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South Africa journey: In Johannesburg and Soweto

John Dear | Jan. 21, 2014 On the Road to Peace

We landed in Johannesburg, South Africa, on Jan. 13, after a 15-hour flight from Atlanta. For me, it was a dream come true. After endless discussion, study, plans and preparations, we arrived on a hot, sunny summer afternoon and found ourselves in a beautiful, lush neighborhood just outside the city. It felt like Northern California -- cool, breezy, sunny and refreshing, with a thousand birds singing all around us.

South Africa, a nation of approximately 49 million people, ended its reign of racial terror and state-sanctioned violence against blacks, known infamously as apartheid, in 1994 with the election of Nelson Mandela and the creation of a new democracy. It has, hands down, the best, most progressive constitution on the planet. The whole world turned toward it last month with Mandela's death, and it continues to inspire nonviolent resisters everywhere with its amazing leaps toward justice, peace and reconciliation. It still has terrible problems -- staggering unemployment, poverty, violent crime -- but for a new democracy, only 20 years old, it has made enormous strides.

Twenty years after apartheid, I've come to listen, learn, and see for myself the beauty of the land and the spirit of the struggling people. I've traveled with my friend Fr. Ray East, pastor of St. Teresa of Avila Catholic Church in Washington, D.C., and a longtime speaker and activist; his sisters Gertrude and Cecilia; and their cousin Bobbye.

We began our pilgrimage with nearly a day at the Apartheid Museum, one of the most powerful museums in the world, located in south Johannesburg. Like the civil rights museums in Birmingham, Ala., and Memphis, Tenn., only much bigger, it takes you through the history of apartheid with films, artifacts, timelines and thousands of photos.

An enormous new wing celebrates the life of Nelson Mandela. We started there, taking it all in. Such an antidote to apartheid and the demons of racism and violence! His life journey, the many artifacts (including his old boxing gloves, the car used when he got out of prison, and his letters) lifted my spirit enormously.

But the museum was disturbing. I could only take so much. The evil and waste and stupidity of apartheid! The section on the martyrs broke my heart. Though I was only a freshman in college, the brutal killing of young Steve Biko in 1977 turned me upside-down. Reading about him in the museum reminded me of my determination then to live a "conscious" life like him.

Still, the museum ends on such a high -- the release of Mandela, the unbanning of the African National Congress, Mandela's election as president, the new constitution, the truth and reconciliation commission, the hope of a rainbow nation, the steadfast spirit of the people and the supportive movements from around the world. I then toured the new Mandela exhibit one more time, drinking it all in.

There's a beautiful park outside the museum where they recommend quiet meditation after the power of the exhibits. I lay down in the tall green grass by myself, under the hot South African sun, and wept. Apartheid, its resisters, the martyrs, the global movements of support, the music, Nelson and Winnie Mandela, Steve Biko, the

great Archbishop Desmond Tutu -- it hit me full on.

The Apartheid Museum forces the viewer to look at his or her own life. It asks: Where do you stand in the face of systemic violence and injustice? Are you silent or actively engaged in the state's violence, or do you speak out, resist and risk the consequences? These are crucial questions that lie at the heart of the Gospel.

I pondered my own poor efforts through the 1980s to attend peace vigils against apartheid; how my early Jesuit superiors refused to let me protest apartheid; my anger and despair over this; and my decision to write to Winnie Mandela. It was 1987, and I asked my 150 high school students at Scranton Prep to write letters with me then had them smuggled to her. She wrote me a wonderful reply. At the end, she asked me to thank my students -- and typed out every one of their names.

Around 1989, I was arrested with friends for blocking the entrance of the White House in protest of the U.S. government's support of South Africa's apartheid regime. I recalled those days and gave thanks too for my friendship with Archbishop Tutu, who has stood by me these last few years.

Later that day, we drove into downtown Johannesburg, visited its modern art gallery, then walked through its main park. It was teeming with thousands of people, everyone enjoying the beautiful day, the fullness of life. This lush park is just a few blocks from the Johannesburg jail, where both Gandhi and Mandela spent time.

Along one busy street sidewalk, we came upon a huge crowd watching a small dance troupe. These were skinny kids, dressed in skimpy native garb, singing and miming some kind of theater performance. Like everyone else, we fell under their spell.

One youth lay flat on the sidewalk, as if dead. Two others ministered to him. Behind them, several others moved and sang a mournful, traditional native chorus. Slowly, the dead man came alive. They raised him up and then broke into smiles and festive song and dance. Resurrection, South African style! Wow!

The next day in Soweto was certainly one of the greatest days of my life. Our friendly young guide drove us through the collection of 18 townships, where more than 4.5 million struggle to survive. We saw the extreme poverty of squatter shacks; tiny buildings without plumbing, water, or electricity; and the many government-built homes for the poor. We also saw the homes of a few wealthy.

In 1976, Soweto became the center of anti-apartheid resistance when 15,000 high school and elementary students marched through its dirt roads to protest the forced teaching of the Afrikaans language. The white government opened fire on the youth, shocking the world. A block away from imprisoned Nelson Mandela's house, young Hector Peterson was the first of some 580 youth to be killed. Of course, the actual number of casualties was probably three times that amount, but no one will ever know. The photo of a youth carrying Hector's dead body flashed around the world, and suddenly, the entire planet saw the reality of apartheid for the evil it was.

Thirty-eight years later, there's a beautiful stone and water memorial near the intercession where young Hector was shot dead. It also commemorates all the dead and the youth who marched against apartheid. Interestingly, their protest had little to do with the ANC; it was inspired by Biko's call for "Black Consciousness." That protest and those martyrdoms were the beginning of the end for apartheid.

We drove down Vilakazi Street, the only street in the world with two Nobel laureates. After we passed Archbishop Tutu's house, we entered the tiny red brick house of Nelson and Winnie Mandela. Bought by Mandela in the 1950s, it was given to a Soweto trust 10 years ago and is now a national museum. I walked through the tiny house in silence and awe, looking at the artifacts, bare furniture, and countless plaques on the wall.

On one wall hung a 3-foot-long framed, hand-copied parish announcement from St. Augustine Catholic Church in Washington, D.C. Dated May 1983, it announced their support of the Mandelas and the church's efforts to end apartheid. Since Fr. Ray worked at St. Augustine, it was an overwhelming moment. Who would have known that such solidarity efforts meant so much that Winnie would have framed it and hung it on the wall?

Suddenly, outside, we heard a rumble among the handful of tourists and there she was -- Winnie Mandeliza-Mandela herself. I walked across the street and met her. She was dressed all in black -- still mourning President Mandela -- with a black headband and black-rimmed glasses. She greeted me with a big smile. I offered my condolences and my thanks for her life work for justice.

Then I told her how I wrote to her 25 years ago and enclosed the 150 letters from my students. Her eyes grew wide; she put her hand on her mouth and bent down to her knees. "You're him?" she asked with a huge smile. "Of course I remember you. How are you?" She asked me for copies of our correspondence for her archives, and I told her of my work against violence and war, my own time in prison, and of my friendship with Archbishop Tutu.

"I so hope you win the Nobel Prize, Father John! That would help the whole world so much," she said.

"I will pray for you," Fr. Ray said to her.

"Oh please," she responded. "I really need all your prayers." She radiated peace, love, strength and joy. We were overwhelmed by her gentle, loving presence.

Back in Johannesburg, later that day, we visited the Missionaries of Charity, who run a large home for homeless people with AIDS and HIV. Over tea, they told us of their work. They are inundated with needy people and do what they can to serve, heal and show love and respect. Very inspiring!

Next week, I'll share a report from my visit to Pietermaritzburg and Durban.

[John Dear's new book, *The Nonviolent Life*, is available at paceebene.org [1] and Amazon.com [2]. John will speak in California in February. He will lead a weekend retreat, "Lotus in a Sea of Fire [3]," with Roshi Joan Halifax Feb. 28-March 2 at the Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe, N.M., and will speak March 9 at Riverside Church in New York. He will give the keynote address with Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.) at the Ecumenical Advocacy Days conference March 21 in Washington, D.C. For more information, go to John's website [4].]

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[1] http://paceebene.org/store/item/nonviolent-life
[2] http://www.amazon.com/The-Nonviolent-Life-John-Dear/dp/0966978323
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