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TRUTH, RECONCILIATION, AND REDEMPTION IN SOUTH AFRICA

Brian Forry Wallace

This summer I spent several thousand dollars and five weeks to learn about the process of truth and reconciliation set up in post-apartheid South Africa. And I did. But I learned so much more. I learned why I chose to be a teacher, and in particular why I remain a teacher at a faith-based college. I learned about the nature of students who come to colleges like ours.

It all began uneventfully enough. I was asked to be on an interview team to select three out of five applicants from Capital who would attend a workshop on peace building in South Africa. I looked at the proposed schedule of the workshop—peacemaking, reconciliation, truth, forgiveness; sounds interesting, I thought. We had thirty minutes to interview each of the five students. After listening to them each explain their background and interest in the area I came to two very clear decisions. First, we had to send all five students. Second, I wanted to go with them. Eventually our group was to include my wife (a kindergarten teacher in Columbus), two students from other Lutheran colleges, and a college health director and her 14 year old son.

We didn't have a lot in common. The students had different majors, ages, religions, hobbies, and quite distinct personalities. But they exemplified the type of student who I have become familiar with in 24 years as a college teacher. They shared an openness to the world, a commitment to understand and to help others, and an unconventional view of what it means to live a good life.

We spent our time living with families in a city ten miles south of Cape Town. We visited churches, poor townships, schools, day care centers. We spent two days working in a children's AIDS hospital. We delivered Christmas packages to schools (yes, in July). We saw Nelson Mandela's cell. We listened to a political prisoner who spent eight years on Robben island. We saw penguins and seals, street children and beautiful flowers, we squished our way through the coldest and rainiest Cape Town winter in 44 years. We shopped. We walked. We listened. We listened to each other. I became just as interested in how these students absorbed the experience here as I was with what I saw about South Africa. We became close, dropping the masks we had brought with us from the U.S. I've taught at Capital for 20 years, and if I hear one more administrator talk about the "Capital family" I will jump

out of my office window. Luckily, I am on the first floor. But in this case "family" is the only word I know to describe the experience. These are people I have grown to care about in a deep and personal way. These were my students, but they were my teachers too. They taught me how to open my soul and encounter the world with god's eyes. I admire them. I want to be like them. I wanted them not to be disappointed in me. I wanted them not to see my shortcomings: my need for too much sleep and time alone, and my grouchiness when I don't get it. I teach International Relations. I know lots about the world, but the truth is I don't get it. I don't know why people are sick and poor. I don't know why others are indifferent. I don't know how to fix it. I know only that this stuff is important and that I care about it. I feared this wouldn't be enough for these students. They wanted *real* answers and I felt powerless when all I can do is sit down beside them and cry because it hurts so bad to see the world this way.

These students are so different from one another, yet they have something in common. Amy sees this place through a camera lens. I watch her lips as she tries to make sense of it all. There's a half-smile, a frown for uncertainty; I like it best when her mouth drops open in awe with some surprise she sees. Brian called me Dr. Wallace so now I call him Dr. Murphy. I think he will be one someday. I see him as a teacher like me one day. He will teach his students with care and grace when he finds the right words to describe this place, and himself. There is Meghan who is constantly processing out loud the love she feels for this world, "well what about this" and "I saw that" and "what does this mean?" and "who am I and what am I supposed to do now that I know this stuff?"

Karrie is sometimes lost inside her own feelings, wondering how she can best use her talents to help the world. She is moved by what she has seen here, down to the center of her soul. I am amazed by her eyes. She will not look away from what she sees here, no matter how painful. Her eyes may be filled with tears, but they are open, focused. Patrick at 14 is the youngest and maybe the smartest of our group. He is a drummer. He pretends not to let any of this sink in, but it does. I admire him for his risk taking, that and the fact that his drum teacher once toured with Van Morrison. Meredith is quiet but she processes every thought and feeling out in the open, in the worry lines on her forehead. I watch her thinking, trying so

hard to makes sense of this place, and I lose my breath. I see what it is to have a soul--to look at the world around you and wonder how to respond.

Cheryl is my soul mate. Sharing five weeks in South Africa has brought us closer than I thought possible after 15 years of marriage. She sees the children here; she sees them everywhere. She was the one who taught me children are real and they are people, and she will take what she has learned here back to open the hearts and eyes of her inner-city kindergartners. Corin is the most childlike person here except for me. Her face is a constant smile, ready to burst from all the joy inside her. I like to be near her when I am sad, which is much of the time. She is the one most likely to put her foot in her mouth, and also the one most likely to notice if one of us needs a hug, and to give it.

Debbie is our leader, but she wants to be one of the group too. She has so many hats to wear and has to switch them at a moment's notice. I watch her swing back and forth from world to world, trying to get students to see the wonder of this place and also checking to make sure the vans get here on time to pick us up, and I am reminded of what it is to be a teacher. April is a nurse. She carries with her Noah's pharmacy: two of every medicine ever made. But I understand. She wants to heal all the hurt that is in the world. I see some of it in her eyes. Audra walks through this country like she is walking on air, suspended a few inches above the ground. She takes everything in with her listening heart. Something here has touched her deep inside. I look at her and I feel I am seeing Jesus, heartsick and weeping over lost Jerusalem.

We live in a cynical age, or so says Jerry McGuire. I work in a cynical occupation. No one can be as skeptical as college teachers. We've seen it all before. We know *everything*. And students today aren't as smart, as hard-working, or clever, or insightful, or as original as when we were in college. The world is going to hell in a handbasket, and we know why. It's students these days. They aren't like they used to be. I used to say that stuff. Even worse, I used to believe it. Not anymore. I see that wide-eyed gazes, the ears that listen to the voices of the world, the mouths smiling in awe and wonder, and the tears, all the tears shed here, and I have no worries about the future.

It is in the presence of these people that I am reminded why I became a teacher, in particular at a faith-based college. I want to be like these students. I want to share my life with them, and have them share their lives with me. I am with them not because they are the smartest (although they are smart) or most creative. They are not likely to be titans of industry or winners of Nobel prizes. I am with them because they teach me how to be human.

They are honest, caring, and open. They are atheists and agnostics and Buddhists and Methodists and Baptists, but at their core they are searching for the truth about God's existence in the world. They don't want easy answers. They certainly don't want doctrine. They want truth. They are not likely to be future billionaires (I hope they don't read this part) or sports stars or supermodels. I have chosen to be with them because they want to be social workers, nurses, teachers, pastors, mission workers, parents, friends. I know this because they have told me, but also because I have seen them be all these things for each other, and for me.

They understand that the truth about God, whatever it is, has something to do with who they are and how they choose to act in the world. They embody vocation. Unlike many of us who teach higher education, these students are not compulsive achievers. They have no desire to build themselves up in the eyes of this world. Rather, they have responded to a voice which has called them out of their selves and asked them to be present in this world. They are certainly of this world. They laugh raucously and dance wildly and sing loudly and even tell dirty jokes. They get cranky and smelly and let me tell you, we all have bad hair days. But there is also something sacred about them. In how they see the world, let it touch them, and touch it back. God is here. They will not leave college to be the powerful, wealthy, or famous. They will walk quietly in the world, binding its wounds, holdings its hands, listening to its voices. They will be its healers. This is why I want to be with them. This is why I hope to be worthy of them. This is why I love them. They are my link to the reconstruction of this lost and broken world, the redemption of my lost and broken soul.

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