

Chapel Talk
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South Africa

I want to thank again Mr. O'Brien for letting me leave school a week early, and to him and Mr. Roach and Mr. Rue for teaching my classes; and also to my wife, for relieving me of two weeks' worth of diapers and meal making and other parenting duties--all of which allowed me to fly to South Africa: Africa, the mother land, the cradle of civilization, the Third World (an ironic term in our Euro-centered vision of the earth, that Europe is the first world, North America the second, Africa the third, when in fact life began in Africa, and moved outward to Europe, Asia, the Americas).

This was quite a trip for me, traveling with my high school buddy Deval Patrick, recently the Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights in our Justice Department, and the graduation speaker here three years ago, who was asked by the South African government to come and talk about civil rights as they work on a new constitution. Just boarding a plane is a monumental mental and emotional journey for me since I hate, I hate, to fly: and to be honest, not much of that dread abated after 11 flights totaling 48 hours in the air. Even with help of a prescriptive anti-anxiety drug from Dr. Lewis, I still loathed getting into a plane. Yet I had to fly, and this confrontation became one of the themes of this trip, my confronting fears and insecurities.

Before I share with you a some slides I took during this 16 day odyssey, I want to talk about a few aspects of this trip which I believe make South Africa one of the most remarkable and exciting places in the world today. The first is the landscape. My sister, the O'Briens, Mr. Hyde, Mr. MacNairn, Mrs. Mein and Mr. Kunz, all of whom have been to South Africa, had told me before how beautiful and stunning the country was; and they were right. Cape Town, at the base of the country and the continent, is a large port city nestled beneath mountains and cliffs which rise over 3000 feet from the ocean, exploding upward almost from the beaches. The bays are rarely quiet, as the winds race up from Antarctica, sending the waves battering against the land, creating spectacular

cliffs and rocky inlets, with the surf pounding in crystal cascades. These prodigious mountain ranges also created havens of vegetation, which the Dutch recognized in the 1800s as perfect places for vineyards. The wine country to the north and west of Cape Town was serene and luscious; and the wine itself delicious and cheap.

We did not go to any game parks, but being able to see the Atlantic and Indian oceans merge, or those mountain ranges vault upward, or the numerous gardens and wild flowers, even the grandeur of some of the old buildings and churches, more than made up for the lack of wild life. Indeed, the stereotype of Africa is the animals, that it's mostly jungle and natives; and even though I knew otherwise, it was important to have this trip be centered around people, around the politics of civil rights and racial unity, around the challenges of recreating a country without anarchy or retribution.

Let me give you a one minute history lesson on modern South Africa. The Dutch set up trading stations along the coast of South Africa in the 1600s; eventually the British began to compete with them through the East India Trading company; there were also battles with the various tribes, primarily the Hotentouts in the southern sections, for the best land. In the 1800s, the Dutch left the Cape Town area on what became known as the Great Trek, and moved inland hundreds of miles, a journey which came to symbolize their pride, defiance, isolation, and bitter hatred towards the rest of the world. Now called Afrikaners, speaking their own language, they came to control most of what is South Africa over the next century, brutalizing the blacks and coloreds--those who were Indian or mixed race--into submission, servitude and poverty. Despite protests from within and without the country, the Afrikaners, who comprised only about 15% of the population in the country, continued to rule the land until 1994. Up until the 1990s, it was illegal for a black person to vote; the police could arrest and detain without cause; blacks had to carry passes wherever they went; they mostly lived in heinous shanty towns, small cities outside the central towns, many of which still remain, where homes are metal roof sheets braced against each other. Nelson Mandela, son of a tribal chief, became the great symbol of resistance when he was jailed for 27 years on Robben Island off Cape Town, then was finally released in 1990 in a scene watched by millions around

the world. As he brought about the end of apartheid, he became the only choice to lead his country when the first democratic elections were held in 1994.

In my view, Nelson Mandela is the most revered leader in the world: no one possesses his integrity, stature, political quickness, moral tenacity. He has led his country to a freedom most of us knew would come, but would only occur after a holocaust of violence and retribution. While there is still violence, South Africa has made the change from a militaristic, racially separated state to a country where races now live and work together in ways unimaginable a few years ago. My friend Deval noted at one point in our trip, that "if ever there was a people who deserved to enact the Old Testament 'eye for an eye' vengeance on those who had so abused and destroyed them, it would be the blacks in South Africa upon the whites." One of our hosts in Cape Town recounted stories from people she knew, blacks who had survived through the years of apartheid; she was amazed that they could still function as human beings because of what she called their "scars of history," scars physical and emotional they had suffered at the hands of whites. Those of you who have read Toni Morrison's *Beloved* remember what happened to Halle after his "scar of history."

And yet here is Mandela's government reaching out to all factions of the country, to the still heavily white owned businesses, gaining their confidence and financial support. Here is Mandela, rejecting a Neurenburg type war crimes court to try and convict and put to death those leaders of apartheid, but instead establishing the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, lead by the other Nobel Peace prize laureate, Desmond Tutu, along with respected judges and leaders of all races, whose task it is to find out what happened, what crimes were committed, what happened to the thousands of people who just disappeared over the last twenty most viscous years, to establish the *truth*. But then there is *reconciliation*: perpetrators receive amnesty for telling the truth, for allowing the country to know what happened but not to continue the cycle of violence and death which ravages through Bosnia and Serbia, two countries also trying to move into freedom and independence. I listened to some of these trials on television while we were there: the callousness of the police officers as they explained their actions of murdering families, children, possible informants, their savage beatings without remorse--these

accounts will test the patience and forgiveness of the country. One session forced Desmond Tutu to "put his head down on the table"(Antony Lewis) and weep, the confessions were so horrific and grotesque. I found my stomach churn as I listened to the police officers describe how they shot to death a family in a shanty town as if they were pestering bugs.

So the country faces huge challenges, but they appear to have the strength and fortitude and charity to do so, a stamina forged by many from their years in prison. Remember Mandela and his 27 years in jail: without any sign of bitterness, he leads his country stressing unity among all people.

What struck me about South Africa was this honesty. People there talk about race much more openly than we do in America. Part of the reason is that the whites have always been a minority, and a small one at that; so they knew they couldn't hold onto power forever. In America, we get defensive over affirmative action; we get nervous about "other people" but we don't talk about it directly. We discriminate subtly, subversively, then duck undercover quickly, denying there was anything "racially motivated" in our actions or words. For the most part, what I witnessed in South Africa was completely different. Nelson Mandela set the standard for discussion through his dignified fight for liberation and equality: the people we met, blacks, whites, Indians, coloreds, talked and argued and wrestled with complex problems of reworking a constitution to fit the needs of all races, not just the whites; but they battled and disagreed openly, honestly. Eating meals with them, listening to these courageous freedom fighters debate and hope was a remarkable experience of how a country can transform itself peacefully and possibly. I felt as if I was in America in 1776 and in the America of the 1870s and 1960s, times of creation and recreation for this country, lead by someone of George Washington's stature and peerless ethical standing.

As awed as I was by the beauty of the land and the courage of its people, I was nevertheless shocked by two aspects of this trip. One was the continued poverty in the country, a poverty especially of economic and educational opportunity. On my three hour drive through the country to St. Mark's College, I stared at villages without

electricity and plumbing, at living conditions worse than anything I'd seen in America; and of course the irony was seeing these shacks and burrows of deprivation from the comfort of an air conditioned Ford station wagon that raced through the towns, a car probably worth more money than what any of those people had earned in their lifetime, a car driven for me by a black South African named Johannis. I hated what I saw, I hated what I couldn't do to help, and I feared for my safety.

This fear, the other shock I experienced, was uglier than the tangible conditions I witnessed from the road. Despite my work over the years in civil rights, summers teaching at schools for the disadvantaged, my fellowship last summer to read African American literature, my 25 year friendship with Deval: despite a youth nurtured by a father who marched from Selma to Montgomery with Martin Luther King, Jr., and wept beneath the Lincoln Memorial as he heard King deliver his "I have a dream" speech in 1963: despite, perhaps because of these profound tenets of equality which I thought existed in me without condescension or knee jerk liberalism--despite all of these Christian and moral forces, I found myself nervous walking the streets in the daylight hours of Johannesburg, Pretoria, Durban, Harare. It was embarrassing, humiliating, even terrifying. In Harare one morning, I left our nice hotel in the middle of the city, crossed the street into a pleasant park, when my eyes opened up: I was the only white in sight. My palms became damp, my heart raced faster; as I kept walking in the humid air, I found myself avoiding eye contact with everyone, moving quickly, almost jogging to the sanctity of a cathedral across the next street. Did I think I was going to be robbed? Did anyone in fact actually approach me? Did anyone in fact actually notice me? Was this how minorities in America felt coming to a place like St. Andrew's?

I failed to come up with clear answers to these questions, nor did intense and soul searching talks with Deval discover any insights. I'm still frustrated with how I felt; I know part of my sensation was being a foreigner in a big city; but that's that subtle, dishonest American way we have of hiding feelings behind "race speak." So I tried to confront this situation in the African way, by open and honest action: I forced myself to walk, and pounding those pavements did more to teach me about the subtleties of comfort and prejudice than a whole summer of reading novels in my safe New

Hampshire study. Am I racist? I don't think so, but I'm human with that natural impulse to carve out safe and comfortable havens. Maybe the challenge for all of us is to stretch our boundaries physically and emotionally and spiritually and culturally.

The last part of my trip I want to share with you is my excursion to St. Mark's, which lies about three hours north east of Pretoria, in the northern part of the country. I looked forward to this journey immensely, to be able to deliver your check for \$4,000 and a big box of red St. Andrew's pencils from Mrs. Mein. Two memories last from that day: the first was my drive out with Johannis, a driver for the US. Embassy, a father of three young children, a man who barely lived through a bullet wound eight months ago when he was robbed. He and I spoke throughout our six hours together, and from him I learned more about the country, Mandela, race relations, past atrocities, future hopes, parenting lessons, marriage customs and food to eat than all the history books or tourist guides could have told me. Johannis helped me move past my phobias and confusions; he helped me see the texture of this country from one of its present beneficiaries and one of its future guardians; ultimately, as I needed to have done, Johannis stretched my boundaries further through his friendship.

My other memory is the tour the Andersons gave me around the campus of St. Mark's, and the vibrating excitement which resonates from every corner of the school. At least five recent graduates happened to come up to the Andersons on our walk, full of stories about their college work, full of pride still in their school--a scene reminiscent to last September's Homecoming here, when the likes of Mary Nicklin, Nick Barker, David Smith, River Elliott, and Jessica Reid all traipsed around the campus remaking the connections and celebrating the shared experience here. You couldn't miss the excitement in the air--at the soccer field, a field not only at 5,000 feet above sea level, but also a field of mostly dirt lumps and uncut grass, there was excitement as St. Mark's attacked the goal and chased after loose balls. The basketball court which St. Andrew's paid for a few years ago jumped with people playing a version of ultimate Frisbee basketball; a classroom swayed with Saturday afternoon dancers. The art room burst with colors and shapes. I realized how privileged we are here at St. Andrew's to have the facilities we do, but I also saw that true learning and growth take place because of people

and vision, which the Andersons have brought to St. Mark's. A remarkable educational experience exists at St. Mark's because they *will* it to happen, against odds we can only begin to imagine. In many ways, St. Mark's offers a more valuable education, and employs more heroic teachers and students than we do, and it was humbling to witness how appreciative the Andersons could be about a box of pencils. I hope the slides reveal in two dimensions what manifested itself in every pore of the campus. What you gave to them will change lives, and will help to change the country.

SLIDES

What are my parting thoughts for you about South Africa? Obviously you must go there. Somehow find a way to get there: if your family has the means, take a trip to South Africa let alone for the majesty of the landscape and the awesomeness of some of the game parks. But South Africa is also a country that demands to be experienced because in South Africa there is the political revolution of a country recreating itself peacefully, honestly, courageously. The exchange rate is extremely favorable, the cuisine and wine superb, the art work stunning. If the \$3,000 air flight ticket is a stretch, find another way to get there: take a semester abroad during college, as 20 Princeton students were doing at the University of Cape Town while I was over there last month. Get to know the people and the mountains. The fresh perspective of seeing and being in a new country, which, while it speaks English, is so vibrantly different from ours, will open up your eyes to new and important questions and ideas. Furthermore, get to St. Mark's, as Mike Evans is trying to do this summer, and work there. Instead of rushing into college, take a year off and help teach there--you will never have felt so useful, and you will learn more about yourself and life in one year than you had in your previous 18 years.

Finally, even if you can't travel to South Africa, find other ways to test your comfort zone, to stretch your parameters. I know I need to keep putting myself out there, to touch the terror of being exposed and then to still find a way to scale my ignorance. My wife Donna, who just returned from an Outward Bound trip in North Carolina, was awed by the experience of rock climbing. She said that the temptation was to try to

barrel straight up the rock face, expecting every hand hold to be directly overhead, when in fact the ascent is more of a delicate dance, and often the next hand hold is just off to the right or the left. All of us need to face these rock walls, but by being receptive to that delicate dance, we can surmount ignorance and fear and prejudice, making "digression our direction," and thus embracing more of the widening boundary of our earthly and human horizons.