Life After the Apartheid Storm: Reflections on South Africa

After nearly sixteen hours on a plane, we arrive in Johannesburg, historically referred to as “the city of gold” due to its prolific mining industry. Fighting jet lag, we face a plodding bus ride to our home for the next week, during which we get our first impressions of the city. On the surface, Johannesburg looks like any other vibrant city—modern skyscrapers, buses and trains that run on time, businessmen walking down the street talking on cell phones, fast food restaurants, trendy nightclubs. It is the largest city in South Africa, and one of the most modern cities in Africa. The road to such prosperity, however, was a long, bumpy one, built on the blood of an entire generation. As I look out the window of our car, I see layers of people and, not surprisingly, they are stratified along racial lines. How do I put everything that I see into its proper place? How do people here reconcile life today with the horrible events of such a recent history? I would soon find that answering those questions is an ongoing process that never really ends.

Later that week, we travel to the townships of Soweto and Alexandra, where some might say you find the real face of South Africa. It is a difficult trip for all of us, encountering the raw stories of apartheid survivors on their streets, in their homes, in their churches. We walk the peaceful streets of Soweto, imagining the brutal violence that erupted in these streets just thirty years ago. Although today it is a sprawling settlement with millions of residents, Soweto feels like a small town, where everyone knows one another.

We emerge from the Hector Pieterson Museum, wiping tears from our cheeks. The museum tells the story of Pieterson, a thirteen-year-old boy who was the first of 566 children killed on July 16, 1976, in a student protest during the Soweto uprising. Suddenly it is dark outside, the clouds roll in, and it begins to rain. The unpredictable South African showers cleanse the streets of Soweto as we return to our hotel to rest; tomorrow is a new day.

Less than 100 kilometers outside “Jo’burg” is Pretoria, the administrative capital of South Africa. Our daytrip to Pretoria leads us to a nonprofit organization designed to support and school more than 100 children who have been orphaned by HIV/AIDS, while allowing them to stay at home and avoid life in an orphanage. It was another bittersweet encounter with the young faces of South Africa’s next generation. Smiling and laughing outside their school, the children are enraptured by our presence, making it almost painful to say goodbye to them after seemingly endless rounds of games and pictures all afternoon. Alas, we must leave in order to continue our journey.

Before we know it, our stay in Johannesburg is over, and it is time to move on to our next destination, Cape Town. Located at the opposite end of this vast country, Cape Town resembles a kind of Mediterranean paradise. The smell of the ocean whips around the corners of Dutch colonial apartments and up the steep sides of Table Mountain.
The legislative capital, Cape Town maintains a beautiful spirit in the face of very recent wounds. Every street is at once an intersection of indigenous populations, descendents of Dutch colonists from hundreds of years ago, the vestiges of life under apartheid, and modern mega tourism. Several kilometers off the coast of the Cape stands Robben Island, site of one of the most infamous prisons in the world. It was here that the hero of the anti-apartheid movement and the first democratically elected president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, spent eighteen years in exile. Our tour guide on Robben Island was himself a prisoner here once, and although he spoke from painful firsthand experience of life there, he remained calm, soft-spoken, and resolute, speaking of forgiveness and of reconciliation with his past. Perhaps we could all learn something from him.

Even after months of preparation— and fourteen intense days—we sheltered Emory students were left scratching our heads, still unable to comprehend the rhythm of South African life. For some of us, this was a return trip, while for others it was a kind of unique baptism into a reality unlike anything we had seen before. Each of us came here with different expectations and attitudes but left with a shared memory of what it means to find reconciliation in the midst of grief, loss, revenge, and survival.

It is clear that South Africa is moving forward from its painful past. Archbishop Desmond Tutu once referred to South Africa as the “rainbow nation.” Indeed, perhaps this is an appropriate analogy for life after the apartheid storm. A country with eleven official languages, South Africa today is proud of its diversity, and sees a bright future—only if everyone is there to enjoy it.

—Drew Winchester