

## Reflections on Letlapa's Visit to UK, Spring 2005.

by Howard Grace.

*With Letlapa's full concurrence.*



Letlapa Mphahlele from South Africa spent nearly seven weeks with me in the UK from January 20<sup>th</sup> till March 10<sup>th</sup> 2005. During that time we went together to 36 schools to do interactive sessions with their Sixth Form (aged 16-18) students. Group sizes ranged from 15 to several of over 100. Sessions usually lasted for about an hour.

As well as school occasions we did 20 other events for non-school groups, often in the evenings in public places or in people's homes. The furthest North was with 45 people in the home of friends in Edinburgh. All these occasions were good, searching times. In these as well as schools we always showed an 8-minute video of Ginn Fourie speaking at Caux about the death of her daughter Lyndi in the Heidelberg Tavern massacre, which Letlapa had authorised. What Letlapa said would certainly have stood on its own, but to have the video of Ginn greatly added to the depth of the occasion and touched many hearts.

I am very grateful that Letlapa was able to keep giving in the way he did, repeating painful incidents and experiences in his life in all the situations we went into. I had met him at an international conference of *Initiatives of Change* in Switzerland last summer but hardly got to know him until he arrived in the UK. He proved to be a really exceptional person to work with. My life and perspective on the world has been considerably enriched during these few weeks.

Everywhere we went we stayed in the homes of friends. That was a great way for Letlapa, to get to know the country, also some of the rich history of IofC. I also discovered that Letlapa is a Liverpool football fan. So we made a visit to Anfield, - after a morning at the Beatles' museum. There were many facets to our adventure!

Our theme for school sessions has been whether there is **an alternative** to the spiral of "terror" and extreme response of "the war on terror" that seems to be the hallmark of present times. Discussion became focussed on varying aspects of this theme on different occasions. For the sake of clarity I will comment on these in six different sections.

- (1) The price of the alternative.
- (2) Forgiveness.
- (3) Other motives.
- (4) The spiritual dimension.
- (5) Purpose for life, aged 17?
- (6) Perspective.

**Finance** Maria and I financed the venture from our own pockets, including Letlapa's air fare. It was in total about £1700. This all came to be covered by voluntary contributions from schools. Also, we were able to send £650 to the Lyndi Fourie Foundation, donated by many, individual people as we went around. This was a great encouragement to a Christian (me) and an atheist (Letlapa), alike.

### The Price of the Alternative.

Students often asked whether in similar circumstances Letlapa would make the same decisions again. It was important to clarify which decision they had in mind. For some it was his decision to leave school at the age of 17 and, without telling his parents (So as not to give them knowledge that would lead to their being subjected to torture, or worse), to go into exile and join the armed struggle. For others it was whether, as Director of Operations of the Azania People's Liberation Army, he would again authorise massacres on white civilians in response to the widespread massacres on black civilians which increasingly took place.

Letlapa said that in both these cases he would explore alternative routes. As we went around the alternative strategy began to take flesh. The day after he arrived in the UK we watched together the film 'Gandhi' by Richard Attenborough. During the time that Letlapa was in the liberation struggle he and his comrades had dismissed Gandhi's approach. They were single-minded in their use of an armed solution. But looking more deeply at what Gandhi was all about Letlapa perceived that the path of Civil Disobedience was not a weak response. Indeed, if applied fully, it requires paying a higher price than going down the path of killing and being prepared to die. It means absorbing the violence that is thrown at you rather than giving vent to your human reactions. We also read the lecture by Rajmohan Gandhi,

“The War on Terrorism and the Gandhian ethic”, which gave great insight into the deeper purposes of his grandfather.

This issue took greater shape when we spent an evening in Cambridge with Vladimir Bukovsky, an outstanding Russian dissident. His experience in the face of the Soviet totalitarian regime (When tens of millions of dissenters died) spelt out ingenious ways of implimenting Civil Disobedience. For instance, in his book “To Build a Castle” it describes one such strategy. “Bukovsky’s response to oppression was to learn to manipulate the system. ... He taught the other prisoners how to demand their legal rights and protest against their conditions; he once almost brought a prison administration to a halt by organising a barrage of complaints which Soviet law obliged the Ministry of the Interior to take seriously.”

Letlapa was also interviewed for three-quarters-of-an-hour on Radio Faza, a Nottingham Muslim local community radio, by Dr. Musharraf Hussain who was one of the two leading UK Muslims who went to Iraq last year to try to get Ken Bigley freed. The sort of questions discussed included, "What alternative is there to violence if you want to bring change in a situation of extreme injustice and oppression?"

“What really turned the tide in the struggle for a new society in South Africa?” Letlapa felt that the key to change had been when the ordinary people lost their fear. In the face of the mass of people, who were no longer afraid, the power of the authorities began to drain away. June 1976, when about 800 pupils in Soweto lost their lives after boycotting school, was a pivotal example of this. It was instructive for me to find that Dr Hussein was but one of several on our trip who raised the analogy between the black experience in South Africa two or three decades ago with present day Muslim frustrations in the Middle East and in broader settings.



Letlapa made clear that injustice needs to be confronted and that there is a price to pay however you do that. Civil disobedience is certainly not a soft option. However there is also a high price to pay, in terms of your self-worth, if you passively do nothing.

When asked directly what alternative action could have been taken instead of the Heidleberg Tavern massacre, the option of distributing an appropriate leaflet in the Tavern instead of opening fire was a possibility considered. This could have shocked the customers by stating that they were at the mercy of the liberation army; however - that the liberation forces had opted not to stoop so low as those who had massacred black civillians! This adoption of the moral high ground could be used to kick off international publicity to put pressure on the other side. As it was, the tit for tat massacres they had adopted had only succeeded in hardening the white extremist position. Meetings which had previously only attracted a few white hardliners suddenly attracted enough support to fill football stadiums. Letlapa also observed that, at the time, 100% whites opposed the massacres while 70% blacks supported them.

Letlapa said that there is debate going on in South Africa now about whether change could have been effected by means other than the violent confrontation. Another key factor in his mind is the question of the limited vision he had during the struggle. Gandhi, for instance, wasn't only concerned with the Indian freedom struggle but with a deeper type of freedom for all people, oppressors as well as oppressed. Maybe there is an even greater liberation struggle we are meant to give our lives for.

## **Forgiveness**

In school sessions I often asked the students whether they thought that Ginn Fourie did the right thing to forgive Letlapa for the orders that led to the death of Lyndi. Also why did they think she forgave? One girl in a Nottingham, Catholic school, while supporting the importance of forgiveness, tellingly observed, "...but how do you find that within yourself, for such a deep thing?"

In a school near Toxteth, Liverpool with a very multi-cultural group, a Muslim girl in the front row immediately responded that Ginn did the right thing because if she lived her life with that bitterness she would suffer more than Letlapa. A boy at the back followed by saying that there was so much anger and hatred in the world that Ginn was setting an example for society by forgiving. I pointed out that Ginn actually forgave because she is a Christian and was following Jesus' example on the cross. "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

Then the students were asked whether you need to be a Christian, Muslim or person of faith to forgive. The teacher interjected, "No, I am an atheist but value greatly things like forgiveness and try to apply them." A boy of Asian appearance sitting at the side of the room raised his hand and said, "It comes from the heart." Indeed it does. It is important to remember that people from all sorts of religions and beliefs value such things as forgiveness and love. No group has a monopoly on grace!

It was clear from our discussions that the inner struggle with these issues is something we all experience. It was also observed that although Ginn did forgive Letlapa, that was nine years after the death of Lyndi. Ginn had told him that had she met him sooner after that tragedy she could have killed him with her bare hands. She was a Christian at that time too. And there are many others now, including Christians, who still don't forgive Letlapa. We explored this observation in varied settings.



One was at a stimulating evening in a London Buddhist temple. Friends there, who don't believe in the Creator God that people from theistic religions do, value inner spiritual change and forgiveness just as much. I was reminded of reading the booklet *The Dalai Lama's book of transformation*. But I also asked why some Buddhists avoid killing animals and even insects, yet still get involved in violence and wars. The answer I received is that in Christian scripture people are told to turn the other cheek and not kill, but that also doesn't stop some Christians from unleashing war. It is clear that there are deeper issues here that transcend our religious beliefs.

Many angles on the question of forgiveness were discussed. One student observed that Ginn, because of what she was experiencing over Lyndi's death, would understand the anger that led Letlapa to do what he did. We brought it back to home by considering how we ourselves handle our anger. Letlapa also observed that, after the years of hassle he had had with legal proceedings, when the charges were eventually dropped that did nothing for his spirit. But when Ginn forgave him that reached something deep within and restored his humanity.

At an evening in Birmingham the 35 people came not only from Britain but from China, Jamaica, Malta, Rwanda, South Africa, Sudan, Serbia, Iraq, France, US, Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland (Catholic). One woman, from a Jamaican family, asked Letlapa "How can you as a Black man forgive what whites have done to your people?" Letlapa replied "Unless we forgive, we destroy ourselves". And "Forgiveness does not rule out the need for justice". (He himself had faced long criminal proceedings for past actions, though a court has cancelled proceedings against him.)

## **Other Motives**

Forgiveness involves the struggle with our emotions. But other inner struggles also came to light in our times with students. One boy came to Letlapa at the end of the session and thanked him, from the heart. I told him that I appreciated his doing that. He said he had been afraid to but knew he would feel wretched about himself if he hadn't had the courage to come and do that. At another session a girl asked, "What is your biggest fear in coming to speak to us?" Letlapa replied, "If you all sit there and say nothing." It was good to talk about dynamics, like fear, that were going on between us there and then.

On a couple of evenings, with our hosts we played Monopoly. I was amazed at how good at this Letlapa was. We were also amazed to hear that this was a major game that the freedom fighters played in the bush, sometimes right through the night. If Letlapa was that ruthless in beating us what sort of spirit must the 'guerillas' have had in the bush? We were amused to observe how the brotherhood of man went out the window and intense capitalism reared its ugly head! But another thing we realised is how powerless you feel when a couple of opponents have houses and hotels on Park Lane or Pall Mall and all you have is the Water Works and a station. When you fall on their property you are helpless. You get eliminated from the game. In real life there are many people who are helpless and get eliminated from the game. They just die! This analogy helped me to live into something of the dilemma so many experience in our world. Those who have, and don't really care, are looked upon with a mixture of envy, frustration and hate by those who have not. Some go to extreme lengths to try to stay in the game!

One white South African who we spent an evening with said he aimed to return to South Africa at some point. How could he best contribute to the country? Letlapa replied, "Simply by caring." That was a visionary answer and greatly encouraged the person who asked the question.

Some people felt pretty helpless about the world. "What is the point of living how you know you should if others will just trample you into the ground?" We sometimes discussed a statement by a young Indian friend of mine who said, "Any person who is fully committed to building a new world in the right way is already living in that new world." Letlapa was also struck and inspired by watching "One Word of Truth", the video of Solzhenitsyn's Nobel Prize Lecture. In it Solzhenitsyn says, "And the simple step of a simple, courageous man is not to take part in the lie, not to support deceit. Let the lie come into the world, even dominate the world – but not through me."

### The Spiritual Dimension

It was intriguing and very worthwhile for me, a Christian, to work with an atheist on a spiritually motivated venture. We compared our spiritual journeys. Letlapa had become a "born again Christian" in his earlier years after rejecting his traditional African beliefs and practices. He was very passionate in "spreading the word of God." But eventually his experience of "white, Christian oppression" changed all that. In his later teens he rejected Christianity and, not long after, went into exile to join the liberation struggle.

Yet, in talking with him, I was interested to find that in his earlier years in the liberation army he still believed in and prayed to God, through Jesus. It was only after reading a variety of authors that he eventually became an atheist. According to Letlapa, he felt 'liberated' when he took his step in (un)belief.

A Christian teacher, in discussion after one session, tried to get his mind around Letlapa's beliefs. How was it that this 'backslider' nevertheless seems to be moving forward in his spiritual journey? I commented that I would hate to see Letlapa slide back to the sort of Christianity that he had formally espoused. In saying that I was not only thinking of the dogma and practice that fuelled Apartheid. Letlapa had also told me about his former literalist beliefs such as "Only Christians will go to heaven." Initially this sort of fear-engendering doctrine led him to become a Christian. Eventually it came to repel him. As a young man I too was alienated by such beliefs. Later, I came to see them as a grave misinterpretation of Jesus' message. In contrast to Letlapa, this deeper perspective has actually led to my becoming a Christian.

However Letlapa's rejection of belief in God had come after his break with Christianity. In his mind there was a distinction. It makes me wonder what actually is being rejected or accepted. I was struck by what someone said on a radio programme. "We talk about God as if we know what we are talking about." I am also a non-believer in the concept of God that Letlapa has rejected. But that doesn't make me an atheist. I believe in a different kind of God, one far bigger than any box our minds can put him into.

I find actually that Letlapa's beliefs and mine are very similar. However I am happy to use the word, "God" to describe the mystical, creative, loving force; while he has rejected a literalisation of that word which some insist has to be followed.

Some people wonder how it is that Letlapa values things like forgiveness, love, responsibility etc yet is an atheist. He replies that he is an A-theist. But that doesn't make him A-everything else. He is very much **for** spiritually inspired values. It is just that he doesn't believe in a human concept of a Creator behind them. Some people of faith put forward the argument of cause and effect to prove that these things must originate from a Creator. But actually that argument doesn't get us any further, as you then have to ask, "What caused God to come into being?" What we really know is that there is a loving spirit in the heart. What that is and where it comes from is a matter that theists and atheists can debate. Personally, my Christian faith sees Jesus as a manifestation of that divine love in action. But whatever we believe the important thing for all of us is to respond to that spirit.



For a broader look at my perspective on this see the booklet, *Reaching Out to the Divine* and its two supplements, "One Christian Perspective" and "Comparing a theistic and non-theistic belief".

## Aged 17?

In several schools Letlapa was asked questions to the effect, “What advice would you give a 17-year-old student in school about how to live his/her life?” This question arose because Letlapa had made a drastic decision when he was aged 17 and at school. He went into exile and was prepared to give his life for the cause he felt strongly about. I asked whether there were needs and challenges in the UK or the world which they felt strongly enough about to give everything for.

I also pointed out that this question is a challenge to us all. Letlapa is in his mid forties now and is thinking about how best to use the years ahead of him. I am in my mid sixties and face the same challenge. We also told about visiting a couple in Birmingham aged 89 and 90 (Bert and Iris Reynolds) whose whole lives had been devoted to the Trade Union movement. They are still pivotal in the production of the broadsheet, *‘The Industrial Pioneer’*. When I stayed with them last year at the time of a sendout of *The Pioneer* I was moved to see Iris, who is blind, still folding papers and stuffing them into envelopes for sending to politicians, diplomats and others. As I observed to the sixth formers, “Still in the struggle at age 90 and when blind.” What do they feel passionately enough about for which to give their all? (We could see some teachers very thoughtful about this too.)

I observed that, in later years when nearing the end of their lives, people sometimes look back and think, “What was that all about?” It was pointed out to the students that it is much better to ask that question at their age, when they are young enough to do something about it, than to wait till it’s too late.

So, we were encouraged that some students are indeed asking that question. It suggests that they want to use their lives for something more than just personal success and enjoyment. I reflected that some years ago I found myself thinking, “What can I do with my life?” But “I” was at the centre of it. A better question to ask is, “What are the needs? What needs to be done in the world or my society, and in what way can I play my part?” We discussed the importance of fostering, in our spirits, a motivation that is centred on others and a spiritual vision, rather than on self.

At one point, just after getting married 32 years ago, my wife and I searched for what we were meant to do together. We didn’t want to just aim to make a nice life for ourselves. We eventually accepted an invitation to go to South Africa to work with friends there to bring change through a change in people’s attitudes and motives. It was a difficult, worthwhile and very rewarding time, which we expected to continue for a lengthy period. But after about four years we fell foul of the SA security police and were forced out. The conviction for how to use our lives was suddenly cut away, by human intervention.

It was at this point, at the age of 40, that I felt I should train to be a teacher. That grew into a new conviction for how to use the years ahead. I felt that my “calling” was to help others find their “calling”. That has led me on to do the UK schools programme. But that is me. I said to the students that they will find something else laid on their hearts to give their all for. When that happens they should follow their dream and not get diverted by the temptations and atmosphere of our society that appeal to self.

There are so many needs, all important. We said to students, “Which one is particularly laid on your heart? Then, how are your abilities and attributes related to that? What part can you play? If it requires further training do that. Otherwise search for the next step. Take a long term view.”

## Perspective.

Towards the end of sessions I sometimes asked which of the students, if their family was being exploited or attacked, would be prepared to use force or violence to counter that. Almost invariably all hands went up. I then asked what if “My people” were being attacked, who would counter that with force? Lots of hands went up again. But the issue then arose, what was meant by, “My people.” When I asked what had been in their minds when I asked that some said, their friends. Some talked about their community and a few said their country, or the English etc. I then asked which of them would include Letlapa under their category of, “My people”. Quite a few did, (despite his not falling in the category of their earlier definition) because he had the same values, or had a heart for the oppressed.



This led to interesting discussions about their broadening perceptions. One girl, who earlier said that her people were "Muslims", later included Letlapa. I asked, "How is that? He is an atheist." We all laughed. Letlapa was also very happy to discover that he got more votes to be included than did George Bush!

Then I asked Letlapa if he would include "this lot" (pointing to the students) in "My people". He replied that now he would. But twelve years ago they would have been his targets, just as I (Howard) would have been. We discussed how this broader vision, and growth from within the heart, affects our decisions. "The Alternative" may need initially to rest on who we regard as "Our people". This is the point made by Rajmohan Gandhi in the last paragraph of his Notre Dame lecture, "The War on Terrorism and the Gandhian ethic."

We observed that in the face of the Tsunami on Boxing day all people were equal, whether Sri Lankans, Indonesians, Swedish or British tourists. There had been a united response from all round the world to help the victims. How do we harness that solidarity in answering the question, "Who are my people"?



Discussions in a wide variety of schools were made all the more powerful by Letlapa's readiness to share openly some of the deeper experiences he has faced in his life. Many teachers told us that they were really surprised by the unexpected students that took part in the interactions. A letter to Letlapa from eight students from one High School after a session there said, "We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to you for sharing your incredible experiences with us. We have been and will continue to be affected and challenged by the issues raised."

It has been an inspiring and thought-provoking time for many people. I'm most grateful to Letlapa for being ready to come to this cold (it was in the winter) and for him, new land. As he left I wrote a letter to our local newspaper. The quote in the final paragraph of this should give us all pause for further thought.

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**Newbury Weekly News      Letters page**  
**March 17<sup>th</sup> 2005**

Dear Sir,

Last week's parliamentary debate around terrorism highlighted an ongoing challenge. At the time of 9/11 a friend wrote from the USA, "We may need to deal with terrorism, but are we going to deal with it's causes?" The second part of that question so easily gets lost.

I have just spent six weeks, all over the UK, with Letlapa Mphahlele from South Africa visiting 35 Sixth Forms, including St Barts', Park House and John O' Gaunt. Letlapa had become his country's most wanted terrorist during the time of Apartheid. He was commander of the Azanian Peoples Liberation Army who, in response to widespread killings of black civilians, had opted for "tit for tat" and authorised several massacres on white civilian targets. One of these was on St James' Church in Cape Town in July 1993 where eleven people were killed, and many more injured. An evil deed, if ever there was one. Yet the man I have come to know is warm-hearted, intelligent, articulate and with a great sense of humour.

Sixth Form students have been absorbed when living into the frustrations and humiliation that led to Letlapa's radicalisation. They hear how he had left home one morning, ostensibly to go to his African village school, but instead went into exile to join the liberation struggle. His book, *'Child of this soil. My life as a freedom fighter'* gives great insights into what causes someone to take up arms, and drive them to such extreme actions.

In retrospect Letlapa recognises that the orders he gave were motivated by intense anger, a bad basis for any decision. He also acknowledges the wrongness of stooping to the level of those who were killing black civilians, thus provoking his anger.

But what is even more telling are remarkable stories of forgiveness and reconciliation with close relatives of massacre victims. Students here asked searching questions about how people find it within themselves to forgive such deep hurts? They have also had the opportunity to explore with Letlapa whether there is **an alternative** to the spiral of "terror" and extreme response of "the war on terror" that seems to be the hallmark of present times.

So, what is the challenge to us, post 9/11, as we ponder the implications of Letlapa's experience? A white South African friend now living in this country wrote thoughtfully after meeting Letlapa, "I can't help comparing the current situation in our global village with that of South Africa two decades ago. Is the wealthy, privileged West trying to put up barricades to protect itself from those who feel marginalised and ignored? Clearly, there are people out there who are very, very angry. Are they simply evil, or are there reasons for their anger? As well as thinking about how to protect ourselves from them, let us also hear them, for their sakes as well as for ours."

Howard Grace.