

THE WILL TO LIVE a film by Anne Gyrith Bonne

Anne Gyrith Bonne and her cameraman Erik Molberg arrived in South Africa on the morning of the 11th September, 2001. The plan was to interview Archbishop Desmond Tutu three days later. The interview was primarily to be part of a film about people, who despite having been the victims of the most incredible suffering and oppression were fighting for reconciliation rather than revenge. The film's basic idea had taken shape over a period of years, the content of which this late summer's day had been summed up in the selected working title: *The Will to Live*. An assessment of the consequences of the fateful events, which took place in New York at the same time, fundamentally altered the perspective of the interview with Archbishop Tutu, and as such came to direct the filmmaker towards a much wider, and deeper emotional exploration of the original theme. The story of the single individual's will to survive became in the actual process the straightforward story about how our greatly differing understanding of the concepts of Love, Hate and Reconciliation influence us all - and thereby our continuing existence.

At the very heart of *The Will to Live* is the search for the broadest possible range of expressions of humanity. For whilst the film's central structure unfolds around the interviews with - and the portraits of - the three central figures: Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu in South Africa; human rights campaigner and doctor, Juan Almeyda in Honduras, and the Cambodian writer Chanrithy Him in the U.S.A. - it is actually in the insistent DV footage shot by Anne Gyrith Bonne on her travels to and from three continents, that the film reflects our differing ideas about love, hate and reconciliation. And it is here too, that the film best pursues its exploration of opportunities provided by forgiveness - and the will to live! The goal of the film - an authentic representation of our universal attempt to achieve reconciliation in a world, where reconciliation is perhaps the only choice available to us - is to encourage people to think.

A number of years ago, I met an extremely vivacious and charismatic woman, who in her youth had been tortured by the Greek junta. She provided me with the inspiration to make a film, which would focus on the questions that her story raised: How do you cope with starvation, imprisonment and torture without both body and soul suffering permanent damage? Do you wish for vengeance at any cost, or is it possible to forgive and believe in possibility of reconciliation? How would I have managed in the same terrible situation?

The project began to take shape, and after a period of planning, we touched down in Cape Town on the 11th of September, 2001 to start filming our interview with Archbishop

Desmond Tutu. Yet the events coincidentally taking place in the U.S.A. placed the whole film in relief. For whilst CNN sent its message of vengeance out to the world, I found myself surrounded by a people, who after having suffered countless acts of violence and murder, supported the idea of reconciliation. Given this situation, could my own thoughts about reconciliation possibly be realized as a film project, or was this just wishful thinking? Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who led the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and is a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, assured me that reconciliation is the right way, and when asked about the suffering of his people, he chose to repeat his wry and often quoted statement, "We were given the bible, and asked to close our eyes in prayer, and when we opened our eyes, we had the bible, but they had the land yet the bible is revolutionary, and helped us to victory." Yet I also saw a tired, old man, bearing the marks of someone, who had seen and heard too much; a person who had buried too many of his countrymen, and who now admitted anger against those who had caused his family's suffering. Acts of violence, which he knows are minor when compared to many others.

Further input was required, and DV camera in hand, I therefore decided to travel around and interview other South Africans; black workers on the street; a white prison officer; the well-educated young - both black and white - as well as the people in the black townships. I asked all of them to give me a personal definition of Love, Hate and Reconciliation. It was gripping and strange, and provided a glimpse of a people, who still have a lot to talk about. It was clear that this new direction my film had taken had to be followed up, but it was with a sense of fear that we traveled to Honduras in November - this time to land right in the middle of a presidential election. Honduras is a country, which is armed to the teeth; where the rich live in constant fear of being kidnapped, and the poor rightly fear torture and oppression. The goal of the journey was to interview Juan Almandares, who is a doctor and human rights campaigner. Although not directly persecuted, Juan is still under surveillance. He comes from a home, where the father was murdered and the mother had fight alone to raise her six children in poverty. Juan has been persecuted in the past as well as imprisoned and physically tortured by the secret police, and he was forced to go underground, where for years he was cut off from his family, friends and his work.

Juan initially assured me that he was not bitter, but in the weeks we followed him the answer to this question was not always so unequivocal. When confronted by the prisoners and their heavily armed guards in one of the infamous prisons, his anger was clearly

visible. Yet the guards themselves are young men recruited from the very people they are oppressing. And by virtue of this fact, these 'torturers' have a high level of anxiety, which they deny when pressed by Juan. Juan is always to be found in the eye of the storm, surrounded by people, who have lost all their rights, and have been tortured and destroyed. Perhaps his pain is no longer personal anymore; rather it's a collective wound that he is trying to heal. Although it is unlikely that he would acknowledge this himself, I none the less suspect that there lies an unconscious act of revenge behind offering the police, his former torturers, treatment at his practice.

Fate had it that it turned out to be an apparently democratic election we witnessed in Honduras. Juan Almeyda does not have the greatest respect for the newly elected president, Ricardo Maduro and his intentions. Yet both are convinced that it's precisely their fight that is the right one, and they have both distanced themselves from hate and revenge. Yet when we later met Ricardo Maduro on a flight to Miami, his views on love, hate and reconciliation were both surprising and intensely personal: a number of years ago, the president's 24-year-old son had been kidnapped and shot. Since then, he had forced himself to work his way from hate to forgiveness, a reconciliation he believes is necessary for the entire country.

My film's further investigation into the opportunities inherent in reconciliation and forgiveness had now begun to take shape, and my cameraman and I decided to travel to the U.S.A. to interview the Cambodian writer, Chanrithy Him. She had chosen to get through her pain by writing a book about her childhood suffering during the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror in Cambodia (1975-79). In her book, 'When Broken Glass Floats', she not only describes how the majority of her family was wiped out by the Khmer Rouge, but also how eventually, she was helped by the self same persecutors to escape to the U.S.A. Chanrithy emphasizes that the book has a number of objectives. It is a memorial to the murdered, for the Cambodia she loved as well as being a symbolic act of vengeance against the Khmer Rouge, whose brutality she provides an insight into within the pages of her book. The book is not just meant to help her, but also others through their own personal trauma, and it is also written in the hope of preventing such an act of genocide ever taking place again.

We followed Chanrithy Him on a lecture tour, and observed how she was regularly confronted with her own pain, and challenged on her ability to forgive and practice reconciliation. An entire continent's views are on display when she is questioned about

her statements about reconciliation by young students, Vietnam veterans, teachers and others. The majority of young Americans want justice, protection and vengeance, and it comes as a shock to many that when confronted with their country's bombing campaign in Cambodia, and the assistance given to refugees such as Chanrithy, the U.S.A. is perceived as both persecutor and angel. Yet they have no real knowledge of real suffering. The suffering that lays in a little girl's loss of childhood, the farewell she was never given with her executed parents, the final help that she was never able to provide her mother, and the loss of the beloved sister, whom she could not save. Chanrithy is still fighting to forgive herself and accept the state of helplessness, which the Khmer Rouge brutally forced on to an entire people.

Yet my questions about Love, Hate and Reconciliation also reveal the depth of contrast between people. Everywhere we filmed, we where met by an unexpected and overwhelming mixture of forgiveness, reconciliation, spirituality, hate and vengeance. My film is first and foremost a documentary review of the experiences I have had in the process of the last six months. A process, which began in September 2001 with Archbishop Desmond Tutu and was rounded off precisely six months later by my meeting with Chanrithy Him on the 11th of March in New York. In addition, the film is a personal and poetically inspired recollection of the people and the varying views on human nature that I have met on my travels - from Europe, through South Africa and South America, to North America. People from three strange continents, whose different views about love, hate and reconciliation I have attempted to reflect in the filmic context, which *The Will to Live* in its own strange way determined for itself.

THE WILL TO LIVE  
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