Home Changes: Part I

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Ever since I left South Africa, my birthplace, thirty-four years ago, I have come to know a range of places as home. I have been nurtured in my grief over the losses incurred as I have come to know others who have turned out to be able to recognize me, despite my difference from them. I have also been consoled by a strong sense of place, and particularly places of the immigrant/refugee in this country, whatever each wave of new immigrants did or do to make neighborhoods their own, their home. When I left South Africa, I was under pressure to leave, although I never meant to go forever. For years after leaving I had the recurring dream of me running across the tarmac to climb the stairs of the airplane, only to be hampered by the opening of my suitcase and the loss of certain personal items like my shoes. My soul needed to catch up with my original home, and so did my ministry, so I chose to spend my study leave at home.

I had under-estimated the degree to which de-coupling from ACPE business and re-entering the society of my birth and young adulthood (in a new era) was going to be an immersion experience that covered my head and heart. For example, as I heard the challenges faced by business, teachers, nurses, refugees, squatters, and middle class people of all colors, I was being immersed in the new realities of South Africa, and saw that this stress was more complicated than any I could experience through the business of ACPE.

For example, my sister, with whom I stayed for much of the two months I was in South Africa, has constant concerns about getting safely to and from work each day, as the crime rates are high and car-jacking is a daily occurrence, as are home invasions. This affects people of all racial/ethnic groups, anyone who has something to fence inside his or her electric fence. Even those who do not live inside a fence of some sort have to deal with the taxis and the tsotsis: minivans carrying the homeless and working poor and the thugs who rob them. You may recall the excellent movie from 2006 called “Tsotsi”, made in South Africa. Books have been written about the over-crowded, un-roadworthy and mostly uninsured vehicles crammed full, a law unto themselves, with daily casualties high. Life is still dangerous in the new South Africa, except for the rich who can protect themselves more effectively.

I grew up in the time of apartheid when Afrikaner humiliation at the hands of the British had led to cultural paranoia and a vicious political solution that conspired to endanger the lives of everyone who was against it, the victims as well as those who struggled against the system. Despite the crime, it was wonderful to be able to freely read literature that was banned at the time I left South Africa in 1976, and literature that could not be written until South Africans had started relating to each other in more open ways in the new era. I recalled how I had been charged back then with having a copy of MLK’s sermons entitled “Why We Can’t Wait” since it had been banned. I remembered the experiences when I had fallen foul of the separate group areas laws to take an injured black man to a hospital in his area, only to be stopped by an unmarked police car to be interrogated about a black and white man in the same car in a black area. I remember how I chose to leave the country rather than go to fight against “terrorists” who had left South Africa to take up arms against the regime. I was in a time warp. The days of separation were over, at least based on race. People my nephew’s age now belonged to inter-racial social groups, and now lived in the same neighborhoods. None of them had a first-hand experience of apartheid. To fill out and elaborate on my immersion experience, I read much post-apartheid literature,
fiction and non-fiction in several areas, including new histories, biographies of the struggle, and literature exploring current challenges. It was amazing to experience how the old that was alleged to be permanent, had moved on. I also learned to see current South Africa in a realistic way, not necessarily through the utopian lens that one dreamed would be reality after the fall of a vicious system.

I visited the Apartheid Museum (as well designed as the Holocaust Museum in DC) which told the history of the country using a variety of media, interactive features and exhibits. When you first entered the museum each visitor was given a "pass book" which identified what race you were. The four official races of the apartheid days were white, Indian, coloured (which still refers to those whose origins were a mix between the colonizing Dutch or Afrikaners, Malay slaves and other indigenous groups), and black, each of which were "cast" into categories with assigned places to live. As apartheid became more established, laws were passed requiring every citizen to keep on their person an identifying book which included a race designation. It was against these "pass laws" that many demonstrated and were arrested, including Gandhi.

So when you entered the museum you did so through the door appropriate to your assigned race and saw signs, memorabilia, and photographs of how "your people" lived then. There were large cut-out posters of individuals from each race whose respective histories you could follow throughout the museum and see how the historical events affected their lives. A film was offered that told about the history of South Africa before white colonizers arrived. The country was hit hard by the world-wide depression in the thirties and many people were out of work. Many of the Afrikaner farmers lost their farms and moved into the cities looking for work. The Afrikaners vowed to make a better life for the Afrikaners, who had suffered defeat in the Boer War at the turn of the last century, and came into power for the first time in the forties. I had just seen a CNN clip about the tea party movement and bells were ringing in my ears.

The Nationalists established apartheid as the law of the land which included not only assigning a race to each person but assigning where each race could live legally. The Dutch Reformed Church worked alongside the Nationalist Party to come up with all kinds of theological reasons to support it. Some in that church were excommunicated and put under house arrest for questioning this stance. Now a major thoroughfare is named after Jan Beyers Naude, a leader who was ousted back in the sixties. Like other “solutions” the world has come up with, apartheid was touted as a solution to a social and economic problem. And the solution caused so much suffering for so many people and so did its dismantling. In the seventies and eighties resistance grew and apartheid in South Africa received worldwide attention. Though Reagan was against this step, the congress came up with sanctions with help from the African-American caucus.

Eventually, the South African President F.W. De Klerk released Nelson Mandela and others from prison. Apartheid was dealt a death blow and the video of De Klerk making the televised speech was played in the museum; several people round me were seeing it for the first time. I was reminded that during the years between Mandela's release (1990) and his election as president of South Africa (1994), more people died, in all groups, in violent clashes than had died in all the years of resistance to apartheid. White supremacists went crazy with rage and there were black tribal leaders who felt that their groups were not getting their due, and some within the African National Congress who thought Mandela was compromising too much. Nelson Mandela turned ninety-two while I was there, and the population was asked to spend at least 60 minutes of service sometime during that day to celebrate the sixty years of service he had given to his country. It was odd to realize that only two years ago, Mandela, the one that everyone admires, was taken off the US terror list. One of the reasons for this almost universal
admiration is his non-racial commitment. I learned that he had admitted that the ANC and not just the apartheid regime, had violated human rights in its killing of civilians, and he fought against many in his own party who wanted to eliminate statements to this effect in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Eventually, the leaders of the New South Africa were able to hammer out a new constitution and they established eleven official languages. What I thought about as I left the museum was “What are the parallels in US history?” I felt, as I did during the World Soccer Cup, pride and humility, gratefulness and amazement.

I had been away for much of the final demise of apartheid, and the first sixteen years of a new democracy. (I left in 1976 when the Army expected me to fight against those who were fighting to free South Africa.) The experiences of visiting the Apartheid Museum reminded me of the degradation of apartheid’s victims, perpetrators and beneficiaries. I saw the prison cell of a friend who served nine years, much in solitary, for being a member of the African National Congress (a white woman, who is now serving in President Zuma’s cabinet). I saw the terrible reality that ending one vicious system does not signal the arrival of justice. The sins of the fathers have a life after. After all, reparations for the apartheid era have been negotiated with the powerful of the international mining conglomerate to ensure their profits continue as usual, which means the continuation of cheap labor, so the unions, which were active in struggling for the new South Africa, have become sidelined by government leaders who in many cases seem more interested in enriching themselves than passing the riches along. I see in today’s news that Walmart is making a bid to enter South Africa and the trade unions are resisting, owing to the company’s record of employment practices. I grew up believing, as a Baptist, that one should seek to do small acts of charity to relieve people who suffer, but that the big picture is not for religious people to worry about – keep religion and politics separate! Faith groups take various stances on what is political and what to do about it. I became freshly aware of the power of a socialist or Marxist critique of a society, which in South Africa’s case suggests that more has remained the same than has changed in the class structure.

All this has made me think about the focus of ministry under the liberal democratic ideology that dominates the western world, and determines the appropriate goals for ministry and spiritual care. Nurses are currently striking in South Africa for better pay and better conditions. I did not see chaplains join the picket line because most hospitals do not have paid chaplains. It would definitely be seen as inappropriate for a chaplain to strike in any US CPE center. I continue to question the worldview that underpins our work, our self-reflections and our goals. I ask anew what it means to be committed to justice in a complicated world that is more the same than different from place to place and is more inter-connected than we know. I remember a time when I was an overseas student in CPE and was learning to explore my identity against the backdrop of a new culture. I continue to explore my spiritual geography today. I am even more for keeping open our ears to the overseas student so we may know ourselves ever better.