

A nation in need of therapy

By Sieraaj Ahmed

[This first page is a Facebook post of 30 October 2014, when I shared a column I'd written in 2003. I was intrigued by the strong reaction the words still evoked, 11 years later. I share the Facebook post first, as it provides context and links the 11-year-old column to my perception of the current realities of South Africa's remaining struggles.]



#ThrowBackThursday (30 October 2014)

December 1984, Durban, the Bad Old Days of Apartheid South Africa: A police officer orders my father to get myself and my brother out of a "whites only" pool at the beachfront (which, bizarrely, remains my favourite spot in Durban decades later). I was eight years old, and this was the moment I became aware of what an insane country I was living in at the time.

Here's a (long) column I wrote in 2003, while studying journalism at Stellenbosch University, which includes a description of this moment.

<http://www.oulitnet.co.za/seminaar/sahmed.asp>

Halfway through our journalism year, our class of 21 was asked to write our feelings and memories of apartheid. The lecturers noticed that our class, 9 years into democracy, was showing signs of a "tearing" between those of us at the older end of the class and those at the younger (The oldest was 29, the youngest 21); between those who could remember the realities of apartheid and those who had absolutely no reference points. So they asked us all to write our feelings as honestly as we could (if we wanted to) and litnet hosted this series/ "seminar" of articles.

I hadn't re-read this in probably 10 years before this morning, and am pleased that most of the things I wrote about have eased. In general, the things I worried about then are still at play in SA today... but I do feel we've taken steps in the right direction on my central point: South Africans try a lot harder to understand each other's points of view today than we did 11 years ago. And I don't hear that horrible "Oh, just get over it" argument so often any more. We are maturing, I believe, in many important ways.

The original column (written mid-2003, while studying journalism at Stellenbosch University and published as part of an online seminar by the independent online journal Litnet at <http://www.oulitnet.co.za/seminaar/sahmed.asp>) follows below:

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By Sieraaj Ahmed

It is December 1984 and we are in Durban. I play in the pool on the famous beachfront. My youngest brother Riedwaan is at my side. I am eight years old; Riedwaan is five. It's cloudy but still very hot. Riedwaan and I make friends with David and Willem and Tracy and Meg. The boys tease the girls as we play.

My Dad took the entire family, minus Mom (who had to work), on a two-week vacation to Durban that summer. At the beachfront, we impressed our new friends as we showed off our swimming skills.

Then, suddenly, I see Kahmiela waving frantically from the edge of the pool. She wants me to come to her. I wade through the water to where my three older brothers are gathered around my father. A policeman makes angry gestures at my father's face.

My heart beats faster as my sister throws a towel over my shoulders. I ask what's happening, and she tries to explain but I can't understand her.

Shivering, I squeeze into the circle, huddling close to my father. I'm hoping that the policeman will not hurt him if I'm standing next to him. The policeman is angry about something. My brothers are angry too as they all reply to him at the same time. I grow more nervous, and put my arm around my father's waist. I struggle to understand what they are arguing about.

The policeman gestures angrily towards Riedwaan and the pool, and I slowly realise that they are arguing about Riedwaan. But what could Riedwaan have done to upset this cop?

My father speaks calmly to the policeman: "Officer, I understand you are just doing your job. But then you must do your job, and you must go in there and tell that five-year old boy he is not allowed to swim in that pool. That is not my job, sir — that is your job."

The policeman splutters, and I turn away to look for Riedwaan. I spot his pitch-black hair. It is then that everything becomes clear to me. Our new friends are all white. Riedwaan is the only child in the pool who is not white. For some reason, he is not allowed to swim in this pool.

I am tempted to call him out of the water, but I don't want this cop to have his way. Riedwaan notices the policeman and wades towards us. By the time I wrap a towel around him, he is crying loudly.

Daddy picks him up and assures him everything is OK. The policeman slips away quietly as we all do our best to calm Riedwaan down.

It was a normal day in 1984 South Africa. It was a day that changed everything for an eight-year old boy and his five-year old brother.

I grew up in a firmly middle-class Muslim South African household. My father was one of the first Coloured company executives(!). When it came to education, my siblings and I never wanted for

anything — education was one area where my father would never say no to us. My father was thrown out of District Six by the apartheid government. My mother was thrown out of Claremont.

My four brothers, one sister, and I were all schooled at a Muslim primary school in Wynberg, Cape Town. It was only at high school, in 1989, that I first began to mix socially with non-Muslims. And it was only when I took a part-time job at a bookstore in Claremont, in 1996 (aged 20), that I first mixed with white people.

For this seemingly “insular” upbringing, I don’t blame myself, or my parents. I blame the apartheid system. If there was one area where the system succeeded spectacularly, it was in the literal sense — keeping South Africans apart.

I was born into a changing country. I was born on 18 June 1976, two days after the police massacre in Soweto that killed Hector Petersen and 152 other protesting schoolchildren. I was born into a country that was in flames and was beginning to tear itself apart; a country that would continue to burn non-stop for the next eighteen years.

Yet I was, through an accident of birth and the determination of my parents and older siblings, shielded from full knowledge of the “half-life” that we were forced to live as junior, “Cape Malay” citizens of Apartheid South Africa. That day at the beach front in Durban I first began to grasp the concept of “black” and “white” people. Like the song says: we are not born with it — children have to be taught how to hate. That was the day I became aware that there was something wrong in the way we lived. But in my child’s mind I could not fully understand what and why, and I did not want to appear stupid by asking my parents.

The rest of the 80s are a blur to me. I remember parts of 1985-1985 from a nine-year old’s perspective. I remember my older (Standard 9 and Standard 10) brothers being at home a lot, and being very jealous of them because “they got to stay home from school”, while I had to attend every day. I remember being gathered in the school quad in the middle of the school day and told to walk home in groups of six — and not to take main roads home. I remember the streets of Wynberg burning with tyres and seeing one of my brothers throw a tyre into the middle of Park Road.

I remember Boetie (my oldest brother, real name Caushiem) being arrested for holding a candle on our stoep on a Wednesday night. I remember crying behind a curtain because my brother Zaahier was in the Luxurama cinema opposite our house and the police had stormed the cinema and we didn’t know if he was OK. I remember my brother Yaasier, Head Boy of his year and number one student academically, refusing to write his Matric exams in 1985. I did not understand why my father let him get away with it at the time, and it was only years later that I realised how proud my father has been of Yaasier ever since.

Yaasier repeated his entire Matric year in 1986 and went on to become a civil engineer and a partner in one of the biggest black civil engineering companies in South Africa. It took a decade or more for me to realise that my brothers had made those sacrifices and burned those tyres for us — because they wanted us to be full citizens of our country, and not suffer the humiliations that our grandparents, parents, and older siblings had suffered.

I was 17 in April 1994 — just two months too young to vote in the historic first democratic election. Too young to vote ... but the morning of 27 April 1994 is etched permanently onto my brain. Maybe it was because I was lucky to be a teenager in a changing country. Maybe it was the magnitude of the change that occurred that day. Whatever it was, that day changed everything — that was the day I finally felt a part of the country I had been born in.

I started working at the bookstore in June 1996, aged 20. It took me four years to relax in the company of my white colleagues. Four years where we tiptoed around each other, always on our best behaviour, scared of how we should approach each other. Four years for me to let down my guard and allow myself to learn about white South Africans. Four years for me to begin to see that “Hey! There are white people who care about the future of our country as much as I do! There are white people who don’t have foreign passports under their beds or emergency plans for Australian citizenship!”

The anger inside me sometimes surprised me. Sometimes it still surprises me. You never know what will trigger it. Two years ago I blew up at an elderly woman in a bookstore in Plumstead when I felt she was following my brother and I around because we were two Coloured boys in a bookstore in Plumstead. I frightened my brother (and myself) with how quickly the anger surfaced and boiled over.

In the past three years I have made many white friends and friends of all races and religions. I have learned about white South Africans and black South Africans and enjoyed teaching them about Muslim South Africans.

The old anger still sometimes shows its face, but I have begun to recognise some of the triggers. My personal biggest “trigger” is the privileged South African (mostly white, but increasingly Coloured and Indian) attitude of “For God’s sake, apartheid is dead — can’t you people just get over it already?”.

I believe that attitude, if it becomes a prevalent attitude among privileged South Africans, could be the biggest danger to the future stability of our country.

Because apartheid has not died. I need only listen to anybody, from our President down to my family or closest friends, to hear how raw the wounds of apartheid still are. Apartheid did not die in 1994. Believing it did, is tempting and easy, but foolish. Wishing people would just “get over it already” is not constructive. It can’t happen that way.

Apartheid lives on in the fact that 70% of our countrymen live in poverty and are getting poorer. Apartheid lives on in a nation where many of us are still afraid and uncertain about how to approach one another and learn about each other. Apartheid lives on in the young white South African who does not know how to handle the guilt that he can’t help but feel — guilt that makes him uncertain of how and where he is expected to fit into a country where he is not always sure he is welcome. Apartheid lives on in the black South African who only lets her anger show when she is in a “safe zone” of other non-white South Africans.

The question in my head for the past nine years or so has been: “If I, a middle-class Muslim boy who never really wanted for anything besides the occasional Thundercats toy ... if I am so angry, how angry is someone in Soweto or Khayelitsha who really bore the full brunt of apartheid laws? What if we’re sitting on this huge pot of anger, and it all boils over twenty years down the line?”

I believe that pretending there is no anger there and wishing it away (as, understandably, many white South Africans would like to do) is a dangerous route for our country to follow. We should flog those unpleasant, uncomfortable, depressing horses until residual anger no longer represents a danger to our society. I believe it is better to talk about it, shout about it, shout at each other if we have to, rather than wait for a “boiling-over” in twenty years time. It’s been nine years since Freedom Day, and sometimes I feel like our real work is only just beginning.

Nine years later, and I find myself at Stellenbosch University. I am unsure about how widespread that “Get over it” attitude is among my friends, family and the new people I am surrounded by. But I am encouraged by a sense that South Africans are beginning to find what we’ve been searching for for nine years — a national identity. We are becoming comfortable in our various skins as South Africans first and foremost. We are beginning to unite in purpose and begin the painful process of being able to look past skin colour to find each other, and then rebuild our country together.

Most importantly, I think many (most?) South Africans are beginning to realise that the past nine years have been a “honeymoon”, and that the socio-economic transformation that needs to happen in South Africa is possibly going to be an even more difficult “miracle” to pull off than the first one. I pray that I am not wrong in thinking that most South Africans are preparing themselves for their part in destroying the socio-economic legacy of apartheid that leaves 70% of our compatriots living in poverty.

Apartheid kept us all apart and it damaged us all in the process. Pieter-Dirk Uys says that every morning, he looks at himself in the mirror and says “I am a racist. Today I am going to try harder not to be a racist.” Depressing as that may sound, Uys’s words resonated immediately with me because I believe that all South Africans were scarred by apartheid. I believe we are a damaged nation that needs to work consciously (as Uys does) against the scars that were inflicted upon our psyches by growing up in an abnormal, insane country. We are all racist. I don’t think there was any way to avoid it if you grew up in 20th-century South Africa.

We are a nation in need of therapy. We need to become each others’ therapists as we put our heads together to tackle the next big step in the destruction of apartheid.