

## Slow healing as we transform

Jonathan Jansen | 01 December, 2011 00:29



**The young man sitting at the lunch table with 15 fellow students had no arms. Next to him sat a woman student who had returned with the group from a short period of studying overseas.**

The returnees were excitedly sharing their experiences with us. Every time the young man looked at his friend sitting next to him, she would lift a spoon of food to his mouth. This went on for a while. Just across the road from where this act of communion was playing out, a terrible racial incident nearly destroyed this old university. Today, the black student is being fed by his friend, the white woman student, as if this was the most natural thing in the world.

"How come there was this old, brown car parked in my driveway?" I ask inside the house.

"A man from the garage dropped off the car. Said it was the address where the car should be delivered after it was serviced."

I look inside the car, find an address, and drive my own car to what I hope is the natural home of the brown car. It is now dark. I press the buzzer outside the gate. The young man striding down the long path towards my car looks upset once he colours me in.

"What do you want here? Can't you see it's late? Yes?"

I know in his Afrikaans culture this kind of dismissive, angry tone would not have been if I was white; this knowledge helps the response.

Firmly, and in Afrikaans, I put it to him, I do not talk to disrespectful kids: "Go call your parents, now!"

Both language and tone surprise him, and he steps back. The parents emerge and recognise me as the university principal; they offer nothing but kindness.

"I need your son for 15 minutes."

He climbs into the car and we drive to my home where I offer him coffee before giving him the key to drive their car home. He spends all the time apologising for his behaviour.

Inside the beautiful School of Music, a good, old European man has found what he calls raw talent from the townships, training young black teenagers to sing the most beautiful Italian classics.

"It is the songs they choose," he tries to persuade me, and the youngsters are clearly talented.

In a moment of hush, he exclaims: "They sing from their natural environment from which they emerge."

The "they" rings in the ears as the "us" absorbs the sweet melodies; the naturelle are still with us. This is the ticket for very disadvantaged youth to enter a preliminary university programme in music. The tuition is free; the voice trainers are volunteers; the paternalism, the sense of uplifting mission, of "them," is there too.

The angry black political leader from outside campus demands more transformation from the university, when what he really wants is ethnic domination. I remind him that every time he meets with the university management it is with an exclusive caste of African men.

"And you want to talk to me about transformation?"

Of course it should not matter in a normal society who he travels with, but normal is still far off, and the hypocrisy of calling for transformation without the capacity for self-reflection is something we need to point out.

Now standing in front of me is one of the most amazing students I have ever met. Only a year ago she was the first black head girl in an overwhelmingly white girls school that still calls itself "Christian and National" in the public school system. From inside an aged institution with all the trappings of conservative ideologies from a harmful past, this school, called Orange, after its Dutch colonial roots, recognised, nurtured and brought to leadership a confident, super-intelligent black woman whose first-year university scores average in the 90s. I put my head on a block she is going to emerge as a major leader in this country in the future.

It is a short flight from the city of roses to that cosmopolitan noisiness called Durban. Today there is a difference. There is no longer the reassuring, deep, white male voice of the pilot introducing the black or woman co-pilot. For the first time, it is a woman introducing her co-pilot, another woman, for the short flight over the Lesotho mountains.

This country changes slowly, in unexpected places, with all the scars of a wounded past, awkwardly and painfully. But away from the noise of succession and secrecy bills, we transform anyway.