

THE (NOT SO) SUBTLE REALITIES OF RACISM: A NOTE FOR WELTHAUS VOLUNTEERS

I am a South African. A middle-aged woman. A mother of three. I am a white South African middle-aged woman with three black daughters.

My history and that of my children is that of my country and the world at large. It is permeated by social constructions of age, gender, and most of all race. As a child of an activist family questioning these social constructions is in my blood, and for some time I thought I could escape them, shape a reality for myself and my children free from the bondage of oppressive assumptions which subvert identity, integrity and dignity.

But nearly 20 years after the advent of political freedom and the experience of raising three children in a rapidly changing society, I know that race and racism will be with us for many more generations to come. The injustices of the past come to haunt us in many forms, and social constructions about race and racism are part of the everyday experience of every South African, albeit in much more complex dimensions.

In fact, the experience of racism is not only deeply embedded in the consciousness of all South Africans, but I believe, also in those who have in some way or other contributed to the development of a racist and oppressive regime or benefitted from it, in particular the colonial powers who have plundered and raped the African continent and, even after political emancipation, continue to exploit its natural resources and divide its people.

As young educated young Germans committed to the cause of a just world, you may think that the colonial past has nothing to do with you. Like the holocaust it may still rest heavily on the shoulders of your grandparents and parents, but you, like my younger daughters, are the “born-frees” (a South African term referring specifically to children born after 27th April in 1994 when South Africa declared itself a free, democratic and non-racial society), unburdened by the horrors of racism in your own country’s past or that of the now liberated southern countries. You come into our country with all the openness, idealism, and good will of young people who in all likelihood never had their most basic human rights violated on the basis of the colour of their skin. As nervous as you may be about entering a different culture, you come armed with confidence and a sense of owning your space in the world.

But the sins of our forefathers are there to haunt us all, old and young. The colour of your skin, as soon as you arrive at the airport, will immediately evoke assumptions about your qualities as a person, your values and attitudes, and your rank in society. These assumptions will determine how people relate to you. The black young man in the taxi you are taking to town, will in all likelihood assume that you are educated, wealthy, and that you have access to resources he can only dream of. It will not occur to him that maybe back in Germany your parents are struggling to pay the rent, or that your brother is unemployed. His interactions with you will be based on these assumptions and it will take much time and effort in relationship building to break through the barriers created by deeply entrenched notions of rank and privilege before you will be able to see each other as equal partners in a meaningful encounter.

Similarly white South Africans are caught up in a web of assumptions and prejudices passed on either overtly or subconsciously through the generations. White racism is well-documented in the South African narrative which for centuries has portrayed the black person as inferior, stupid, and incapable of anything more than manual labour for the white boss. While such attitudes are no longer openly

expressed, they tend to simmer beneath the surface, and often find their way into seemingly open and harmless conversations. This can cause real dilemmas for people who are actively committed to authentic relationships and human interactions beyond the barriers created by racial stereotypes. For example, when my children were younger, mothers on the school parking lot, would assume that I am taking the children of my black domestic worker to school. It did not occur to them that they were my children. Similarly, my children and I are often pressurized by total strangers to explain the nature of our relationship. Once a white man handed R100 to one of my daughters at a church function, assuming that I was there with children from a black orphanage. You too may find yourself in situations in which there is a subtle expectation of collusion with racial prejudice by peers who take it for granted that a shared skin colour implies shared values and attitudes.

Stereotypes and prejudices have been handed down to you too, and although they may be less explicit they are no less damaging. We often hear international white volunteers wax lyrical about the joyful suffering of poor black people, especially women and children (“die Armen leiden doch so froehlich”). Volunteers love taking pictures of themselves surrounded by laughing black children in rags (“see how wonderful I am”). White people, including myself, committed to working with black people in the most desperate circumstances, often openly marvel at the “amazing resilience” of those who suffer horrendous trauma and deprivation. I am often told by other white people how “wonderful” I am to be “willing” to work with “those people”. All these are subtle ways in which those of us with rank and resources set ourselves apart from those without. It is a form of racism that is legitimized in the discourse of welfare and development work. It is one we all need to particularly guard against. The truth is that there is nothing romantic about poverty, war, violence, or oppression. The suffering associated with these can never be joyful.

Most importantly, those of us who have acquired rank and status by the accident of birth, carry an enormous responsibility to constantly question and confront our own prejudice. Willingly or not, we are benefitting from the grossly unequal distribution of resources in the world, and the very fact that we have been given the privilege of owning our space with confidence and dignity, challenges us to break through the barriers that separate us from the vast majority of global citizens who have, on the basis of the colour of their skin and/or other irrelevant attributes been denied the chance to claim theirs.

Racism is a reality in all our lives. The challenge is not to paint rainbow colours over a deeply divided nation in a deeply divided world, but to confront the racism within and between us with honesty, authenticity, and love.

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