion. They are linked to issues discussed above—issues such as the ideals of leading the best of possible lives, of filling one’s life with values, of finding coherence and continuity; the necessity of taking responsibility for one’s life; and the connections between trauma and life narratives.
There is another link between Frankl’s and our ideas, which is suggested by the name he gave to his theory: logotherapy. The Greek word “logos” to which the term refers, has various meanings: it means “word”; it can also mean “narrative”; furthermore, it can refer to order and logic—it is sometimes translated into Latin as “ratio”. The fact that the word “logos” suggests a link between “word” and “narrative” on the one hand, and “order” and “logic” on the other hand, is no coincidence. In English similar links are found: the words “meaning” and “sense” refer to the communication through language (the meaning of words; talking sense) as well as to order and purpose in life (the meaning of life; making sense of what happened). Language and order are linked.

Trauma defies language; it resists being communicated. The recovery from trauma begins with the finding of words and of a story about what happened; “translating” trauma into the structure of a language and a narrative is a way of bringing order and coherence into the chaotic experience. Furthermore, trauma can be communicated and shared through language, which also helps the healing process. Frankl’s logotherapy is a search for purpose and a search for words. According to Biblical tradition, in the beginning the earth was “without form and void”, but when God spoke, order was created out of the chaos; similarly, the void created by trauma needs words to be transformed into something meaningful.

Objections to Frankl

Although we have indicated our agreement with many of Frankl’s ideas, some objections could be raised against his views. People who are in shock after a trauma, do not want to hear that they must “pull themselves together” or “look on the bright side of things”. They need a period of wordless mourning, of painful meditation on what happened, before they can move forward. Any talk about a search for meaning in suffering would be offensive to a traumatised person who is emotionally not ready for it. And even when the search for meaning begins, the journey often moves one or two steps forward, and then one backward. Frankl’s ideas should be used mercifully, in small measures, as new meanings gradually emerge from the pain.

A number of writers on the Holocaust have expressed opinions which deviate from those of Frankl. Primo Levi agrees with Frankl that a small minority of “superior individuals, made of the stuff of martyrs and saints”, managed to remain true to their moral codes in the camp (Levin n.d.: 98). But the general trend among the inmates that Levin describes, is a far cry from the search for meaning on which Frankl focuses. Levi noticed that survival became of prime concern in the camp, and moral convictions faded away:
There comes to light the existence of two particularly well differentiated categories of men—the saved and the drowned. Other pairs of opposites (the good and the bad, the wise and the foolish, the cowards and the courageous, the unlucky and the fortunate) are considerably less distinct, they seem less essential, and above all they allow for more numerous and complex intermediary gradations … Here the struggle to survive is without respite, because everyone is desperately and ferociously alone. (Levi n.d.: 93–94)

In a moving chapter, titled “The last one”, Levi describes the death of one of the inmates who dared to resist the authorities—he was “the last one”. The camp authorities have turned the other humans, who had been capable of moral choices and judgements, into machines incapable of using their will, automatically doing what their masters want. At the end of the chapter Levi concludes:

To destroy a man is difficult, almost as difficult as to create one: it has not been easy, nor quick, but you Germans have succeeded. Here we are, docile under your gaze; from our side you have nothing more to fear; no acts of violence, no words of defiance, not even a look of judgement. (156)

After the departure of the German soldiers, the humanity of the prisoners resurges when they decide to reward three well-deserving men among them with extra slices of bread.

Only a day before a similar event would have been inconceivable. The law of the Lager said: ‘eat your own bread, and if you can, that of your neighbour’, and left no room for gratitude. It really meant that the Lager was dead … It was the first human gesture that occurred among us. I believe that that moment can be dated as the beginning of the change by which we who had not died, slowly changed from Häftlinge [prisoners] to men again. (Levi n.d.: 166)

Levi’s sharp observations remind us that ethical behaviour is not merely an individual matter. Cruel authorities can create an environment where it becomes increasingly difficult, almost impossible, to observe an ethical code. Ethics is turned upside down, and what used to be good, becomes bad, and vice versa. The most merciless, cruel soldier is then the “best” one; the most servile subject of an unjust authority does “best”. Consciences disappear, and human beings change into animals, or machines.

When Levi returns from the camp, he has a recurring dream:

A dream full of horror has still not ceased to visit me, at sometimes frequent, sometimes longer, intervals … It is a dream within a dream, varied in detail, one in substance. I am sitting at a table with my family, or with friends, or at work, or in the green countryside; in short, in a peaceful yet relaxed environment,
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apparently without tension or affliction; yet I feel a deep and subtle anguish, the definite sensation of an impending threat. And in fact, as the dream proceeds, slowly or brutally, each time in a different way, everything collapses and disintegrates around me, the scenery, the walls, the people, while the anguish becomes more intense and more precise. Now everything has changed to chaos; I am alone in the centre of a grey and turbid nothing, and now I know what this thing means, and I also know that I have always known it; I am in the Lager once more, and nothing is true outside the Lager. All the rest was a brief pause, a deception of the senses, a dream; my family, nature in flower, my home. Now this inner dream, this dream of peace, is over, and in the outer dream which continues, gelid, a well-known voice resounds: a single word, not imperious, but brief and subdued. It is the dawn command of Auschwitz, a foreign word, feared and expected: get up, “Wstawách”. (379–380)

Levi’s narratives about life in Auschwitz complements Frankl’s logotherapy—he reminds us that the search for meaning is not merely a personal matter, but one that involves the building of a society that allows and encourages ethical behaviour. Levi’s dream suggests that humans can create either a secure and fair society or an environment where the mighty rule without morality—Levi has experienced both. The choice is ours and, echoing Frankl once more, we can indeed say:

“Since Auschwitz we know what man is capable of. And since Hiroshima we know what is at stake”.

Reflecting on his Holocaust experience, Elie Wiesel also expresses opinions which apparently deviate from what Frankl believes. He confesses his total lack of understanding of what happened in the concentration camp, saying: “I know nothing” (Wiesel 1968:180). There is no explanation “why” such a thing happened: “Answers: I say there are none” (182). To him, “Auschwitz signifies … the defeat of the intellect that wants to find a Meaning—with a capital M—in history” (183). Therefore we must “learn to be silent” (197).

It is significant that Wiesel seems to go against his own instruction, for he breaks the silence himself. In him we find the typical inner conflict of the traumatised—he cannot understand, yet he wants to understand; he wants to remain silent about an experience that cannot be put into words, and yet he continually writes about it. In a paradoxical way, he has indeed come to some kind of an understanding of what happened—an understanding that it cannot be (completely) understood. Wiesel’s criticism is not so much against those who write about their experience, but against those who write without knowing; not against those who search for some meaning in their suffering, but against those who pretend to have found the total Meaning of it, with a capital M. In his writing, he condemns those who condemn, those who pretend to understand
Auschwitz, but were not there. Wiesel knows that he understands more than they do, those judging easily from the outside—for he, unlike them, comprehends the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust.

In similar vein, Lawrence Langer writes about the “bottomless layer of incompletion” of holocaust testimonies (Langer 1993: 23). He points out that no testimony can ever contain the event in its totality; it is indeed a bottomless well. He quotes Thomas Mann’s novel *Joseph and his Brothers (Joseph und seine Brüder)* to support his view. It is interesting, though, that in spite of Mann’s acknowledgement of the limitations of human knowledge and understanding in *Joseph and his Brothers*, his great work is permeated by meaningful ideas and structures. The novel suggests that much can be discovered, even though much more remains a mystery.

A strong objection against a search for the meaning of suffering could be raised by people unwilling to ascribe any positive aspect to intense suffering. They may fear that finding meaning in suffering may imply that “suffering is OK”, that we should say “yes” to life in its totality, with its evil and its suffering, instead of improving the world by attempting to remove evil and suffering from it. Instead of saying “yes” to suffering, they would much rather say “no” to it. Those who have personally experienced the intense horror of trauma are not inclined to accept it placidly and regard it as a way of enriching their lives.

One should, however, distinguish between the causes and the effects of suffering. In the realisation that traumas can destroy people, physically and mentally, we should fight to remove, as far as possible, the causes of trauma: hunger, war, criminality, poverty, Aids, rape, and so on. But, in the realisation that suffering will always be with us, we should also work at softening the effects of trauma. Finding words to express pain and finding meaning in suffering (the themes of this chapter) are ways of healing their painful wounds. We do not maintain that suffering is all right—on the contrary, because it is so terrible, it is essential to gain some meaning from it to counterbalance the losses it causes. Being happy about one’s own suffering is masochism; being happy about the suffering of others is sadism; it is not our intention to propagate either masochism or sadism, but to suggest ways to make suffering more bearable. The reality of trauma’s destructive power can be balanced by the reality of human resilience, triumphing over adversity and creating meaning in the void.

**African responses to suffering**

Our argument is that one should not attempt to shut out all pain from one’s life. It is a natural tendency, very marked in the modern Western world, to ignore suffering. Susan Sontag detects a
modern sensibility, which regards suffering as something that is a mistake or an accident or a crime. Something to be fixed. Something to be refused. Something that makes one feel powerless. (Sontag 2004: 88)

On the other hand she also believes that it is

a good in itself to acknowledge, to have enlarged, one’s sense of how much suffering caused by human wickedness there is in the world we share with others. Someone who is perennially surprised that depravity exists, who continues to feel disillusioned (even incredulous) when confronted with evidence of what humans are capable of inflicting in the way of gruesome, hands-on cruelties upon other humans, has not reached moral or psychological adulthood.

No one after a certain age has the right to this kind of innocence, or superficiality, to this degree of ignorance, or amnesia. (Sontag 2004: 102)

In a way that seems foreign to the modern Western mind, suffering is central to the African experience. The point is made by the character Blanche, administrator of a hospital in Zululand in J M Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*. Referring to the harsh life of Africa, she says:

- This is reality: the reality of Zululand, the reality of Africa. It is the reality now and the reality of the future as far as we can see it. Which is why African people come to church to kneel before Jesus on the cross, African women above all, who have to bear the brunt of reality. Because they suffer and he suffers with them. (Coetzee 2003: 141)

The African scholar Gabriel Setiloane makes a similar point: “to Africans, the crucified Jesus is irresistible” (Setiloane, quoted in Brand 2002: 67).

Gerrit Brand extensively discusses the debates around suffering and sacrifices in African Christian theology (2002: 147–194). “Sacrifice is one of the most widely discussed topics in African Christian theology,” he maintains (147). Mercy Oduyoye, basing her theology on her experience as an African woman, points to the various ways in which ordinary people are senselessly sacrificed daily to the mighty and the rich. In contrast to this evil suffering, Oduyoye notes another kind of suffering, a praiseworthy suffering for the sake of others:

- “Living for others” might take the form of “dying for friends”. In times of a crisis a sacrifice must be offered if the harmony and wholeness of life is to be restored … In Oduyoye’s view … the Western (and Western feminist) ideal of maximal individual self-fulfilment, constrained only by the self-fulfilment of other individuals, is simply not a live option for African women and children … In a situation where people depend on one another for their very survival, “wholeness of life” will have to take the form of communal wholeness. This means that
individual self-fulfilment can only be found in sacrificing one’s personal interest for the community, and self-confidence only gained through self-denial. (Brand 2002: 163–164).

Oduyoye’s ideas are echoed by the African theologian Manas Buthelezi, who distinguishes between “oppressive” and “redemptive” suffering. “Oppressive suffering” should be resisted; resistance against such oppression, however, involves the risk of another kind of suffering, redemptive suffering (Brand 2002: 166–167).

Oduyoye’s and Buthelezi’s opinions on suffering and sacrifice are closely linked to ubuntu, the much-discussed, many-faceted ethical concept developed in Africa. The following exposition is based on P H Coetzee & A P J Roux’s book, Philosophy from Africa (pages 41 to 51). At the heart of ubuntu is the belief that “a person is a person through other people”. Ubuntu is a humaneness that radiates into every aspect of life and finds its expression in a community where the individual lives for the community, and the community cares for the individual. It takes seriously the view that humans are social beings; it implies an obligation of the privileged towards the needy.

Ubuntu steers midway between the two extremes of individualism and collectivism. In contrast to individualism’s belief that “self-preservation is the first law of life”, it affirms that

we cannot preserve self without being concerned about preserving other selves … The agony of the poor impoverishes the rich; the betterment of the poor enriches the rich. The manager’s success at managing depends on the co-operation of the managed … Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. (R Khoza, quoted in Coetzee & Roux 1998: 45)

Unlike collectivism with its disregard for the individual,

ubuntu would seem to be broadening respect for the individual—respect for the individual and the rights of each person in the social unit—and purging collectivism of its negative elements. (Coetzee & Roux 1998: 45)

Although the concept is embedded in the African family and African kinship, it has been expanded to include the belief in a universal brother- and sisterhood. According to Khoza, ubuntu can never be racist, for it is based on respect for all human beings. The important point for the argument here is that ubuntu entails, on the one hand, a society of harmony and wholeness but, on the other hand, a willingness of individuals to suffer for the well-being of others.