



*Photos: Courtesy of Ginn Fourie*

## A Mother's Forgiveness

*By John Webster*

**F**orgiveness is never easy. To see it up close is a moving experience. I was reminded of this fact again last month, while visiting in the home of Ginn Fourie, a faculty member in the department of physiotherapy at the Health Science faculty of the University of Cape Town, at the southern tip of Africa. Let me tell you her story in some detail. It is a story of a mother's incredible forgiveness in the face of the loss of her only daughter.

It was the best of times. It was the worst of times. It was 1993. Nelson Mandela was free. South Africa had chosen negotiations over bloodbath. The die had been cast. The first free and fair election was just around the corner. However, the end had not yet come for some in the Pan African Congress (PAC), a smaller liberation party heavily invested in armed struggle. Those in positions of privilege had not yet suffered as they deserved. Peace was coming too soon. Young operatives had not yet had a chance to earn their revolutionary credentials. The war could not stop—just yet.

Things had gotten ugly. A group of PAC guerrillas had stormed into St. James, a popular Evangelical Anglican church, killing dozens of worshipers in a hail of AK47 bullets. Shortly thereafter, the same group hit another church. Fear was back in the air.

But December 31 was a time to celebrate. It was the night before New Years Eve. Lyndi Fourie, a vivacious Adventist university student and her friends had taken a flatmate to the railway station to catch the train. On the way home, they decided to stop in at the Heidelberg Tavern, a favorite spot for multicultural gatherings of University of Cape Town students. Unexpectedly, the doors burst open as a PAC operative stormed inside firing round after round into the tavern. In a few moments it was over. Shot at close range, Lyndi's body lay crumpled on the floor. She died instantly, while her friend Quentin was paralyzed from his waist down and another flatmate lost a kidney and part of his stomach.

I will never forget waiting with other friends and church members at the Fourie home for Ginn and her husband to return from the morgue—knowing that they had to go and identify their daughter's body. Most of the church pastoral team was away during the holidays at the end of the year and I had been asked to help break the news to the family. How does one describe such grief? What a waste. So close to the end of hostilities. So near and yet so far. What does one say? Lyndi was the very epitome of the new South Africa—bright, optimistic, nonracist, open. Now she was cold and lifeless. Nothing could more poignantly embody the tragedy of sin—of the evils of apartheid, war, and mindless violence.

I was asked to offer the prayer at the funeral. I was somewhat taken aback when Ginn approached me beforehand and asked if she could read a prayer that she had prepared, at an appropriate point during my prayer, while the closest family and friends formed a huge circle around the simple pine wood casket. I was astonished and moved to



tears as I listened to a mother's prayer I will never forget. Though violated and broken and outraged at the evil and pain of the killing, she prayed a prayer of incredible power in a steady and clear voice. It was a prayer of forgiveness for the perpetrators, a prayer asking for love—the love Jesus showed on the cross. "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

Last December, while visiting South Africa, I asked for a copy of that prayer. With Ginn's permission, let me share what she prayed:

Gracious Father  
You gave your only Son  
to bring healing for every soul on earth

Thank you for our only daughter  
May healing come through her death  
to each person she touched—especially those who  
murdered her

Mary, Mother of God, our children died at the hands  
of evil men

Lyndi had no choice, no time

But your son said it for her:

"Father forgive them for they do not know what they do"

We gave her bed and board and some love  
You gave her forgiveness and a love that was:  
honest,  
pure,  
selfless,  
color- and gender-free.

Dear God she taught me well of you  
able to listen,  
able to hear.  
That was her life that you gave her  
Her death was swift and painless, thank goodness

My heart is broken  
The hole is bottomless  
it will not end  
But you know all about it.

Thank you for the arms,  
the lips,  
the heartbeats  
of family and friends to carry us.  
I trust you with my precious Lyndi  
This planet is a dangerous place to live  
I know that you will come soon to fetch us  
I wish it were today  
But I will wait for your time.  
Amen.

Of course, people sometimes have superhuman strength during a crisis. Later on, resolve crumbles and bitterness sets in. Not so with Ginn Fourie. Almost a year later, after the operatives had been arrested and charged with murder, Ginn found herself in criminal court facing young men who denied it all. She writes:

I sat in the Supreme Court in Cape Town, looking at them in the dock: Humphrey Gqomfa, Vuyisile Madasi, and Zola Mabala. I was confronted by my own feelings of anger and sadness, and how I could possibly respond appropriately. Somehow I could engender no hate, in spite of the grim reminders presented by video and close-up colored photographs of Lyndi and three others lying dead on the floor. The prisoner's faces were stoic and they demonstrated clear resistance to the process of the law. I felt an unexplainable sense of empathy and sadness for them, quite a predicament for them to be in. Now, there was no support for them from the organization that had inspired their "Freedom Fight," each was represented by a separate advocate.

As she wrestled with her feelings, Ginn resolved to communicate directly with the prisoners. She sent a message to the them through the court interpreter: If they were guilty, whether they felt guilty or not, she forgave them. During a pause in proceedings, they beckoned to her to come to the docket. Two of them shook hands with her and said "Thank you, but we do not know why we are here!" She responded that they should tell that to the judge, because until then, they had been unwilling to enter the witness stand. When the judge returned, their stoicism immediately returned and they moved away.

Eventually, they were convicted of murder and sent to prison for an average of twenty-five years each. According to the judge, they were mere puppets who had enacted a violent crime against humanity, a crime strategized by others higher up and much more intelligent. As a final act of defiance, they refused to be present in the courtroom for their sentences and had to be forcibly brought in.

The prisoners eventually became known to the Fouries as the Heidelberg Three. In October 1997, they applied for amnesty to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a statutory body in South Africa under the chairmanship of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Hearings were held. Victims and perpetrators talked face-to-face. The Heidelberg Three were finally prepared to admit to the killings, but claimed that they only acted on orders from their "high command." Ginn Fourie, just out of hospital after cancer treatment, somehow found



the strength to publicly support their request for amnesty—without in any way minimizing the devastation their acts had caused or the evil and futility of the resort to violence—and again assured them of her forgiveness. The published record of the public hearing follows:

**Ginn:** Molweni Amadoda (Good day gentlemen, in Xhosa).

**Applicants:** Molo Mama (Good day mother).

**Ginn:** I am very sorry that I can't express my thoughts and feelings in Xhosa. I think you remember me. At the criminal trial, I asked the translator to tell you that I had forgiven you. Do you remember that?

**Applicants:** Yes, we remember.

**Ginn:** I shook your hands. Mr. Gqomfa was unwilling and he looked the other way, but I certainly shook Mr. Mabala and Mr. Madasi's hands. Nothing has changed, I still feel exactly the same way and I do forgive you because my High Command demonstrated to me how to do that by forgiving his killers."

Ginn proceeded to share with them who Lyndi was, how painful her loss was, and what she hoped for them and the country. Her concluding words were:

I wish that the violence could end, and perhaps with time and counseling this can be so. I trust that counseling will be made available to you as it has been made to us as survivors. Lindiwe (Lyndi's name in Xhosa) would have wanted to hear the stories of your lives. I am interested as a woman who has experienced the pain and frustration of oppression to hear about your experiences.... I know that it must be terribly frightening to reveal who the 'High Command' is because your lives may be in jeopardy if you do get amnesty. But I thank you for being able to look me in the eye and for hearing my story.

In January 1998, on the closing day of the amnesty hearing, the Heidelberg Three sent a message through a PAC parliamentarian that they wished to speak with Ginn. Gqomfa, acting as spokesperson for the group, said that they had wanted to speak with her and thank her for her forgiveness, and added "that they would take that message of peace and hope to their communities and to their graves, whether they got amnesty or not." Gqomfa mentioned having his own child and remarked that if someone killed that child he didn't think he could find it possible to forgive them.

The prisoners went on to share their own stories of tragic violence and loss as they had grown up. Two of them had lost family members to security forces and white oppression. Ginn was particularly touched by Gqomfa's response to her suggestion that they too should be provided with counseling: "We would welcome counseling, and rather with the survivors so that true reconciliation can take place." Ginn believed that the insightfulness of such a statement was staggering and commented that, on her own, she would not have thought of having counseling together. "I was profoundly moved by their acceptance of my gift of forgiveness and in retrospect, I recognize another step in the healing process," writes Ginn.

There they sat in a little room, the prisoner's chains on the floor beside them, and for the first time they opened up to Ginn, moved by her powerful witness to the gospel of grace and forgiveness. Touched by her desire to understand their experience of living under apartheid, they agreed to further contacts. Eventually, they committed together to try to do something concrete and positive for victims and perpetrators of violence. With Ginn's continual urging and pushing, this need has now been accepted by each political party, separately, in South Africa. Unfortunately, attempts at practical implementation have been stalled as a result of the inability to bring this urgent need for counseling to parliamentary level.

Finally, the warders insisted that the meeting adjourn. Hardened as they were, they were staggered to watch perpetrators and victim hug each other, which indicated the depth of community formed during their short time together. The applicants then shackled themselves, symbolizing to Ginn the enormous responsibility that accompanies freedom of choice and the sad outcome of making poor choices. Tears came to her eyes. Humphrey Gqomfa turned to the interpreter and said, "Please take Mrs. Fourie home." Once more, she was amazed by the sensitivity and leadership potential of this man. . . the same one who had perpetrated "gross human rights violations" against her own daughter.

Ginn was invited a little over a year ago to present a paper at an international conference on mental health in South Africa after the TRC, sponsored by the Medical Research Counsel of South Africa. Her story, which told about her experience and pilgrimage on the road to healing, was the only one to receive a standing ovation. Properly so, because forgiveness is never easy. As Ginn says, "it is a gift of grace from God, which has the potential to flow from the forgiven to their communities, until their graves."

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