Immersed in America: Life after a Trip to South Africa

Published In Kotzé, Dirk, Myburg, Johan & Johan Roux. (eds.) 2002. *Ethical Ways of Being*. Pretoria:Ethics Alive, pgs.35-54.

Kaethe Weingarten, Ph.D.
The Family Institute of Cambridge and Harvard Medical School

It is always difficult to trace the origins of a paper. Should I mention the proximate cause, Elmarie Kotzé's request to write a paper titled "*A Walk on South African Soil with Kaethe Weingarten*?" Or, the first cause, my early connection to South Africa in childhood? Or all the reasons in between, piled like stacks of papers, ordered and disordered, read and still-to-be-read, with only a few studied and carefully annotated.

Should I start backwards; write linearly or metaphorically; personally, theoretically or both? So many choices, so few criteria for selection. What does the reader need to know to accompany me on my "walk?"

I met Elmarie Kotzé in a workshop I gave in 1999 at the first Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference in Adelaide, Australia. She and I were in a small group together and her description of the violence in post-Apartheid South Africa moved me deeply. Our group had created a trusting and caring holding space and in that context I asked Elmarie if we might keen with her.

Keen. I was thinking of an evening I had spent ten months before with a group of women where we had watched the setting of the sun blacken the night sky and darken the many-windowed room where we were joined in expectant silence. One woman began to weep and as she cried another woman joined her, until the space was filled with a chorus of lamentation, some focused on private griefs and some responsive to the cries of the other women in the room. Many minutes later, a rhythm emerged from the chaos, a

harmony of sound, a joining of tears, until the room vibrated with synchronized wails. Beauty collaborated with pain, creating hope.

I wanted to keen with Elmarie; I wanted to join my breathing to the rhythm of hers and show with my sobs that I had entered her sorrow. I knew I had met a woman I wanted to meet again. A few days later, I met Dirk Kotzé. He and I attended a workshop about a gathering of aboriginal families organized to heal the effects of events that had occurred years before in their community. At the end of the presentation, Dirk and I stood outside the tent, filaments of connection starting to spin between us. I remember weeping, feeling overawed, sensing the fragility of the planet and how interlinked we all are. I knew I wanted to find a way to go to South Africa, to be there with Elmarie and Dirk.

I now have. I was invited by the South African Association of Marital and Family Therapy (SAAMFT) to be one of three international keynote speakers at their eighth international conference and by the Institute of Therapeutic Development in Pretoria, directed by Elmarie and Dirk Kotzé, to do several workshops and consultations for their community. The process of refining the work that I would do in South Africa involved lengthy correspondence by email with Elmarie and with Suzanne Shuda, SAAMFT national president. The correspondence, along with the reading I did in preparation for the work in South Africa, became an integral part of my life.

I vividly recall reading Antjie Krog's *Country of my Skull* (1998) during the summer of 1999 in our small lakeside cabin in Northern Maine, on a foul, wet day, inside by a fire with my then twenty-year-old daughter, Miranda, who was reading Philip Gurevitch's harrowing account of the Rwandan genocide, *We wish to inform you that*

tomorrow we will be killed with our families (1998). There we were, two women by a cozy fire, reading in silence, joined in appreciation of the work it is to witness horror, even encountered on the pages of a sleek book with soft, cream pages. Simultaneously, I was floating in the grace of having a child with interests and concerns, politics, similar to mine.

Later that summer, my life partner, Hilary Worthen, a primary care physician, and I read aloud to each other from various histories of South Africa and from Nelson Mandela's (1994) autobiography. I particularly remember reading a passage toward the end of the autobiography about Mandela's relationship to his cook in his last prison residence, a cottage on the grounds of Victor Verster prison. The description surprised me for its sweetness, for Mandela's graciousness and his insistence on reciprocity in their relationship. If the prison guard/chef cooked, Mandela would wash the dishes. If he helped Mandela with his Afrikaans, Mandela would help him with his English. I was struck by Mandela's capacity to live in the present, to practice forgiveness and to enjoy himself.

I read for months. Voluminously. But nothing prepared me for the experience I was to have. Years ago, I had written a paper on intimacy. In it I wrote that intimate interaction develops when people share or co-create meaning together and that non-intimate interaction occurs when people refrain from meaning-making, impose, reject and misunderstand each other's meanings (Weingarten 1991). I intuited that the experiences I would have in South Africa would be so powerful, and that I would be so transformed by them, that it was imperative that Hilary take this trip with me. I believed that we would be awash in intimate interaction were he there, and that we would be separated by the

difficulties of communicating were he not. In effect, I anticipated another way by which non-intimate interaction can occur: when one person cannot encompass the meanings of another.

I was absolutely right that we should take this journey together, for that is what it is becoming. In our fifties, having "walked" on South African soil, we are living differently in America. We are on a journey, destination unknown, the path clear only a few steps ahead.

Seeing Table Mountain

The first morning we woke up in South Africa, I got dressed quietly into my running clothes and slipped out of the darkened room so that Hilary, who had not had a week in the Netherlands as I had to adjust to the time change, could sleep in. I set out from the hotel to walk to Table Mountain, whose form hovered in the background and which had been visible to me from many angles the previous day.

Oblivious to distance, I had intended to walk to the mountain, but walking toward its looming bulk, I lost interest in the mountain as a destination and instead released myself into the effect of its presence. Jane Hirshfield, a contemporary American poet, writes that: "in poetry, a landscape is never only outer, it is also a portrait of the soul" (Hirshfield, 1997, p.12). I think this is what I felt as I walked. No longer was I engaged in my morning fitness routine, albeit going to a majestic place. Rather, I was lifted into contemplation of my soul and the sacredness of the call to service I had received. I felt humility, reverence, and gratitude. I felt small, open, eager. I slowed down, the better to savor the mountain before me, the browns and crags of it.

I looked around me, but none of the other people on the street, all persons of color, was looking up or beyond where my eyes were captured. This interested me. In the United States, many people think that even the most spectacular views, for instance, our Teton Mountains or the Grand Canyon, seen often enough can become "like wallpaper: just there." Obviously, on this morning, there were people who could walk near Table Mountain and not be stopped by its beauty or feel in dialogue with it.

That never happened to me. We stayed in Cape Town for eight days. I was in the thrall of Table Mountain the entire time. I personified the mountain. I made it an ancient ancestor, who had seen all the hatred, violence, passion, devotion … and who had survived with a searing, compassionate wisdom.

I used the mountain the way I use poetry. This function of poetry has been described by Seamus Heaney (1995) as a "counterweighting, of balancing out the forces, of redress –tilting the scales of reality toward some transcendent equilibrium" (p.3).[1] In this sense poetry not only makes truth claims but also imagines a "satisfactory comeback" to the facts of the matter. This is a fully realized poetry where "the co-ordinates of the imagined thing correspond to and allow us to contemplate the complex burden of our own experience, (Heaney, p.10.)"

Lest you think I am mad to compare Table Mountain to poetry, let me quote Heaney one more time. He writes: "I want to profess the surprise of poetry as well as its reliability; I want to celebrate its given, unforeseeable there ness, the way it enters our field of vision and animates our physical and intelligent being…(Heaney, p.15)." Just so Table Mountain. For the days of the conference, I left the Huguenot Memorial Hall

[1] I am indebted to conversations with the poet Fred Marchant and his essay "Comebacks and Counterweights" in *Peacework*, July/August, 2000, pgs16-17, for my appreciation of Heaney's point about the redress of poetry.

reeling from the talks I had heard and the conversations I had taken part in. I would look up at the mountain and find a counterweight and comeback. Everything would suddenly return to a manageable scale. All current effort seemed worth the pain; the past, redeemable. The mountain's presence spoke to me of a measure of time greater than centuries within which endurance mattered. The mountain soothed and comforted me.

Distance

Distance is a funny thing. Not just in relation to mountains. On our second day in South Africa, Mita Solomons , the branch chairperson of SAAMFT, took us into the township of Gugulethu so that before we participated in the conference, we would have more perspective on the lives of colored and black South Africans. As we drove out from the city, like tracing time on the concentric rings of a tree, the streets became wider and emptier, the dust blew with less restraint in the breeze, as if there was little to tack it down, and the houses became smaller and smaller, shabbier and shabbier until, finally, we saw houses that were jumbled concoctions of discarded building materials, the borders of one bleeding into the shape of the next, making a mockery of my ideas of permanence.

Into this visual, visceral experience of Apartheid, Mita scheduled several stops for us, each of which provided powerful lessons. In the midst of overwhelming circumstances, we met people who were taking firm steps to replace chaos and dissolution with clarity and direction. Rather than be paralyzed by how much there was to do, people had rolled up their metaphoric sleeves, and said, "Of the million things that need to be done, what do I want to do, what *can I* do *here, now*?

Later, at the conference, I heard many people speak about projects with which they were involved in their home communities. It was as if they were suddenly let out of a very tight, very painful box and, newly released, they were drawn to filling in gaps.

Gaps are another sort of distance. There is a comic routine by a very cranky, now dead, American comedian, Jimmy Durante that my best friend in high school's family used to launch into at odd moments. It went like this:

> To Durante: What's the Grand Canyon?
> Durante: The Grand Canyon is a chasm. What's a chasm? A chasm's a hole. What's a hole? A hole is nothing. And if you think I'm going to sit around here talking about nothing, you're crazy!

South Africans seemed to be involved in a reverse-Durante. They saw a chasm – gaps in what needed to be there but wasn't –and flung themselves into it, believing they were the right person at the right time at the right place to just do it. Necessity seemed to squelch, or at least temper, self-doubt.

We met one woman who knew that her community needed AIDS counseling, but there was no space to provide it. She "liberated" a toilet stall, placed a board across it, and was in business. When it was suggested to her that she could build a small room if each of her visitors paid her with one brick, she leapt at the idea.

In America, there are also gaps. Millions of gaps. But there is so much red tape, there are so many stakeholders, vested interests and politics surrounding every gap, that it is exhausting to imagine oneself plunging in to fill any gap that one perceives. However, one of the major impacts of my trip to South Africa is a commitment not to recoil from the *stuff* surrounding a gap.

Recently, on the same porch in Maine, I read an article in *Family Process*, a family therapy journal, which inspired me because it articulated for the American context

the kind of public action I observed and was inspired by in South Africa. The ideas in this article felt like they were good allies. (Of course, in the States, ideas in journals are coated in academic discourse, legitimating by intellectual concepts what is legitimated by heartfelt common sense in South Africa.)

The authors of the article propose that therapists and health professionals undertake the craft of Catalytic Community Partnerships, which wed "a vision of democratic renewal with practical skills in building capacities for leadership of individual people, families, and community organizations. The image of 'craft,' rather than 'techniques,' connotes a love for the process and public outcomes" (Doherty & Beaton 2000, p.155).

The authors describe ten core beliefs that underlie Catalytic Community Partnerships, each of which is a core belief I think I encountered among the South Africans I met who were working to fill gaps. Here are a few of these beliefs:

- Individuals, families and communities are producers of health promotion.
- Professional expertise should be "on tap," not "on top."
- Community initiatives…should involve an unleashing of the spirit.
- Community health initiatives must be based on people's cultures…
- Accountable leadership is responsive to feedback from all stakeholders. (Doherty &Beaton, 2000. p.161).

I am hoping to find a project that I can commit to here in the States that will allow me to work with the spirit I observed among my South African colleagues. There are

many beliefs in my context that will make this challenging, not the least of which is the ambivalence with which Americans view the “I.” Let me try to explain.

Ubuntu

Even before I visited South Africa, I was magnetically pulled to the idea of *ubuntu*. I first encountered the philosophy of *ubuntu* in 1999 in Australia, when I attended a workshop given by Lizzy Ramantsi, Dirk Kotzé and Elmarie Kotzé entitled, "Keeping *Ubuntu* Alive: Caring for People and Community." I then read more about *ubuntu* in several books, including Antjie Krog's. In Krog’s (1998) book, I read a statement made by Archbishop Desmond Tutu: "In the African *Weltanschauun*g, a person is not basically an independent, solitary entity. A person is human precisely in being enveloped in the community of other human beings, in being caught up in the bundle of life. To be …is to participate” (Krog 1998. p.143).

Ubuntu conceptualizes the human situation as interdependent. I have struggled with the Western autonomous view of “man” all of my conscious life. As a young child, although I was teased mercilessly for these habits, I named everything around me. I named sections of our yard and the park in which I played as if each portion of ground was an extension of my self. I did not observe the same boundaries of self and other that my family and friends did.

When I got older and collected shells, I numbered, color-coded and named each of them. All my stuffed animals had first and middle names. I needed to do call them by names because I was not the master of these things, but their friend and fellow communitarian.

I felt other people's situations as if they were my own. I wept easily as a child. I could enter the experience of others even though I had little frame of reference for doing so. I vividly remember sobbing at the conclusion of an MGM musical that had breath-taking dance numbers when the camera panned to a close-up of a baby in a bassinet. I remember saying: "It's so beautiful," to my concerned father, who wished I just ate popcorn, like other five-year-olds.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Martin Buber (1970) enunciated an inter-human stance in his dialogic philosophy. Contrasting the I-It with an I-Thou mode of relationship, Buber contrasts relating for the gratification of self-interest versus relating for the fullness of mutual recognition. However, in both forms of relationship, the emphasis is still on the dyad. While the "I" may be part of a community, the "I" is relating as an individual self in both of these modes of relationship.

As I understand *ubuntu*, an individual's understanding of the self is based on an awareness of the fundamental indivisibility of self and group. I animated every aspect of my world to create awareness of my interacting with it, not my passing through it. My childhood efforts at stitching connections through naming are a Western child's attempt at creating multiple attachments with mutual responsibility. For me, the concept of *ubuntu* answered a felt need.

Perhaps the community work with which I observed South African colleagues of all colors engaged is also an expression of *ubuntu*. Whereas in the United States we reference democracy to call forth public work, perhaps in South Africa, *ubuntu* is the common cultural reference. But democracy may not be a sufficient draw. What of love?

I drive a car that has one bumper sticker. It says, “Love is the only solution.” This quote from Dorothy Day, the radical pacifist and Catholic worker for the poor, was chosen by one of my closest friends to commemorate the lives of her eight-year-old son and her husband, both of whom died of cancer within four years of each other. I believe that this bumper sticker is true.

The bumper sticker means to me that ultimately, human-kind will survive to the extent that we love each other, in the sense that the Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela so compellingly describe. They write:

> Biology also shows us that we can expand our cognitive domain. This arises through a novel experience brought forth through reasoning, through the encounter with a stranger, or, more directly, through the biological expression of a biological interpersonal congruence that lets us *see* the other person and open up for him (sic) room for existence between us. This act is called *love*, or if we prefer a milder expression, the acceptance of the other person beside us in our daily living. This is the biological foundation of social phenomena: without love, without acceptance of others living beside us, there is no social process and, therefore, no humanness. Anything that undermines the acceptance of others, from competency to the possession of truth and on to ideologic certainty, undermines the social process because it undermines the biologic process that generates it. Let us not deceive ourselves: we are not moralizing. We are only revealing the fact that, biologically, without love, without acceptance of others, there is no social phenomenon (Maturana & Varela 1987, p. 246-247).

Whether it is biological or philosophical, the argument for love is powerful. I believe that love is assisted by a different conception of the “I” than the one that is dominant in Western thinking. In the West, the “I’ refers to ego. I prefer to think that the “I” can be a tool through which empathic engagement with the other is achieved.

Recently, I experienced shame and humiliation with regard to just this distinction. One of the overwhelming experiences I had in South Africa was “getting” the magnitude of the AIDS crisis in Southern Africa. Although I had left home knowing piles of statistics, nothing prepared me for the human face of the epidemic. An AIDS counselor

from Zimbabwe talked about having 17 members of her immediate family die of AIDS. A psychology professor from Durban said that she attends between three and five funerals a week. Women talked about the AIDS orphan "problem" in their communities. I heard some of the stories behind the rape and sexual harassment statistics. I felt that the crisis was unencompassable and, simultaneously, that my politics, my sense of justice, compelled me to conceptualize the "AIDS crisis in Africa" as personal.

My previous denial weighed heavily on me. I felt keenly the horror and privilege of being a member of the first world. I felt certain that if this epidemic were occurring on the East Coast of the United States where I live, **nothing else** would be happening but efforts to contain, intervene and prevent. I was, I am, beside myself.

In June, I went to a writing retreat with my revered teacher. During that time, we were asked to create a sacred alphabet. After much soul-searching, I began with the letters in the word "AIDS," writing the following sentence: "'A' is for AIDS in Africa and 'I' am a first-world person." I situated my understanding of the sacred in the heart of this plague and my responsibility in relation to it.

Hearing my sentence, my teacher told me that it was "hubris"[2] to place myself in the sentence. I was stunned and felt ashamed, but her comment gave me an opportunity to think as rigorously as I am able and to know what I think about this matter. I know I am capable of hubris and egoism. It is an unattractive quality. However, I believe that enterprise and action evolve most productively when we are motivated by a fundamental experience of connection with, rather than assistance to, others. Breyten Breytenbach frames this position in relation to Apartheid: "I repeat: my revulsion to Apartheid could not only be because of what it was doing to all the 'un-Whites,' could not be really

[2] Hubris derives from a Greek word meaning excessive or overweening pride.

resilient if motivated by a ‘do-good’ approach, but because of how it was affecting *me*” (Breytenbach 1983, p.74).

Likewise, my commitment to work on the AIDS crisis is, I believe, more robust if it feels personal rather than altruistic. Using my sense of myself as a first-world person to enter imaginatively the community of Southern Africa enacts *ubuntu* and *love*. It defies geography but it respects solidarity. It also reflects the openness with which I felt embraced and graced. I felt “permitted” to think of myself as connected to the people, the predicament and the plight of South Africans. I felt that I could live here and love there.

Witnessing

In the course of the preparation I did for the trip, I gravitated to the concept of witnessing as key to my understanding of the dilemmas faced pre- and post-Apartheid for South Africans. Building on my years of experience working with families in which sexual abuse has taken place, I was drawn to enter the witness experience and try to capture aspects of it. A witness is created in a number of ways, one of which is when a person observes the actions of a perpetrator (or a system) on a victim. People can occupy multiple positions at any one time, and over time. That is, a person may be a victim in one context and a perpetrator or witness in another.

I developed a two by two grid, in which different witness positions were generated by whether or not an individual witnessed with or without awareness and was in an empowered or dis-empowered situation in relation to that which was witnessed. Although the diagram is two-dimensional, it is essential to grasp the three-dimensional implications of the grid. Every witness position creates consequences for the individual, family, community and society. Although I think it is desirable to be an aware and empowered witness, I also know that there are risks: again, to the individual, family,

community and society. There are consequences of each witness position at each level of system organization.

Nelson Mandela's autobiography (Mandela 1994) illustrates many features of this grid. The contours of Mandela's life in relation to Apartheid are well known to South Africans. His personal journey from an unaware, dis-empowered witness of Apartheid; to an aware, dis-empowered witness; to being an aware and empowered witness has affected the lives of all South Africans and the lives of many peoples in the world. The consequences of his different witness positions entailed, among other effects, twenty-seven years of imprisonment for him; his family's loss of their beloved husband, father, and son as well as constant attacks on the lives of family members; and turmoil and freedom for the society. He precipitated many people's journeys out of a dangerous unaware empowerment.

A few illustrations will call many others to mind. While Mandela was still a young child, his father defied a white magistrate and in retaliation, the magistrate deprived Mandela's father of his fortune and title. Mandela was an unaware, dis-empowered witness to this event. He writes: "I was unaware of these events at the time, but I was not unaffected" (Mandela 1994, p.7). His family lived in strained circumstances, and his mother moved to a different village where she could have the support of friends and relatives. This turned out to provide Mandela with the happiest years of his childhood.

The case of Mandela's guards is also instructive. While Mandela was in prison, he acted with kindness and compassion towards his guards, several of whom shifted their witness positions in relation to their observation of this extraordinary man. Starting from positions of empowerment but unaware of the real effects of Apartheid, several of his guards developed an awareness of the Apartheid system that rendered them no longer suitable as guards. One of the most memorable moments of my trip to South Africa was when one of Mr. Mandela's former guards came up to me after my talk and said that he had gone through the very transitions through the witness positions that I had used to illustrate the talk.

In the weeks that I spent in South Africa, I was showered with stories about witness experiences. I also became a witness as my discussion of witnessing

spontaneously generated the creation of public witnessing events. These witnessing events created witnesses who observed persons acknowledging others, not perpetrating violence on others. I was especially interested in how these events transformed those who were speaking in acknowledging ways. My sense is that it made as much of a difference to the witnesses as to the person "being witnessed" to speak with awareness about the person's contributions to their life. That is, the transition from a taken-for-granted relationship to an aware relationship is powerful.

Since my return from South Africa, I have continued to work on the phenomenology of witnessing. I am working with transforming witness experiences. Many of us have memories of being witnesses without awareness or of having witnessed with awareness but without being in an empowered position. These memories can be painful; we often carry these memories like little tombs, embalmed moments in the past about which nothing more can be done.

I have decided to challenge the premise that these moments are over and to see if they can be brought into the present and re-done. At the same writing retreat, I wrote about my first memory of being a witness when I was age three. I wrote about what actually happened and then I wrote about what the person I am now, transported back in time into the person I was then would have done. Then I wrote what my three-year old self guided by her 53-year-old self-to-be would have done.

These were the events. My older sister and I were walking alone to a store at dusk on a wide, quiet dirt road alongside a beach when a car struck a teen-ager on the other side of the road from us. At first, I didn't grasp what had happened. I saw legs sticking out from tyres but I couldn't form a meaningful gestalt.

My sister jerked my hand hard and pulled me forward, insisting that we had to go to the store. I had turned stiff, my knees had locked and I stared as if turned to stone. I remember her telling me, "The car hit her. We have to go." And I also remember hearing myself scream, as if the ears that heard were yards away from the mouth that was shrieking. I pulled my hand away from my sister and ran home, even though I wasn't allowed to walk by myself.

I was both an unaware and a dis-empowered witness. I fled. The moment has felt finished and un-emendable. Now, I have emended it. I have re-entered the scene and

done what I would know to do now. I have wept. I have raced over to the young person and held her hand, directed others to call the police and the ambulance. I have stayed with her until others arrived, telling them what I had seen.

And I have re-entered the scene as my three-year-old self, drawing on my 53-year-old self to release the wisdom of the young child I was, helping her to do what she might have done had she been fully present to herself at that moment. I wrote:

> I look across the road. Now I know that attached to those legs are a trunk and a neck, two arms and a head with eyes, a nose, mouth, and two ears. And although I cannot form the image of girl, I know she is there, there where a crowd is forming now.
>
> I do not cross the road. I fall to the sand on this shoulder of road and I fold myself small. I take the sand and pour it over my head, scooping with an open hand so that my palm is free to press the grains into my cheeks and chin. I close my eyes and press hard, hot grains into the bones of my face, all the while making full, high keening sounds. I rock myself as I pour sand from cupped hand and press hard white grains into my face and smash the sand into my collarbone.
>
> I sit for a few minutes, pouring, grinding, looking. I hold the girls' legs in my gaze, the girl in my mind's eye, until the ambulance comes.
>
> Minutes pass. The hot air bends the distant image but soon I see a stretcher wheeled toward the open doors of the white vehicle. As the stretcher passes behind the open rear doors, I stand, letting my hands fall loosely at my sides.
>
> The ambulance leaves. I look for my sister and, without thinking, I take off to join her at the store.

This re-entry, both as an adult and as a child, has changed my experience of the old memory. By changing my witness position in a way that is honoring of who I am in the present, I have healed the past. I have begun to work clinically with this idea with powerful results for others as well. I am finding that not only is the past redeemed, but the process yields a bonus of compassion.

Compassion

I have been reading a book on the neurobiology of interpersonal experience that emphasizes the importance of nonverbal communication as a crucial component of

attunement to each person's internal state. The author uses phrases like "the co-regulating of contingent communication" and "the attunement of states of mind" to convey the ways the brain activity of one person directly influences the brain activity of another. "Collaborative communication allows minds to connect with one another," writes Daniel J. Siegel (1999, p.70).

I am interested in the way Siegel's work may help me understand the hard-wiring, if you will, of compassion. While the dictionary tells us that compassion is a feeling of sorrow or pity *for* the sufferings or misfortunes of others, I think that compassion is much more a process of entering into the experience of another and being simultaneously in one's own and the other's life space. It is suffering *with* another. Collaborative communication is the means through which compassion operates.

During my time in South Africa, I felt privileged to feel in an almost continual state of compassion. I rarely felt myself pull away from a person no matter how painful, unfamiliar, disturbing or disconcerting his/her story. I experienced a nearly steady attunement with many different minds. This state of compassion was profoundly peaceful for me. In a situation in which I had few pre-conceived opinions or judgments, I was released to be in *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991) with others. It helped me reflect on what stands in the way of this state of attunement or flow in my home context.

At home, I fall prey to judgment. The person who is principally the victim of my judgment is myself, and the negative outcome is that I am less likely to offer compassion to myself than I am to be compassionate towards others. In South Africa, I heard myself speaking to others about just this dilemma in ways that were convincing to me. As a

result, since the trip to South Africa, I have entered a more compassionate relationship to myself.

I found that the history of South Africa permeated the present moment in every interaction. While the nation has been encouraged to approach the past through the lens of truth-telling, reconciliation and forgiveness, themes of justice are also prominent. Many Whites seem burdened by weighing their "right" to compassion. What did they suffer in the past? What are they suffering now? Is it just or unjust that they suffer now? What is their suffering now compared to what Africans and Coloreds have suffered in the past? Does current suffering atone for past privilege? If current suffering is justified by past and current privilege, does current suffering merit compassion? How does current suffering compare to others' current suffering? What kind of current suffering deserves compassion?

As an outsider to the lived experience of the context of these questions, but not at all an outsider to the anguish out of which these questions derive, I found that I had thoughts about these questions. These thoughts were based on my reactions in the moment to the stories people told. I felt compassion for people in a wide range of circumstances. I felt able to tell the difference between the orders of magnitude of people's tribulations, and still feel compassion for situations that were less dire than others.

I found colleagues frequently depriving themselves of care and compassion because they compared their suffering unfavorably to the suffering of others. As a visitor to South Africa, but a "resident" to the practice of denying myself care and compassion because I trivialize my "suffering" in comparison to the suffering that exists on this

planet, I found these practices of deprivation disturbing. I had an epiphany for myself as I spoke about these matters to others. I "saw" that the solution was not to deprive oneself of compassion, but rather to be unflinchingly honest about the nature of one's circumstances compared to others while still behaving towards oneself with compassion. I "saw" that one had an obligation to tell as complex a version of one's circumstances as one could, a version that never lost sight of the plight of others. I would call these activities acts of discernment and I would distinguish them from acts of judgment.

Upon my return from South Africa, several of my clients shared with me their fears that I would no longer care about their pain because it would not measure up to the pain of people I met in South Africa. In fact, I had no such experience. I found my compassion to be as robust at home as it was in South Africa. At the same time, I noticed that I was more active in helping clients situate their experiences of pain, not just in the local cultural context, but at times in a broader cultural context.

For instance, I am seeing a woman who twisted her ankle shortly after we resumed working together after my trip. She spoke about this misfortune as if it were catastrophic. It seemed clinically useful to me to help her put her ailment in proportion, while encouraging her to care for herself physically and emotionally. For me, placing restrictions on compassion – to self or other -- is an "intervention" in the wrong location. I think that compassion coupled with discernment can produce a generous and generative attunement.

Thus compassion becomes a practice of love with humility, offered to the self as well as to others. The failure to care for the self tears the fabric of the world as surely as failing to care for others, for we are also someone's other.

Recently, I read a poem of Muriel Rukeyser (1997), first published in 1978, entitled “St. Roach.” The poem makes a powerful statement about prejudice, but I was most struck by the poet’s tone of compassion for herself as well as “the roach.” In my reading of the poem, “the roach” represents both “the other” outside of us as well as “the other” within all of us, that is the parts of ourselves we despise.

St Roach

For that I never knew you, I only learned to dread you,
for that I never touched you, they told me you are filth,
they showed me by every action to despise your kind:
for that I saw my people making war on you,
I could not tell you apart, one from another,
for that in childhood I lived in places clear of you,
for that all the people I knew met you by
crushing you, stamping you to death, they poured boiling
    water on you, they flushed you down,
for that I could not tell one from another,
only that you were dark, fast on your feet, and slender.
    Not like me.
For that I did not know your poems
And that I do not know any of your sayings
And that I cannot speak or read your language
And that I do not sing your songs
And that I do not teach our children
        to eat your food
        or to know your poems
        or sing your songs
But that we say you are filthing our food
But that we know you not at all.

Yesterday I looked at one of you for the first time.
You were lighter than the others in color, that was
    neither good nor bad.
I was really looking for the first time.
You seemed troubled and witty.

Today I touched one of you for the first time.
You were startled, you ran, you fled away
Fast as a dancer, light, strange and lovely to the touch.
I reach, I touch, I begin to know you.

The poet is ashamed that she has felt and acted with prejudice. She regrets many of her past actions and non-actions. Yet she is also able to stay in connection with herself. Compassion is a practice, compassion for self as much as compassion for others. It is a practice that I believe is worth doing. I am grateful that among other gifts of my trip to South Africa I have come home to a more compassionate relationship with myself.

References:

Breytenbach, B.(1983). *The true confessions of an albino terrorist*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Buber, M. (1970). *I and thou*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1991). *Flow : the psychology of optimal experience*. New York: HarperPerennial.

Doherty, W.J. and Beaton, J.M. (2000). Family therapists, community and civic renewal. *Family Process 39*:149-161.

Gurevitch, P. (1998). *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families. New York:* Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Heaney, S. (1995). *The redress of poetry*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Hirshfield, J. (1997). *Nine gates: Entering the mind of poetry*. New York: HarperCollins.

Krog, A. (1998). *Country of my skull: Guilt, sorrow, and the limits of forgiveness in the new South Africa*. New York: Times Books.

Mandela, N. (1994). *Long walk to freedom*. Boston: Little Brown.

Maturana, H.R. and Varela, F.J.(1987). *The tree of knowledge: The biological roots of human understanding*. Boston: New Science Library.

Rukeyser, M. (1997). *Out of silence: Selected poems*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.

Siegel, D.J. (1999). *The developing mind: Toward a neurobiology of interpersonal experience*. New York: The Guilford Press, 1999.

Weingarten, K. (1991). The discourses of intimacy: Adding a social constructionist and feminist view. *Family Process*, 30:285-305.