

Living in South Africa after apartheid

Sometimes I just feel tired being black in the new South Africa. Nobody warned me in 1994 about the emotional rollercoaster that would for a long time define everyday life for ordinary black and white people in the streets, at work, in school, in the shops, in the church—everywhere---as we struggle to find each other.

One of my third year students died in his sleep the other day. This was easily the saddest day in my life as Dean at the University of Pretoria. A bright young man, Jeandre Diedrichs was respected by his professors and loved by his fellow students. He was the only child of two wonderful, doting parents. I traveled the long road to the funeral service at the NG Church Wonderpark with hundreds of other mourners. Even though I was one of only a handful of black mourners in the packed church, I felt completely at home among my fellow South Africans. His tearful parents came to greet me with the words: “he was truly happy with and among you.” It was one of those rare moments where you could just be yourself, lost among your community in your common humanity. Though I was sad at the loss of this wonderful young man, my heart was lifted by the warmth of the church community and by the compassion of the friends and parents of my student.

I rushed back to the Office, and had about 30 minutes before the meetings started again. There is a lovely new bread shop in Groenkloof and I stopped to buy fresh sandwiches which take about 10 minutes to prepare. With this time on my hands, I stepped into the hairdresser next door and asked them to quickly take-off my hair. Still warm and lifted from the church experience, my guard was down. Big mistake. The white woman, fixing a plug without another client in sight, shrieked a familiar refrain: “I don’t do ethnic hair!!!” I lost it, explaining to her that she too was ‘ethnic’ and inquiring how she dealt with my white friends who had my hair texture when they stopped by for a haircut. A shouting match ensued, and I left the shop, reckoning that now and again this barbaric behaviour was bound to express itself in the still newish South Africa. As I moved next door, deflated and feeling that I now had my racist quota for the month, a white woman comes out of the kitchen holding my sandwiches aloft and in a loud voice announced: “you speak good English for a black man!” In less than 2 minutes, my hopeful, lifted spirit was crushed by two white compatriots, one an English woman and one an Afrikaans woman; it did not matter.

That was a rough day, but then I thought about how often I travel in one day or weekend through different emotional time zones, and how unconscious I am of the effects this must have on the mind and the heart. Like the other day I found myself training teachers in the middle of a huge squatter camp on the outskirts of Johannesburg, and wondered why these energetic young teachers would even care to show-up for work in these miserable conditions that clearly did not improve since the dawn of our post-apartheid democracy. The next evening I

found myself speaking at a huge and impressive white, Afrikaans Dutch Reformed Church, light-years away from the squatter camp in terms of resources, culture, language and colour. The next evening I opened a book launch in the heart of the outrageously rich Sandton Square where people spoke with exaggerated English accents. This kind of traveling is not normal, and in each place I had to make tricky emotional and political readjustments in terms of how I spoke, what language I spoke, and what I spoke about.

Shortly after I told a white friend about the hair and sandwich incidents, she left my office distraught and sent an email message apologising for the bad behaviour of what she called 'my mense.' I wrote her a terse email back, suggesting that that was precisely the problem. Those people, I told her, **are** my people.

We do wise as South Africans to start debunking those myths about who *our people* are. Until we can feel the pain and understand the pathologies of those whom we think are different from us, we cannot begin to bridge these huge social divides that still separate us as ordinary citizens. It means being prepared to travel across some unfamiliar spaces, speak new languages and risk our emotional selves.