

Choosing to See

Racial Healing is Possible

Hanna du Plessis

Om te sien is 'n keuse

Hanna du Plessis

Translated by
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INTRODUCTION

My name is Hanna. I grew up in South Africa. Now I live and write in the US. I came here to pursue a calling to create more wholeness.

My experience back home was one of segregation. I was seventeen when Mandela was released. Until then, black folks were “workers.” And in the back alleys of my mind, they were untrustworthy or even outright dangerous.

I wrote these moments because they were pivotal in my journey towards racial wholeness. When I leaned against the doors that I had kept closed, I opened to the reward of whole relationships. And those relationships make the soil from which a different world will grow.

I am dying of a disease called ALS. I can no longer speak, so my friend Erica Wessels is going to read my words to you.

These are some things I have seen, and still see now. I wonder if you will look. I wonder what you will see.

ONE

The dusk is laced with the smell of wood fires. The smoke, dust and smog from a dry Johannesburg winter make a halo of grayish tangerine as the sun sets. Through my car window I see women wrapped in blankets, roasting corn over salvaged oil barrels. I see kids gleefully chasing each other in clothes that make me feel cold.

I watch the door of a “Shack” open. A Shack is a tiny home, mostly built with corrugated iron, often with rocks on top to hold the roof down. Most have no running water, no indoor plumbing— matchboxes as home to multiple generations.

The township—one of many poor, crowded, racially-segregated areas set up during apartheid—is called Diepsloot. I pass it when I try to miss traffic on the national roads. But today this road is congested too. And feels more dangerous, with taxis billowing red dust as they use the side of the road to pass other cars.

My hand reaches for the radio. Classical FM fills my car with the harmonies of a Bach choir, but fails to soothe the steel-on-steel scraping I feel inside. I had just met with a client to discuss ideas for their multi-million-Rand home—huge, elegant, clean and safe.

I am driving a white but dusty German-engineered BMW. I became a designer believing I could contribute to reducing income inequality by providing jobs. But whose lives am I actually improving?

As a designer I serve clients that have answered their own question: “What do I want?” I’m tasked with answering, “What should it look like?”

But I want to be asking, “What do we need?” For we need a world where everyone can live a dignified life.

TWO

My landlady likes me. When I deliver my rent check, she invites me to their apartment for tea. They live on the fifty-second floor, with a wide view of Lake Michigan. They too are immigrants, but not like me. Her husband works for a Swiss company that handles all his visa paperwork. They sometimes throw parties, and soon I set the dinner table with crystal, silver, porcelain, and heirloom hand-embroidered linen ready for people who are dressed for the opera.

As they arrive I stand behind the drinks table, looking sharp, grateful for the long table cloth that hides my sandal that broke on the walk there. People are mostly friendly and some seem genuinely interested in me until I hand over their drink. It's a blunt cut in my heart to know that I am merely an instrument in their world. The class difference between us means I will never belong. The tables are turned. I'm no longer the host. I'm the worker sent home with some cash and a container with salmon and vegetables that I carefully divided and froze for future meals.

The next day I get on my loaner bicycle and pedal to the food store. I spend all my drink-serving money on two weeks' worth of vegetables, rice, cheese and eggs. On my way home a flashy loud convertible filled with picture-perfect whities almost drove into me. I swerve. My front tire hits the curb and my groceries, poorly fastened for lack of resources, pummels over. The kids in the convertible don't notice me, only their good time. I don't have more income for weeks. My cheeks are red as I try to rescue tomatoes from under the feet of hasty pedestrians, and try not to cry over broken eggs.

My mind flits back to a summer day in Hermanus. I saw a black man storm out of a white-owned business, his eyes radiating hate. Some of which I feel now as another fancy car turns the corner.

“It is good to realize that falling apart is not such a bad thing. Indeed, it is as essential to transformation as the cracking of outgrown shells. Anxieties and doubts can be healthy and creative, not only for the person, but for the society, because they permit new and original approaches to reality.”

Joanna Macy

THREE

The smell of brass brings memories as I open the thick cloth. I bought these buttons as a child during a visit to the Voortrekker monument, a symbol of the Afrikaans settlers' journey inland and of God's redemption. As an adult I wrapped them in this cloth to bring with me to Pittsburgh, a package of childhood memories. Now at the birthday party I watch in anticipation as my friend, a button connoisseur, opens her gift. She admires each button and asks questions.

I explain, “This one's a springbok, possibly from an airline uniform. And see this anchor? It's from the navy. My dad taught at the Naval Academy in the 60's, and my brother was a Navy SEAL. And this one here is police.”

I feel the air around us thicken. I freeze, sensing that something is happening beyond my grasp. I look at my friend. Her face is contracted in a painful expression. Tears roll over her ebony cheeks. She looks at me in anger and pain. She says, "Do you have any idea what those policemen did to my people? Do you know how many years I've spent fighting apartheid?"

I stay silent. I think of the head of South African police, who lived just two blocks from my childhood home. I never connected him with violence. Cycling home, I am unsteady.

Why? Why were the cruelties of apartheid simply facts filed in my mind, never finding their way into my tissues? Maybe because I believed the tidy cultural story: "Apartheid is over." Maybe because this was the first time a black person allowed me to witness their pain. I am nauseous at my ignorance. I am ashamed I've been so indoctrinated.

FOUR

In 1993, just before the end of apartheid, I made my first two black friends: Letlagle and Jerry. Our conversations did not traverse the dark chapters of our history. We spoke about safe stuff—Shakespeare, soccer and Nelson Mandela. This pattern of avoidance became easier after apartheid ended. Like slavery in the US, we could shoo the topic away with a wave of the hand—"It's over."

My avoidance of discomfort came from my inability to deal with the pain, rage and trauma that shaped our history. This is a common survival mechanism in an oppressive system—to segregate. You segregate yourself from others' reality so you don't have to confront their pain. You don't have to notice the rage they feel when they return, tired from a long commute, to a corrugated home too hot for sleep. Or when their brother is shot by police. Or when they are too afraid to visit the outhouse at night because they have been raped there before.

Drive through any city in the United States or South Africa as a white person, and you notice when you enter the "black part of town." That's the part that has been separated from your experience by design.

The other, *internal* division—the segregated landscape of self—is more difficult to see. That's the one that perpetuates this structural violence.

As a kid I saw adults slinging insults at people of color. Pain, anxiety, anger would erupt inside me. But the fear of more insults taught me to stay silent. I learned to relocate my discomfort to another neighborhood inside myself. Instead of allowing myself to feel and express this discomfort, I exiled it from my conscious mind.

For more than three decades I banished disconfirming information or strong emotions. I erected higher and higher barricades between my thoughts and my exiled grief and rage.

A moment: I was at a protest sparked by a young unarmed black man being killed by police. A friend took the megaphone. From deep inside her came a long wail of sorrow, mourning the loss of a brother, frothing with rage at white silence. White silence like mine, that sees pain and injustice, says "I am sorry for your loss," but stays unaffected and takes no action to shift an unjust system.

I couldn't deny her pain. But I couldn't quite hear it either. Because if I really listened to her pain, it would tear down my defenses and lead me straight into the forgotten neighborhood of my subconscious. I was afraid to enter that neighborhood, because how would I be able to face decades of unmourned grief, muted rage, silenced shame and unacknowledged trauma?

I did not want to enter, and at the same time I could no longer live in this segregated self that is never at home or at peace.

“Your sense of reality is dictated by what you avoid. If you avoid reality then how can you face it? If you avoid the ghettos, you don’t know the hearts and minds of millions of people. And you don’t know your own heart and mind.”

James Baldwin

FIVE

It is the last night of the course. We're having a dance party. Most people seem to be in good spirits and surrender to the music, cheering each other on as individuals step into the circle to show their moves. I'd be down to show off my white girl moves, but I have swallowed a rock. Movement tears at my chest tissue.

Just before dinner we had our second to last session. We sit in two rows, whites facing black and black facing white, and we face a new person after each question. I sit upright on the meditation pillow. My hands feel clammy on my knees. The people of the global majority are asking us what we're doing to undo racism in ourselves, our household, community and city. I don't remember what words came out of my mouth. I was caught off guard by this directness.

During dinner, the divide continues. We sit at separate tables. The people of the global majority are lively. I sit at the white table. We look wilted as we push our vegetables across our plate.

Then, the last session: it felt like boulder dropped on the house of trust we had constructed during the week. There was a sadness among us. We're not responsible for the human condition. But we're responsible for the world we create with the ways we live and whom we love. Even now we struggle to wholeheartedly love ourselves and each other as white kin.

After dinner I put on lipstick so I could appear party-ready. But at the party I'm a captive of old beliefs.

The voice that reverberated throughout my life said clearly that racial healing is impossible. I don't hear the music. I just feel the bass beating in my throat. I don't feel my feet. I just notice my body leaning heavily on the white oak door. I stumble into the night, thick with humidity and a hint of skunk. I inhale, but my insides are unable to expand. My mind repeats every sentence I've heard about the impossibility of mending. There's the familiar urge—to jump to reconciliation without grappling with the truth. After all, I have the choice to ignore my conscience and go back to design, back to a hefty paycheck, back to planning my next adventure with my white friends.

I'm halfway to my dorm to escape into a book, when it happens. I am stopped in my tracks by an invisible hand as tall as my body. And it speaks, not audibly but undeniably: "Hanna, who is the one leaving?"

I stood there, faced with a choice: opt out, or persist. I considered long enough to see the skunk moving nearby. I heard the voice of James Baldwin saying, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

That made me turn around, press against the heavy door, and dance away my fears and all those rocks I'd swallowed until the last song. When it was time to go, I didn't need to push the door myself. This time it was held open for me as we left the party. Tired. Smiling. Together.

“‘We have two options for our nation’s crisis,’ the joke went. ‘The practical one: pray for angels to save us. The miraculous one: actually talk to each other, work together, and solve it ourselves.’”

Adam Kahane (paraphrased), from *Transformative Scenario Planning: Working Together to Change the Future*

SIX

We sit in a circle, all forty of us. I am used to majority-white spaces where I don’t stand out. But in this eight-month anti-racist yoga teacher training, only six of us are white. To me that whiteness feels like a tungsten stadium light.

A priest begins to speak, and through his words we enter a history of violence—Columbus and his men shooting Native Americans like game. My mind fills with images. Black bodies chained in ship hulls. Families auctioned off like livestock. Whips cracking on backs. Bodies hanging from trees while white folks stand by or turn away.

We break for lunch. Heaviness has soaked into my legs. Someone starts to cry. Part of me wants to comfort her, another part wants to walk away. I embody the people who caused the wounding she mourns. I compromise by sitting still with my hand over my wildly beating heart.

Soon I feel too uncomfortable to stay. Out on the street I find a rough block to sit on, and rest against a chain-link fence. I can tell by the tightness of my throat that I am sad. But I can’t cry.

When I return, the people of color have woven themselves into a circle. Their shoulders touch as they sing and sway, hands clapping a steady rhythm. Those who could not turn away from the pain have learned to sing and dance inside it. Despite the hate that came to them, they chose to increase their love for each other. I sense their collective strength.

In contrast, the handful of white folks bob around aimlessly. We don’t turn to each other. We don’t express our sorrow in song. Our sadness mingles with shame and curdles in our throats. Having entered a truth our white world kept from us, we do not yet know how to be inside this devastation.

When the session resumes, we explore how past violence lives in the present. Who is working two jobs? Who took public transportation here? Who has loved ones unemployed or imprisoned? Again and again, it is people of color who raise their hands.

After dinner I can no longer keep my torso upright. I make my way to the circle’s edge and lower my body onto a yoga mat. Astrid, a young black woman, says goodbye. She thanks the black ladies for their support. Then she turns to the white people: "Don't ever expect thanks for showing up and doing this work. And you can be glad that I am not punching you all in the face right now. You deserve to be punched in the face every day."

In that moment my heart drops off a cliff. Maybe it is impossible to face our past and find a way forward.

I get up from my mat and make my way back to my seat between Faye and Rosetta. They notice my mood.

"How are you doing, Sis?" Faye asks.

I'm aware that white folks often collapse in these conversations, then lean on black people for comfort. I don't want to burden them, so I tell a half-truth: "I'm okay, but I'm tired and I have a headache."

Faye takes me by the shoulders and folds her arms around me. Rosetta does the same. Rosetta, who during our first session made it clear she has no time for white people.

Faye slips a chocolate into my lap, takes my hand, and closes with both her brown hands around it. Our shoulders touch. As she rocks gently, I exhale. This undeserved kindness lowers my feet closer to the ground.

Maybe the way muscles tear in tiny ways to become stronger, maybe it's like this with us. We move and grow in cycles of broken faith, restored faith, broken trust, restored trust. We learn, by doing in community, how to face the wounding and become the healed world.

SEVEN

It's too hot to be outside. But it's migration time for the Baltimore Orioles—dazzling little orange and black birds. For them, it's worth braving the heat. I meet two African-American collaborators, Michelle and Medina, outside the forest canopy, a lush sanctuary in the city. We set off and words flow like water, punctuated with us freezing mid-sentence and someone pointing to what we think is a flit of gold.

Like this hope to see a rare bird, we were first brought together by our mutual hope to live in what Martin Luther King, Jr. called "the beloved community." Or in my case, Nelson Mandela's "Rainbow Nation." That dream fuels how we live and guides our choices—the work we left behind, and the work we now choose to do. The three of us have come a long way. Genuine cross-race relationships require working through historical conflict, pain, and the defenses we've come to embody. An example: my insistence that we "be on time," my signals of disapproval, and my failure to first seek to understand led to separation from a collaborator of color.

At the end of our walk we sit near a fountain, where the wind blew just right to envelop us in a cloud of mist—a welcome reprieve from the heat. Then I remember. My hands slip into my bag, searching. Every time I go home, I bring a gift from "the mother continent," as Michelle calls it. My hands close. I pull out a cloth for Michelle and earrings for Medina. Their faces glow with appreciation.

Michelle says, "Thank you that you love us, Hanna." This is the first time a black person says these words to me. My mind flashes back to childhood, where these incredible women and mentors would probably have been confined to domestic work—enduring each day the politics of humiliation through their maid outfits, inferior food and crockery, and meager wages. It was a society in which interracial marriage was outlawed. And here we sit now, without the weight of separation. I want to say, "Thank you for the opportunity to love you."

But the wind picks up, and we hug each other in a shroud of mist. Out of the corner of my eyes, burning with sunscreen, love and belonging, I see a rainbow. Racial healing is possible, even if it takes generations.

AFTERWORD

I am dying. If I was still working as a designer, I would feel bereft. But because of this journey and my work as a facilitator, I have a sense of completion. I know I've done my best to repair and rebuild racial relationships,

creating a more equitable world in that process. My collaborators and I have supported others—individuals, organizations, networks—to do the same.

Still, I feel sad that I am dying so young, and with so many dreams unrealized.

I wonder what ache lives in you, toward a world more whole and equitable. Maybe you've spent decades living into that desire. Maybe you're just beginning. Or you may feel isolated, at a loss.

Wherever you are, I trust you, sacred being, to look and see. Look and see. Look until you see what possibility beckons you forward. And follow it wholeheartedly. I'll be rooting for you from the other side.

Om te sien is 'n keuse

Hanna du Plessis

Translated by
Christine Fourie

INLEIDING

My naam is Hanna. Ek het in Suid-Afrika grootgeword. Nou woon en skryf ek in die VSA. Ek het hierheen gekom om 'n roeping na te streef. Die roeping is om meer heelheid te skep.

In my geboorteland het ek isolasie en segregasie ondervind. Ek was sewentien toe Mandela vrygestel is. Tot dan was swart mense *werkers*. En in die grys stegies van my bewussyn was hulle onbetroubaar of selfs gevaarlik.

Ek het hierdie kort episodes geskryf om te wys dat rasse-verhoudinge gesond kan word. Ek het deure self toegehou, maar wanneer ek teen hierdie deure geleun het, kon ek as beloning deurbeweeg na gesonde verhoudings. En hierdie verhoudings is die grond waarin 'n ander wêreld sal groei.

Ek is besig om dood te gaan aan 'n siekte, amiotrofiese laterale sklerose, ALS. Daarom gaan my vriendin, Erica Wessels, my woorde vir jou lees.

Daar is dinge wat ek gesien het, en steeds sien. Ek wonder of jy gaan kyk. Ek wonder wat jy gaan sien.

ONE

Skemer is verweef met die reuk van houtvure. Die droë winter van Johannesburg se vuurrook, stof en rookmis maak 'n halo wat 'n gryserige nartjie word soos die son sak. Deur my motor se venster sien ek 'n vrou toegedraai in komberse, besig om mielies te rooster oor vure in herwinde oliedromme. Uitbundige kinders jaag mekaar, aangetrek met klere wat my koud laat voel.

Ek sien hoe die deur van 'n plakkershut oopgaan. Klippe bo-op hou die dak vas. Daar is nie lopende water binne die hut nie. Generasie na generasie het so 'n vuurhoutjiedoos as huis.

Hierdie township – een van talle digbevolkte, arm woonareas in die land, gesegregeer op grond van ras tydens apartheid – is Diepsloot. Om verkeer op die nasionale paaie te sistap, neem ek altyd die pad wat verby Diepsloot loop. Vandag het die verkeer egter hier ook opgehoop. En dit voel meer gevaarlik, met taxi's wat rooi stofwolke agterlaat wanneer hulle die ongeteerde sypaadjies langs die pad gebruik om ander verkeer verby te steek.

My hand reik uit na die radio. Classic FM vul my motor met die harmonie van 'n Bach-koor, maar slaag nie daarin om die metaal-teen-metaal geskraap wat ek binne-in my voel, te sus nie. Ek het pas 'n kliënt ontmoet om idees te bespreek vir hul multi-miljoen huis – ruim, elegant, skoon en veilig.

Die motor waarin ek ry is 'n wit, maar stowwerige, Duits-vervaardigde BMW. Ek het 'n ontwerper geword, omdat ek geglo het dat ek inkomste-ongelykhede kan verminder deur meer werk te genereer. Maar wie se lewens verbeter ek uiteindelik?

As 'n ontwerper dien ek kliënte wat hulle eie vraag beantwoord: *Wat wil ek hê?* My taak is om 'n antwoord te gee op die vraag: *Hoe moet dit lyk?*

Wat ek eintlik wil vra is: *Wat het ons nodig?* Ons het 'n wêreld nodig waar almal die geleentheid het om 'n waardige lewe te leef.

TWEE

Die eienares van die woonstel wat ek huur, hou van my. Wanneer ek my huurgeld neem, nooi sy my binne vir tee. Hulle woonstel is op die twee-en-vyftigste vloer, met 'n wye uitsig oor Michigan-meer. Soos ek, is hulle immigrante, maar ook anders as ek. Haar man werk vir 'n Switse maatskappy wat al die administrasie vir hulle visa-aansoeke hanteer. Soms hou hulle partytjies en dis nie lank nie voor ek die tafel dek met kristal,

silwer, porselein en erfstuk-linne wat met die hand geborduur is: gereed vir die gaste wat gepas vir die opera aangetrek is.

Soos die gaste arriveer, staan ek gereed agter die tafel met die drankies, self stylvol, maar ook dankbaar vir die laaghangende tafeldoek wat my sandaal wegsteek, die een wat met die loop tot daar gebreek het. Die gaste is oorwegend vriendelik, sommige lyk opreg geïnteresseerd, totdat ek hulle drankies oorhandig. 'n Stomp mes sny deur my hart met die besef dat ek slegs 'n instrument in hulle lewens is. Die klasseverskil tussen ons beteken dat ek nooit sal behoort nie. Die rolle is omgekeer. Ek is nie meer die gasvrou nie. Ek is die werker wat huis toe gestuur word met kontant en 'n plastiekhouer met salm en groente, wat ek later sorgvuldig opdeel en vries vir toekomstige etes.

Die volgende dag klim ek op my huurfiets en trap na die supermark. Ek spandeer al die geld wat ek met die bedien van drankies verdien het op twee weke se voorraad van groente, rys, kaas en eiers. Op pad terug huis toe ry 'n swierige afslaankapmotor met luiddrugtige musiek en 'n modelmooi, wit gesin my amper raak. Ek swenk uit die pad. Die voorwiel tref die randsteen en my inkopies, wat moeilik was om vas te maak omdat ek nie daarvoor ingerig is nie, tuimel oor op die sypaadjie. Die kinders in die afslaankapmotor sien my nie raak nie, want hulle is op die vakansie-aftmosfeer binne in die motor gefokus. Ek het nie vir die volgende paar weke 'n inkomste nie. My wange raak rooi soos ek probeer om die tamaties onder die voete van die voetgangers te red en nie oor die gebreekte eiers te huil nie.

My gedagtes spring terug na 'n somersdag in Hermanus, toe 'n swart man met oë wat haat uitstraal by die besigheid van 'n wit eienaar uitgestorm het. Ek voel iets van daardie dag, nadat nog 'n sportmodel om die draai ry.

“It is good to realize that falling apart is not such a bad thing. Indeed, it is as essential to transformation as the cracking of outgrown shells. Anxieties and doubts can be healthy and creative, not only for the person, but for the society, because they permit new and original approaches to reality.”

Joanna Macy

DRIE

Soos ek die swaar lap oopvou, bring die reuk van brons herinneringe. Ek het hierdie knope gekoop as kind tydens 'n besoek aan die Voortrekker-monument, wat 'n simbool is van die Afrikaanse setlaars se reis na die binneland en van God se genade. As 'n volwassene het ek die knope in hierdie lap toegedraai en saam na Pittsburgh gebring, 'n pakkie met herinneringe uit my kinderdae. Nou by 'n verjaardagpartytjie, hou ek met groot afwagting my vriendin dop, soos sy haar geskenk oopvou. Sy is 'n knoop-connoisseur, bewonder elke knoop en vra vrae.

Ek verduidelik, “Hierdie een is 'n springbok, waarskynlik van 'n lugmag uniform. En sien jy hierdie anker? Dit kom uit die vloot. My pa het by die Vloot Akademie in die 1960s klasgegee en my broer was 'n **spesiale duiker** in die vloot. Hierdie knoop kom uit die polisie.”

Om ons word die lug swaarder en ek vries. Ek voel aan hoe iets gebeur wat buite my begrip en ervaring is. My vriendin se gesig vertrek met pyn. Trane loop oor haar swartbruin wange. Sy vra, “Het jy enige idee wat daardie polisielede aan my mense gedoen het? Weet jy hoeveel jaar het ek spandeer om teen apartheid te baklei?”

Ek bly stil. Die hoof van die Suid-Afrikaanse polisie het net twee blokke van ons gewoon toe ek 'n kind was. Ek het hom nooit met geweld verbind nie. Terwyl ek huis toe fietsry, is ek onstabiel.

Hoekom? Hoekom is die wreedhede van apartheid bloot feite wat in my verstand geliasseer is, sonder om by my weefsel uit te kom? Miskien omdat ek geglo het in die netjiese kulturele verhaal: *Apartheid is*

verby. Miskien omdat hierdie die eerste keer was wat 'n swart persoon my toegelaat het om hul pyn te sien. My eie onkunde maak my naan. Ek is skaam dat ek so geïndoktrineer is.

VIER

In 1993, net voor die beëindiging van apartheid, het ek my eerste twee swart vriende gemaak: Letlagle en Jerry. Ons gesprekke het nooit die donker hoofstukke van ons geskiedenis deurloop nie en het eerder by veilige onderwerpe gedraai: Shakespeare, sokker en Nelson Mandela. Hierdie patroon om te vermy raak makliker nadat apartheid amptelik beëindig is. Soos met slawerny in die VSA, kon ons die onderwerp met die hand wegwaai – *dit is verby*.

My geneigdheid om ongemak te vermy, is die gevolg van my onvermoë om die pyn, woede en trauma te hanteer wat deur ons geskiedenis gevorm is. Om te segregeer is 'n algemene oorlewingsmeganisme binne 'n onderdrukkende sisteem. Jy verwyder jouself van ander se realiteit sodat jy nie hulle pyn in die gesig hoef te staar nie. So hoef jy nie die woede raak te sien wanneer hulle, na lang ure se harde werk, met publieke vervoer hul pad terugvind tot by 'n sinkhuisie, 'n huisie wat te warm is om in te slaap. Of wanneer 'n broer geskiet word. Of wanneer hulle te bang is om die kleinhuisie in die nag te besoek, omdat hulle al voorheen daar verkrag is.

As 'n wit persoon, kan mens deur enige stad in die VSA of Suid-Afrika ry en jy sal weet wanneer jy in die swart woonbuurt is. Dit is die deel van die stad wat aan die hand van ontwerp van jou persoonlike, daaglikse ervaring geskei word.

Die ander, innerlike skeiding – die gesegregeerde landskap van die self – is moeiliker om te sien. Dit is die landskap wat die strukturele geweld laat voortduur.

As 'n kind het ek gesien hoe volwassenes beledigings teenoor mense van kleur gemaak het. Pyn, angste en woede het binne my ontplof, maar die vrees vir nog beledigings het my geleer om stil te bly. Ek het geleer hoe om die ongemak te verhuis na 'n ander woonbuurt binne my en so het ek dit uit my bewussyn gedryf.

Vir meer as drie dekades het ek onbevestigde inligting of sterk emosies uitgedryf. Ek het hoër mure gebou tussen my gedagtes aan die een kant en my verbande hartseer en woede aan die ander kant.

Een oomblik wat uitstyg: Ek was by 'n protes wat voortgevloei het nadat 'n ongewapende swart man deur die polisie doodgeskiet is. 'n Vriendin het die megafoon geneem. Vanuit haar binneste het 'n huilroep van hartseer opgewel, treurend oor die verlies van 'n broer, en skuimend woedend oor die wit stilte. Wit stilte soos myne wat pyn en onreg sien, wat sê *Ek is jammer oor jou verlies*, maar ongeaffekteer bly en geen aksie neem om die onregverdige sisteem te verander nie.

Ek kon nie haar pyn ontken nie. Maar ek kon dit ook nie aanhoor nie. As ek regtig na haar pyn geluister het, sou dit my verdedigende mure afgebreek het en my reguit na die vergete woonbuurt in my onderbewussyn geneem het. Ek was bang om daardie woonbuurt binne te loop. Hoe sou ek dekades se verlies waaroor daar nie gerou is nie, stilgemaakte woede, stilgemaakte skande en onerkende trauma in die oë kon staar?

Ek wou nie die woonbuurt betree nie, maar terselfdetyd kon ek nie langer bly leef binne hierdie gesegregeerde self wat nooit tuis kom en nooit vrede vind nie.

“Your sense of reality is dictated by what you avoid. If you avoid reality then how can you face it? If you avoid the ghettos, you don't know the hearts and minds of millions of people. And you don't know your own heart and mind.”

James Baldwin

VYF

Dit is die laaste aand van die kursus. Ons hou 'n danspartytjie. Meesste mense lyk ontspanne en gee hulself oor aan die musiek, moedig mekaar aan wanneer individue na die middel van die sirkel met hul dansbewegings tree. Ek sou my witmeisie dansbewegings ook vertoon, maar ek het 'n klip ingesluk. Beweging skeur die weefsel in my borskas.

Net voor ete is dit ons tweede laaste sessie. Ons sit in twee rye, wit kyk na swart en swart kyk wit, en na elke vraag kyk elkeen na 'n ander persoon. Ek sit regop op die meditasie-kussing. My hande is klammerig op my knieë. Die mense wat deel is van die globale meerderheid vra wat ons doen om rassisme binne onself, ons huishoudings, gemeenskap en stad om te keer. Ek kan nie onthou watter woorde by my mond uitgekroon het nie. Ek is onverhoeds betrap deur die direkte vrae.

Tydens ete gaan die skeiding voort. Ons sit by verskillende tafels. Die mense wat deel van die globale meerderheid is, is vrolik. Ek sit by 'n wit tafel. Ons lyk verlep terwyl ons groente heen en weer in ons borde skuif.

Dan is dit die laaste sessie. Dit voel asof 'n enorme rots val op die huis van vertroue wat ons in die voorafgaande week gebou het. Ons is hartseer. Ons is nie verantwoordelik vir die aard van menswees nie. Maar ons is verantwoordelik vir die wêreld wat ons skep deur ons leefpatrone en deur wie ons liefhet. Selfs nou is dit moeilik om heelhartig vir onself en mekaar as wit naasbestaendes lief te wees.

Na ete sit ek lipstiffie aan om gereed vir 'n partytjie te lyk. By die partytjie word ek deur ou gelowe gevange gehou.

Die stem wat dwarsdeur my lewe weerklink het, sê hoe duidelik dit is dat rasse-versoening nie moontlik is nie. Ek hoor nie die musiek nie. Die basklanke is al wat in my keel pols. Ek voel nie my voete nie en ek merk hoe my lyf swaar teen die wit, akkerhout deur leun. Ek struikel die nag binne, wat swaar is met humiditeit en iewers is die geur van muishond. Ek haal asem in, maar dit is nie vir my borskas moontlik om van binne uit te swel vir die lug wat moet instroom nie. My verstand herhaal elke sin wat ek al gehoor het om die onmoontlike aard van gesondmaak te weerspreek. Daar is die bekende instink – om na versoening te spring sonder om die waarheid binne te tree. Boonop het ek die keuse om my gewete te ignoreer, om terug te keer na ontwerp, die mildelike salaris, terug na die beplanning van 'n volgende avontuur saam met my wit vriende.

Ek is halfpad terug na my koshuis om met 'n boek te ontsnap, toe dit gebeur. Ek word deur 'n onsigbare hand, so groot soos my lyf, net daar in my voetspore tot stillstand gebring. Die hand praat met my, nie hoorbaar nie, maar onsmiskenbaar: "Hanna, wie is die een wat wegloop?"

Ek staan daar met 'n keuse voor my: om uit te tree, of te volhard. Ek staan daar lank genoeg om te sien hoe 'n muishond 'n entjie weg beweeg. Ek hoor die stem van James Baldwin wat sê, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

Dit maak dat ek omdraai, dat ek druk teen die swaar houtdeur, inbeweeg, my vrese en al die klippe wat ek al gesluk het, kan wegdans tot met die laaste musieksnit. Toe dit tyd is om te gaan, is dit nie vir my nodig om self die swaar deur oop te stoot nie. Hierdie keer word die deur vir my oopgehou soos ons uitbeweeg na die partytjie. Moeg. Glimlagte. Saam.

“‘We have two options for our nation’s crisis,’ the joke went. ‘The practical one: pray for angels to save us. The miraculous one: actually talk to each other, work together, and solve it ourselves.’”

Adam Kahane (paraphrased), from *Transformative Scenario Planning: Working Together to Change the Future*

Ons sit in 'n sirkel, veertig van ons. Ek is gewoon aan spasies waar die meerderheid mense wit is en ek nie uitstaan nie. Maar in hierdie ag maande lange opleidingskursus vir anti-rassisme joga-instrukteurs, is slegs ses van ons wit. My wit ras voel vir my soos 'n groot sportveld se wolfram-lig.

'n Priester begin praat en via sy woorde loop ons deur 'n gewelddadige geskiedenis: Columbus en sy manskappe wat inheemse Amerikansers skiet asof hulle wilde diere is. Beelde stroom my bewussyn binne. Swart liggame wat aan 'n skip se boeg vasgeketting is. Families was soos vee op vendusies verkoop word. Swepe wat op kaal rûe knal. Swart liggame wat aan bome hang, terwyl witmense daar rond staan of wegdraai.

Ons kry 'n middagete pouse. 'n Swaar gevoel deurweek my bene. Iemand begin huil. 'n Deel van my wil haar troos, 'n ander deel wegloop. Ek is 'n liggaamlike verteenwoordiger van die mense wat die wonde veroorsaak het. My kompromie is om stil te sit met my hand oor my hart wat wild klop.

Ek is gou te ongemaklik om te bly. Buite langs die straat vind ek 'n rowwe houtblok om op te sit en ek leun terug teen 'n kettingagtige heining. Hartseer trek my keel toe, maar ek kan nie huil nie.

Toe ek teruggaan, het die mense van kleur hulleself in 'n sirkel geweef. Hulle skouers raak aan mekaar soos hulle sing, wieg en handeklap op 'n reëlmatige ritme. Hulle kon nie wegdraai van die pyn nie en het geleer om binne die pyn te sing en te dans. Ten spyte van die haat waar hulle vandaan kom, kies hulle groeiende liefde vir mekaar. Ek voel hul kollektiewe krag aan.

In kontras is die handvol witmense besig om doelloos rond te beweeg. Ons draai nie na mekaar nie. Ons druk nie ons hartseer in sang uit nie. Ons hartseer meng met skuld en raak soos klonte in ons kele. Nadat ons 'n waarheid binne getree het, weet ons nog nie hoe om binne die verwoesting van waarheid te wees nie.

Wanneer die sessie voortgaan, verken ons hoe historiese geweld voortleef in die hede. Wie het twee werke? Wie het met publieke vervoer tot hier gekom? Wie het geliefdes wat werkloos of in die tronk is? Weer en weer is dit mense van kleur wat hul hande opsteek.

Na middagete kan ek nie meer my bolyf regop hou nie. Ek beweeg na die rand van die sirkel en laat my liggaam op 'n jogamatjie sak. Astrid, 'n jong swart vrou, groet. Sy bedank die ander swart vrouens vir hulle ondersteuning. Toe draai sy na die witmense: "Moet nooit dankbaarheid vir verwag omdat julle opgedaag het vir hierdie werk nie. En julle kan bly wees dat ek julle nie nou met die vuur in die gesig slaan nie. Julle verdien dit om elke dag 'n vuishou in die gesig te kry."

In daardie oomblik val my hart oor 'n krans. Miskien is dit onmoontlik om die verlede in die gesig te staar en 'n pad vorentoe te vind.

Ek staan van die jogamatjie op en vind my pad terug na die stoel tussen Faye en Rosetta. Hulle voel my gemoedstemming aan.

"Hoe voel jy, Sus?" vra Faye.

Ek is bewus daarvan dat witmense dikwels in hierdie gesprekke ineenstort, om dan op die skouers van swartmense te leun vir troos. Ek wil hulle nie hiermee opsaal nie, en daarom vertel ek 'n halwe waarheid: "Ek is *okay*, net moeg en my kop is seer."

Faye trek my aan die skouers nader en vou haar arms om my. Rosetta doen dieselfde. Rosetta, wie tydens ons eerste sessie dit duidelik gemaak het dat sy geen tyd vir witmense het nie.

Faye sit 'n sjokolade op my skoot neer, neem my hand en maak my hand met haar twee bruin hande toe. Ons skouers raak aan mekaar. Soos sy saggies wieg, blaas ek my asem uit. Hierdie onverdiende tekens van omgee maak dit moontlik dat my voete nader aan die grond kom.

Soos spiere op verskillende maniere op kleinskaal skeur om sterker te kan word, is dit miskien ook met ons. Ons beweeg en groei in siklusse van gebroke geloof, herstelde geloof, gebroke vertroue en herstelde vertroue. Ons leer, deur saam met ander in gemeenskap te doen. Ons leer so hoe om die verwonding in die gesig te staar en hoe om die gesonde wêreld te word.

SEWE

Dit is te warm om buite te wees. Maar vir die Baltimore Orioles – klein, flamboyante oranje en swart voëls – is dit die moeite werd om die hitte aan te durf. Ek ontmoet twee swart Amerikaanse medewerkers, Michelle en Medina, buite by die woud se blaredak, 'n heiligdom en toevlugsoord in die stad. Ons begin en woorde vloei soos water, met 'n punt wanneer ons in die middel van 'n sin vries en iemand iets uitwys wat volgens ons 'n fladdering goud is.

Soos die hoop om 'n skaars voëlsoort te sien, het ons aanvanklik bymekaar gekom met die hoop om te woon in wat Martin Luther King, Jr *die geliefde gemeenskap* genoem het. In my geval is dit Nelson Mandela se *reënboog-nasie*. Daardie droom is die energie wat bepaal hoe ons leef en hoe ons besluite rig – die werk wat ons agterlaat en die werk wat ons nou kies om te doen. Die drie van ons het 'n lang pad reeds gestap. Egte verhoudings wat bo-oor rasgrense strek, vereis werk wat beweeg deur historiese konflik, pyn, en die verdedigende gedrag wat ons met verloop van tyd beliggaam het. 'n Paar voorbeelde: ek dring aan daarop dat ons almal *betyds* moet wees, my tekens van afkeur en my onvermoë om eers te probeer verstaan wat tot die skeiding met 'n medewerker van kleur gelei het.

Aan die einde van ons stap sit ons naby 'n fontein waar die wind net reg waai om ons met 'n miswolk te bedek – genadige verligting van die hitte. Toe onthou ek. My hand vroetel in my sak om dit te kry. Elke keer wanneer ek huis toe gaan, kom ek terug met 'n geskenk uit, soos Michelle dit noem, die moeder-kontinent. My hand vou toe om iets. Ek haal 'n doek vir Michelle en oorbelle vir Medina uit. Hulle gesigte gloei met waardering.

Michelle sê, "Dankie dat jy vir ons lief is, Hanna." Dit is die eerste keer wat 'n swart persoon dit vir my sê. My gedagtes flits terug na my kinderjare, toe hierdie buitengewone vroue waarskynlik tot huisskoonmaak beperk is – en die politiek van vernedering moes verduur deur bediende-uniforms aan te trek, minderwaardige kos uit minderwaardige breekware te eet en karige lone moes ontvang. Dit was 'n samelewing waarbinne interrass-huwelik verbode was. En hier sit ons nou, sonder die gewig van skeiding. Ek wil sê, "Dankie vir die geleentheid om vir julle lief te wees."

Maar die wind raak sterker en ons druk mekaar in 'n mantel van mis. Uit die hoek van my oog – wat brand van sonroom, liefde en die wete dat ek behoort – sien ek 'n reënboog. Rasse-verhoudinge kan gesond word, selfs al duur dit oor generasies.

AFTERWORD

I am dying. If I was still working as a designer, I would feel bereft. But because of this journey and my work as a facilitator, I have a sense of completion. I know I've done my best to repair and rebuild racial relationships, creating a more equitable world in that process. My collaborators and I have supported others—individuals, organizations, networks—to do the same.

Still, I feel sad that I am dying so young, and with so many dreams unrealized.

I wonder what ache lives in you, toward a world more whole and equitable. Maybe you've spent decades living into that desire. Maybe you're just beginning. Or you may feel isolated, at a loss.

Wherever you are, I trust you, sacred being, to look and see. Look and see. Look until you see what possibility beckons you forward. And follow it wholeheartedly. I'll be rooting for you from the other side.



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