

A tribute to H.W. van der Merwe: Peace builder, colleague, and friend

*Ampie Muller**

I met H.W. (as he was always called – sounding like ‘Harvey’ in English) in 1972 when I travelled from the university in Port Elizabeth to attend a three-day meeting organised by Dr Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert and a few other people including the Sonn brothers, Julian and Franklin (of whom Franklin later became our first post-1994 ambassador to Washington), to create the opportunity for progressive young (white) Afrikaners to meet and discuss issues with leaders of the so-called Coloured (brown) community.

This particular meeting was held at the farm Oude Brugge in the Grabouw district and was attended by Afrikaner leaders (outside the ‘establishment’) from all over the country; while most of the Coloured leaders came from the Western Cape. The main objective was to attempt to heal the rift that was caused by the bitter apartheid policies of the then Nationalist Government. We believed that by meeting in such an intimate environment we could develop the trust that was necessary for such a venture.

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One of the first people I met on the first morning of the first day was H.W. van der Merwe, dressed casually in a khaki shirt and khaki shorts, looking very unprepossessing as always. We had time for many discussions over the three days and learned that we shared many sentiments and beliefs. That was the start of our close friendship, and professional collegiality, for nearly thirty years.

H.W. was invited in his capacity as Director of The Centre for Intergroup Studies at the University of Cape Town, while I was on the National Committee of *Verligte Aksie* (Enlightened Action), an activist group that attempted to develop an awareness among members of the Afrikaans community of the large group of educated and culturally distinguished members of Black, Coloured and Indian communities, who, under apartheid, had been repressed.

There was nothing remote or removed about his philosophy and belief system. It was simple and down to earth. He was a very caring person who believed that ethics that could not be translated into action were not worth a lot. He believed that peace without justice had no chance of success in the real world. He further believed, and this was deeply characteristic of him, that *all* people had reasons for what they believed in, and that if we did not take that seriously, or if we ascribed negative motivations when dealing with them, then we had no chance of effecting change in them or in their behaviour.

I stress this aspect of H.W.'s being, since he was often blamed by his more progressive friends and colleagues for seeming to 'side' with people who believed in apartheid. While that could have led to political taint and exclusion, the clear force of his convictions saw him through. He did, however, have to bear with occasional criticism, sometimes from close friends who did not understand at the time his vision of creating a 'middle ground'. He talked to, for example, ultra-rightwing Afrikaners such as Eugène Terre'Blanche, and brought Carl Boshoff (son-in-law of apartheid architect Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd and founder of the exclusive white community Orania) into contact with Nelson Mandela. He managed to persuade the African National Congress (ANC) to talk to, and even share a 'braaivleis' (barbecue), with members of the rightwing movement *Afstig*. Instead of being a weakness,

his acknowledgement of the integrity of people's beliefs, even though he did not share them, actually constituted the nucleus of his strength in bringing people of opposite views to 'the table' to talk to one another.

He was against violence of any kind and was later instrumental in the compilation of a handbook for anti-violent protest action (*The Purple Shall Govern* – the apt pun having been derived from an occasion when the police used a water canon filled with purple coloured water against the demonstrating people).

His caring ranged from sharing a piece of bread or a little money – he was never rich – with those who knocked at his door for help, to caring for the entire country.

H.W. not only held very strong principles but he backed these up with a dogged determination. He would not cease arguing and acting against an issue if he felt it was wrong. This often led to meetings in the offices of high-ranking police or military officers, when he spoke, in true Quaker tradition, 'truth to power'.

He never saw personal risk as a factor to consider and I sometimes dreaded hearing the noise of his scooter outside my house, as it often led to hours of phoning around to impress on politicians or police personnel the peril of arresting some or other black leader, or of preventing members of the black community from expressing their feelings. Such an event occurred when Govan Mbeki was released from Robben Island, and his community wanted to receive him back with joyful celebrations – which was refused by the security police.

On one occasion we spent a whole day trying to reach Prime Minister P.W. Botha, a difficult man, on a public holiday, and warn him about the dangers of arresting Winnie Mandela, who was on her way back to Soweto after spending a few days at H.W.'s house on her regular visit to her husband, Nelson Mandela, who was still in jail. Although we never reached Botha, the message did, and the secret police contacted us to find out what this was all about. There could be no doubt that our telephone numbers were well known to the relevant

authorities! H.W.'s interventions led to some successes and some failures – but he never stopped trying.

What he began to do at that Oude Brugge meeting was what he did best, namely the creation of spaces where adversaries could feel safe and speak their minds as honestly and openly as possible, thereby effecting authentic communication. In all these cases, he hoped this would empower people to negotiate their own futures.

The Centre for Intergroup Studies (CIS) under H.W.'s leadership also brought together people with different views such as the End Conscription Campaign (ECC) and members of the armed forces; and often, during the 1970s and 80s, members of the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), as well as many smaller community groups from the Cape Flats.

It is important to note that H.W. never saw himself as an activist and that many of the more progressive groups criticised him for that, since they felt that 'if you are not with us, you are against us'. A fundamental understanding of the meaning and importance of the concept of 'the middle ground' only became apparent after some of them attended our training courses. H.W. understood from the start that where the 'middle ground' is wiped out, conflicts become intransigent and unsolvable, because everybody involved becomes a supporter of either the one or the other 'side', which leads to a deadlock.

After my visit to the USA in 1980 to attend the first extended training course offered by The National Training Laboratories in Conflict Resolution and Human Relations, I convinced H.W. that as there was no other group in South Africa (at that stage) with those skills, it was incumbent on us to start such training courses. H.W. made contact through his Quaker connections in the US with Richard (Dick) and Greta Salem, well known mediators and trainers, to visit Cape Town in order to train at the CIS. Salem was well known because of his intervention at Wounded Knee between US government troops and a group of Native Americans.

These activities expanded, and in 1984 H.W. and I started a training venture in mediation and understanding conflict at Funda Centre in Soweto. He agreed

to the CIS becoming part of a joint venture in 1986 to host Carl Rogers (at that stage perhaps the best known psychologist in the world) in a training event at the University of Cape Town (UCT). There were other smaller events and conferences attended by many overseas colleagues like the Australian John Burton and British academics such as John Groom and Keith Webb, and he gave his blessing to one of the biggest training events held in South Africa. In 1989 we invited James Laue and Bill Potapchuk (of George Mason University's Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution in Fairfax, Virginia), as well as the well-known mediation theorist and practitioner Christopher Moore and his colleagues from Boulder, Colorado, to conduct training events, first at the CIS in Cape Town, and then all over the country.

H.W.'s belief in the value of training should by now be clear, but he also believed in setting up structures (very often through others). He suggested that I initiate SAACI (the South African Association for Conflict Intervention); and he was the founding president with me as the founding chairperson. H.W. believed that as soon as a venture proved viable it should be allowed to proceed on its own and the Centre would then withdraw.

During his sabbatical in England in 1980, he made contact with the ANC in exile. This led to further, repeated contacts with the ANC leadership in exile, mainly in Lusaka. In 1984, we arranged to take my brother Piet Muller, political editor of the Afrikaans Sunday newspaper *Rapport*, to Lusaka where he and H.W. met and talked with, among others, future Presidents Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma. Piet's article suggesting that the Government speak to the ANC created a furor, yet it was the first of many such 'junkets' to Lusaka, including another of ours in 1988, when we took a young Afrikaans student leader to meet with members of the ANC youth movement – again a heavily criticised visit. During this period H.W. was also permitted to visit Nelson Mandela in prison. This is another indication of his rare ability to cross political boundaries at a time of deep polarisation.

Perhaps his longest-lasting legacy was the setting up of what is now known as the Centre for Conflict Resolution (CCR), which grew out of the old CIS. It was (and is) anchored at UCT, and grew into a significant force in the critical

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years of the late 1980s and early 1990s as our country struggled through the tensions, and changes of attitudes needed, to enable our peaceful first election in 1994.

H.W. was a soft-spoken, humble, yet determined man, who once he had decided that something was right, would not easily be deviated from his course. He really had the courage of his convictions in a difficult and often dangerous time. His often behind-the-scenes role in South Africa's peaceful transition has never been fully recognised, but it is true to say that without his contribution, the road to democracy would have been much harder. I miss him.