

# IN MEMORY OF PETER BIEHL

## TRANSFORMING PRIVATE ISSUES INTO SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT: THE ROLE OF A PROFESSIONAL JOURNAL

By Sonia Leib Abels, Paul Abels, Peter Biehl & Linda Biehl

*Peter Biehl died March 31, 2002 in CA at the age of 59. Peter and Linda's daughter Amy was killed by four youth as she worked in South Africa, to aid in securing social justice. Her death, and its meaning, led Linda and Peter to reconstruct their lives to carry out their daughter's mission. Initially, they established the Amy Biehl Foundation in La Quinta, California, where they were living, and then in Cape Town, South Africa. Together they built a legacy of social, economic, and recreation institutions under the auspices of South Africans, and their sculpted imprint of justice and forgiveness affected many. As Nobel Prize winner Desmond Tutu said, "What was so remarkable was not only that they forgave the killers of their daughter, but they went so far as to rehabilitate them."*

*In the summer of 1998, The Biehls, Paul and I, presented a version of the paper published here at the International Conference of Social Development in South Africa. As part of the Biehl's presentation, they welcomed one of the young men who had killed their daughter. Peter initiated the original contact with the journal. He wanted his daughter's story told, as a means to create social change in South Africa, and looked to **Reflections** as one vehicle among many for this to occur. This paper honors his work and his memory.*



Linda and Peter Biehl

There is a dynamic interaction and interdependence between despair and struggle of persons as they search for ways to improve social development to meet head on the factors which cause that despair, and give meaning and purpose to action. How are private struggles transformed into recognized and attended to social development concerns? We suggest that social development and transformation are interactive processes. Both may occur when individual transactions take on public significance. Transformation is a metaphor for significant conceptual shifts in human perspectives and social structures.

Shifts in perspectives are pliable, neutral concepts; they can move toward evil or toward justice. These shifts, though often enhanced by external forces, are dependent on the power of persons and communities to transform their situations. This internal power is as true for nations as it is for individuals. Framed in the landscape of recent South African experiences, this essay seeks to show and explain how one such shift in perspective emerged from evil, and gave greater meaning

to the desire for justice.

Our (Abels) account of the story to be told starts with the origins of **Reflections**, now in its eighth year. Its creation in the United States, far from the culture and traditions of South Africa, began as a result of the then editors' experience with another nation, Lithuania, a country which had been free from Soviet occupation for one year (1993). We had been asked to help start a School of Social Work in Kaunas, Lithuania, a country whose experiences and culture were different from what we experienced as educators in the United States. Lithuania was obviously different from South Africa, but the people's hope and despair were similar in their quest to become a democratic nation. The desire for transformation was the same.

In professional literature the emphasis on the scientific, on quantitative research, precluded interest in publishing narratives of helping and social change, and its meaning to those helping, as well as those helped. While most narratives in **Reflections** have come from social workers and social work educators, those of medical practitioners, lawyers lay people, alternative healers and others have been welcomed within the same set of standards.



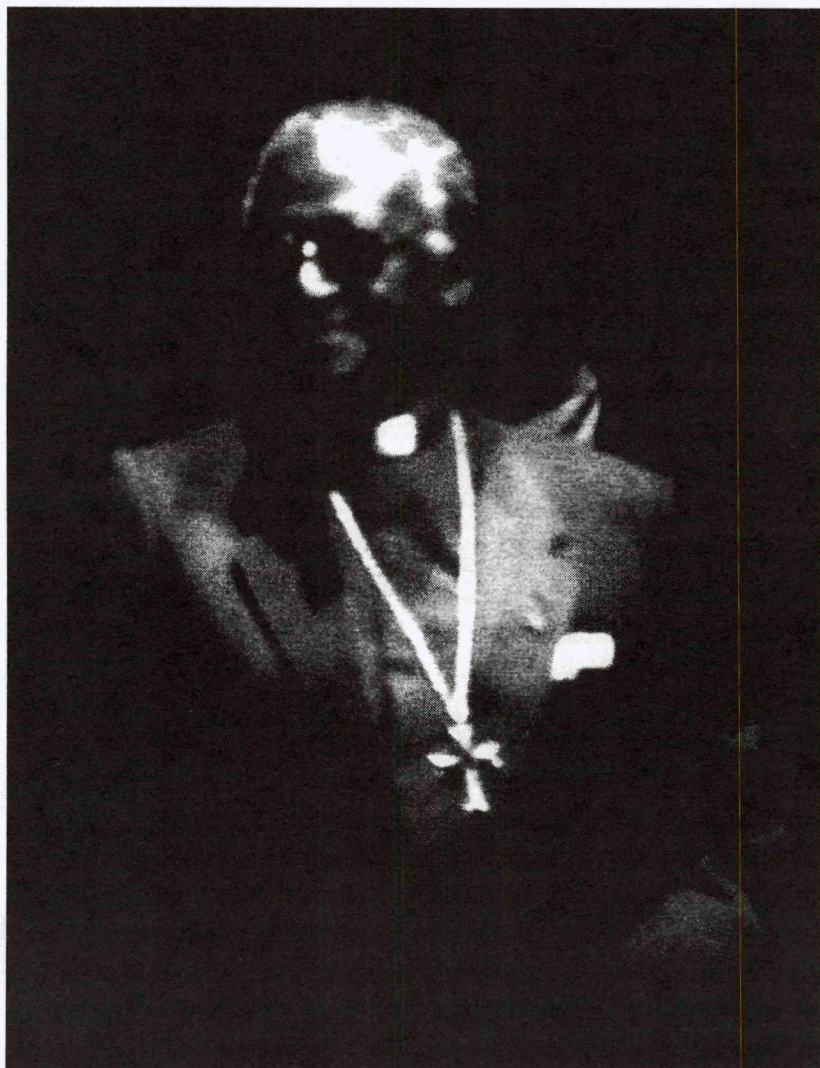
When *Reflections* published the story of Amy Biehl's work in South Africa and her tragic murder, the editors had no idea that its impact would reach beyond its readership. The narrative, accompanied by commentaries, became a catalyst for change (Fall, 1996). It was partially a narrative of a social development project in South Africa, but at the heart, it illustrated how the project emerged out of a private, tragic, personal event, the death of Amy Biehl, whose work as a volunteer in South Africa continued through the project's social development efforts.

This presentation is a creation of the parents of Amy Biehl, Linda and Peter, who authored the *Reflections* narrative that initiated a transformation process by the editors; by the unseen hand and work of Amy; and by the historic events in South Africa. It humbly explores how private troubles/public issues full of loss and discontinuity, can be transformed into new structures of meaning, and how attachment allows sense-making of the world, allowing connections with uncommon others in a common cause. Isak Dinesen noted, "All sorrows can be borne if we can put them into a story." *Reflections*, by publishing the Biehl's narratives, became a vessel for transformation, leading to new opportunities for expanding resources for Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) in South Africa. We saw a responsibility, beyond just publication, to assist people to make connections.

It helped us understand the advanced, creative, though controversial thinking of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Amnesty Committee, which supports the idea that private troubles made public have transformative power. It led to an examination of forgiveness, a vital force in South Africa's reconciliation efforts, and to our connecting it to the Biehls' work in their second article for *Reflections* on Forgiveness (Fall, 1998). It involved their presence on the CSULB campus and led to the engagement of students

and faculty in a discourse about forgiveness; a concept transformed from psychological narrowness, to social, spiritual, political, and educational consciousness. How did it happen?

Peter and Linda requested that *Reflections'* editor (Sonia Leib Abels) consider publishing the narrative about the creation of the Amy Biehl Foundation and its purpose to carry out the meaning of their Daughter's life. Amy, killed by four young men in South Africa during a time of searing unrest and upheaval, was a Fulbright scholar—an advocate of human rights who worked to empower women and children in South Africa.



Archbishop Tutu of South Africa



Although the article was accepted, one reviewer raised concern about the Biehls' use of South African township community vernacular, and in general, the issue of ethnic power relations. Following an approach to such concerns, several people were invited to write their comments, and these comments were published along with the narrative. One reactor, Kenneth Lutterman\* (National Institute of Health), contacted the Biehls, encouraged them to follow up with U.S.AID, and sent the journal to Tipper Gore (former V.P. Gore's wife) and Donna Shalala (member of President Clinton's Cabinet), who was preparing to visit South Africa. They visited the NGO (Mosaic), partially funded by the Biehl Foundation. The Biehls had earlier connections to U.S. AID through a contact Amy had made with Brian Atwood, and soon developed a new South African foundation with AID support.

In 1998 the Biehls were invited to appear at the Amnesty trial of the four youth that had killed their daughter. They gave their testimony, and congruent with what they believed Amy wanted, did not oppose amnesty. The following is an excerpt from the Biehls' thoughts on testifying before the Amnesty hearings:

*"There was no question of our participation in the hearing, Amy had informed us four years earlier that the Truth and Reconciliation Process was a pre-negotiated condition upon which free elections for all South Africans could be granted by the National Party-in power at that time. More importantly, a procedure for granting amnesty in forgiveness of politically directed crimes was essential to the pro-apartheid regime before it could open the ballet boxes to the certainty of Black majority rule. Given this background insight and Amy's passionate efforts to gain free and democratic elections for all of South Africans, we could not ignore the Amnesty*

*Committee. In his statement at the hearings we noted Amy would have embraced your Truth and Reconciliation Process. We are present this morning to honor it and to offer our sincere friendship. We are all here in a sense to consider and value a committed human life which was taken without opportunity for dialogue. When this process is concluded we must link arms and move forward together (Reflections. Fall 1998).*

The editors believe that the journal, serendipitously, created the potential for transformation. We know that it may have aided in promoting some connections and funding of the NGO through the Biehl foundation. We believe the students and the faculty participation in a presentation by the Biehls on forgiveness, transformed, or created a different discourse on the meaning of forgiveness. We also knew well before the debacle of the Congress and Clinton, the importance of forgiveness as an issue within the helping and social change process. We also knew that the issue had a profound effect upon the students at CSULB—they had never heard anyone talk before about the experience of forgiveness with the Biehl's authenticity and meaning. Not only did the students and faculty participating at the conference gain new understanding and new confusion about the ability to forgive, they carried these ideas into their classes and out to their field experiences. This was the kind of dialogue we had hoped would occur. Some went through their own transformations. Distributing copies of articles from the issue on "Forgiveness," and in particular, the Biehls' article, served to reinforce the process.

Going public with an intense private or personal experience can facilitate transactions in groups, even in entire communities of people. News media with a sound-bite approach can inflame and at times stimulate public transformation; a journal using a narrative





After the presentation: the Chair Person, Sonia Abels, Peter Biehl, Linda Biehl, and Paul Abels



structure can create a broader public identification with a private experience sharing a story by chronicling a process or journey. A number of authors have spoken to the impact that stories have on the lives of persons, and how the stories we have been led to believe in shape our lives and therefore our actions. The way we tell these stories, retell these stories, and modify these stories can influence our view of ourselves. We might say that they could help us remake ourselves.

It is possible that some narratives can move persons in new directions. The Biehls' sharing of their story, and the decision to imagine the narrative that their daughter Amy would have wished them to pursue, not only shaped their lives, but the lives of the young men involved in her death. There are stories, too, of all the people touched in some way by the programs they developed, and by the Journal, *Reflections*, its editors, and its readers. Reflecting on this potpourri of interaction, one gains a sense of the mystery of transformation and the cosmological forces at work.

With identification, a true conversion or transformation is possible because a connection is made with the once private experience. The deeper and wider the connection, the more pervasive the transformation. Research has indicated that when persons get information only from TV, their views on a particular subject are narrow. In fact, the media's power to control our thinking and formulate the stories we believe in has been blamed for everything from youth crime and the acceptance of murder and mayhem, to the willingness to intervene in saving thousands of lives when the suffering is viewed on TV. What a reflective journal can do is just that: help persons reflect on the narratives they read about. Reflecting gives the people the power to transform themselves. An editor is a powerful person and can control what the reader reads; not necessarily what they "read into" the article. The editor's decision to have reactors

to the Biehls' first article was a willingness to extend more power to readers, providing access to people whose ideas might differ from that of the authors. Of course that is exactly what occurred. Some of the commentators questioned the Biehls' motives and actions; some were in wholehearted support. But whatever the position, the reader was invited not to privilege any one position, but to reflect on the ideas expressed and to gain new knowledge. And knowledge is power. The Biehls' willingness to accept the conditions under which their story would be told was in keeping with what Amy would have wanted, and reflected her openness to minimizing others' control over peoples' lives.



**A party after the conference in Cape Town. The band instruments were furnished by the Biehls.**

One might legitimately wonder whether a professional journal shouldn't just present the "facts." That is what most professional journals do, and in fact, that is a responsible approach when the "facts" are known. By now, most of us are aware that there are very little facts as we think of them in the physical sciences. More often, everything presented is observed by an observer. The adage "what the thinker thinks, the finder will find" helps us realize just how tentative facts might be and how they are created.

The "Narrative is an iconic social representation of moral action, an expression and

preparation, therefore, for the largest such representation – the democratic political community” (Brown, 1998). We believe that a professional journal has responsibility to contribute to social development within a disciplined framework that defines the profession. Narratives are central forms of knowing and communication in the lives of a people. They shape individuals and nations. (Paper conclusion)

Following the original paper presentation, the Biehls spoke about their programs in South Africa and about Amy, and read part of a letter she had sent to the *Cape Times* on June 21, 1993, quoting a poem by Victoria West, a South African poet:

*They told their story to the children.  
They taught their vows to the children,  
That we shall never do to them  
What they did to us.*

\* Kenneth Lutterman, a strong supporter of social work, died last year.

## References

- Brown, R. (1998). *Toward A Democratic Science: Scientific Narration and Civic Communication*. Yale, University Press. New Haven

The Amy Biehl Foundation, La Quinta, CA. Memorial donations may be made to the Amy Biehl Foundation c/o Steve Schwartz, 29 Independence Drive, Hillsborough, N. J. 08844

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