

An Eye-Opening Journey to a New South Africa

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Sojourner Truth a century and more ago — words that I carry from the United States to South Africa. I feel an utter calm and peace about the journey on which I now embark. Like Sister Sojourner I, too, feel a power. It is the collective power of my students, colleagues and friends who expressed, despite heart-felt trepidation — theirs, not mine — great confidence in me. I go in the power of their spirit and it is sustenance for my soul.

I feel as well the power of my African ancestors on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean; ancestors who relinquished physical life in their struggle against enslavement and so, in truth, they live on still. Their spirit of struggle is something I deeply affirm. Indeed, it now possesses me. It is a power that bridges Africa and America, a freedom song coursing through my veins to know no rest until justice and peace are known and had by all.

The power I carry with me to South Africa is also that of the saints of God, the church, whose heart-felt prayers mean much. How can I not impart their strength, sense of presence and courage to millions of South Africans awaiting apartheid's end? I know that prayer is carrying me forth, that sister and brother believers are encouraging and supporting me. It is no accident that my April journey began with worship — Easter sunrise service at Emmanuel Baptist Church. Resurrection Day is affirmation that the people of South Africa — all the people — are to know liberation at last.

The Mind of White South Africa (April 6-12)

I arrive in South Africa on April 6. The host organization, the Ecumenical Monitoring Program for South Africa (EMPSA), is waiting at the airport. More than 300 monitors for peace are arriving from every part of the globe. As we head toward Johannesburg, I notice a large and ominous advertisement: "Immigration Services for Those Who Wish to Leave South Africa." Word is that tens of thousands of white South Africans have already left the country, some for permanent relocation to the United States, New Zealand and elsewhere; others, less anxious to leave, have taken a vacation to escape the dreaded post-election "backlash" of the black majority against whites. The newspapers are full of stories about empty grocery-store shelves and Afrikaner families preparing for racial "Armageddon." Little empirical evidence exists to support white paranoia about black revenge, but then paranoia has always been its own best justification. Still blessed with economic privilege, at least, white South Africa awaits the future with baited breath.

Fear of the golden rule, "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," is widespread but seldom voiced among white South Africans today. I was fortunate to spend an evening with several high-ranking members of the National Party. They sought to persuade me, an intelligent (and therefore different) African American, that South Africa was no longer an apartheid society, that racist sentiments were largely extinct in the mind of whites. Whether or not they expected me to believe their story is beside the point. Their words were largely meant to comfort and console themselves. For whatever it's worth, white South Africa needs something to hold on to, some kind of self-assurance that their oppression of blacks has not been all that bad. Needless to say, it is a psychology that doesn't work.

Ciskei and the Eastern Cape (April 13-18)

If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time, but if you come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together!

These are words that I heard from a young Xhosa brother on a previous journey to this land, words that continue to resound in my spirit. Why am I in South Africa? The question came back to me when, much to my disappointment, EMPSA deployed me to the Eastern Cape province. I was prepared to work in the most dangerous regions, but the Border/Ciskei area was to be my home for the next three weeks.

Specifically, our group of 15 are stationed in the towns of Bisho and King William's Town. Like so much else, the existence of "twin" cities are the direct result of

established. Fully dependent on the South African government, the homelands had no industries to speak of and less than fertile land. In addition, the land was "owned" by the homeland government, so its citizens had even less access to good land. The Eastern Cape is predominantly Xhosa, rural and illiterate. It is also the poorest and second-most populated of South Africa's nine provinces. Cities like King William's Town, located on the homeland's border, have always insured white South Africa's stability and security.

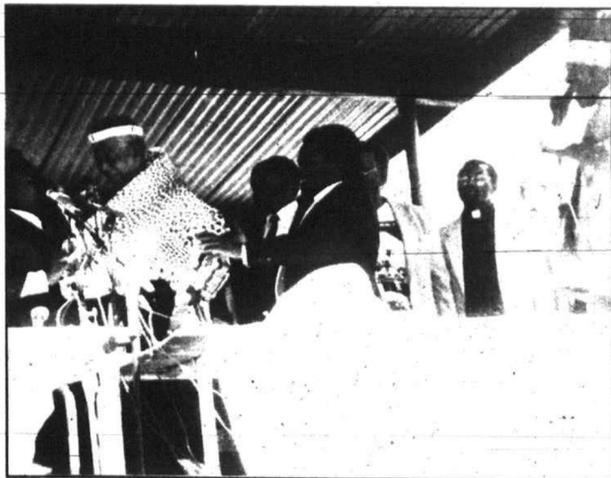
Pre-election Observations (April 19-25)

Another day in South Africa and I am finally beginning to grasp the rhythm of these pre-election days. The struggle is not as many anticipated, with threats of physical confrontation, even death for some. There have been some tense moments, of course, especially bomb attacks from the white right wing. I remember vividly the April 10 rally held at Soweto's Irkabbo West Stadium. It marked the one-year anniversary of the assassination of Chris Hani, leader of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), and beloved by the people.

Nelson Mandela was the featured speaker and security was tight. Nevertheless, a crowd of people broke through MK's ranks and on to the field, in pursuit of a man said to be an informant for the Inkhata Freedom Party. Security was no match for the hundreds of people who streamed on to the field. For several minutes, I felt the sheer terror of the situation as the crowd surged toward the center of the field and me. A South African on the field with me would later describe that moment as the most terrifying of his life, as spears, shields and guns suddenly appeared from nowhere. I knew I should leave, but was too caught up in the moment to move quickly. Shots rang out from rifles and AK-47s and then we moved. I will not easily forget the feeling of my heart coming up in my throat that day, or the grim look on my friend's face.

But back to my main thought. The tensions at Orlando West scarcely materialized anywhere during the elections. Regrettably, someone lost their life that day, but I have had a more enduring sense of danger walking the city street of Europe and the United States. I have made several trips to Africa, and white depictions of black people in South Africa strike me as scarcely different than the stereotyping of African-Americans. To be feared rather than affirmed, studied rather than understood, is a constant. Apartheid as a way of life is deeply entrenched and will not easily go away. But the rising tide and surging expectations of black people cannot be denied. South Africa will never be the same.

I walked the mile and a half to the King William's Town stadium and to one of the most memorable experiences of my stay. The area Council of Churches had called for an ecumenical prayer meeting for



Mandela: adorned with chief's garb of head beads and a leopard skin.

women. Having no idea what this meant, I arrived at 10 a.m. to find voter education taking place. Each woman who entered the grounds was given a sample ballot and shown how to make an "X" next to the candidate of their choice. It did not take me long to realize that this women's prayer event was more than a traditional prayer meeting. Politics and prayer, religion and justice all met on this day, as women after woman offered proud testimony to the new South Africa. ANC colors were worn by many of these women of faith, despite their different religious backgrounds. Apostolic, Methodist, Anglican, Presbyterian, Baptist and others preached, prayed and danced and swayed in collective affirmation. Even someone like me, unable to speak Xhosa, was easily able to understand what was taking place. The power of black women amassed, their resolute determination and strength was almost beyond belief. (Need we ask why no white women were present?) No pie-in-the-sky religion, but a self-determining faith for these women. "Was not Mr. Mandela born of a woman? And has he not struggled for us?" one sister proclaimed. "Let us be sure then to mark 'X' next to his picture!" The service ended six hours later. No fewer than 1,000 women were in attendance.

A day or two thereafter, Nelson Mandela spoke to a cheering crowd of about 2,000 people at Mqheke — the Great Place — near King William's Town. He promised to install Paramount Chief Maxhoba Sandile as a king on equal footing with King Goodwill Zwelithini of the Zulus. The crowd cheered wildly as Mandela was then dressed in traditional chief's garb by Chief Sandile: a circlet of beads on his head and a leopard skin draped over his shoulder. He was also handed a ceremonial spear to protect him against his enemies and anointed with holy water by a Roman Catholic priest. To see Mandela in this setting was undoubtedly to see a man of the people at his best.

The Elections (April 26-29)

The elections are almost underway and everywhere, it appears, the people are lining up in massive numbers. I arrive at my first station, Ndevana, at 6 a.m. The school polling station had not yet opened, but the line along the fence surrounding the station is perhaps half-mile in length, or more! It is election's first dawn and I see the people converging as I walk the dirt road trying to glimpse the end of the line. People are streaming toward their date with destiny in

groups of two, three and more, even though voting will not start for another hour. They are coming from every direction, as far as the eye can see, young and old alike, adults carrying babies and, on occasion their elders, as well as plastic buckets with bread and drink in them. Outside the fences, "hawkers" are displaying their wares of apples, pineapples, roasted corn and so on. Children play quietly nearby (two 10-year-old boys tell me how much they want to vote) and teen-agers look on with great interest at the process and at each other.

I have taken pictures — don't know if they will come out — of the line stretching beyond the upturned curve in the road with the sun rising behind it in the east. The scene, with its silhouettes, reminds me so much of our own civil-rights movement in the United States, and the famous photos of men, women and children marching along freedom's way in Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee.

"The people have spoken" was the first thought that went through my mind as I saw them arriving at Mdevana, persons of every description, all of them African, hopeful, joyous, silent, dignified — oh were they dignified — waiting, talking, smiling, patient, some having been there for several hours already. I spoke with the first woman in line. She had been there since 3 a.m., layered with blankets to protect herself against South Africa's cold autumn nights. I met persons at other polling stations who had been in line even earlier. No wait seemed to long for a moment years in the making, for decades and centuries of preparation. The people were clearly in a mood to celebrate, but not before

love her, safeguard this sacred moment. Apartheid is legally dead and Mandela, the "handsome old man" of the ANC, is now president. "Free at last," South Africa is a society whose glorious promise is that racism, sexism and oppression do not have the last word. Not now, not ever. For Africans, on the continent and throughout the diaspora, that such a truth should come to pass will be enough. In the meantime, the struggle continues. Mayibuye, iAfrika.



Several people attended a voter registration drive.



Wise old men are plentiful in South Africa.



Tomb of Stephen Biko, who died at 30.

apartheid. King William's Town is the more established white town while Bisho is a sterile municipality 13 years old. Bisho is the capital of Ciskei, one of South Africa's several homelands until now. King William's Town sits on the "South African" side of the border. There is little evidence of life in Bisho; King William's Town is thriving. Thankfully, Ciskei made the decision to disband its homeland government a few weeks ago. With some coaxing from Nelson Mandela, neighboring Transkei has also rejoined the national fold.

To know Ciskei and Transkei is to know something about the future of South Africa. The region is a strong hold of the African National Congress (ANC) and birthplace to many progressive leaders. Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Raymond Mhlaba, Govan Mbeki, Black Consciousness leader Stephen Biko and numerous others came from here. Ciskei's Fort Hare University, attended by all the above, is a well-known breeding ground for revolutionary activity. Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe studied there and Archbishop Desmond Tutu once served as university chaplain.

The apartheid government believed it could break the ANC and its allies by developing a divide and conquer strategy in the region. As in other parts of the country, the so-called "independent" homelands of Ciskei and Transkei were thus



Throngs attend prayer for women at King William's Town stadium.

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