

Lessons In Xenophobia

by

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Burning barricades of tyres, reddish-orange and black. Sirens of emergency and police vehicles. The braggadocio of the warring factions crumbling before rubber bullets and water cannons.

All in my living room.

“Civil blood makes civil hands unclean.” Love amidst feuding families. I try to prepare my lessons for the first day of the new term, but Romeo and Juliet give way to the pictures in the evening news.

On the last day of the school holidays, xenophobic violence continues in Mahatma Gandhi Road, in the Central Business District of Durban and elsewhere in the city.

I cannot escape the irony. *Violence... in Mahatma Gandhi Road.*

A man shows raw gashes on his head and arm. “I was attacked. By thugs. With a panga and knife. For nothing. For selling fruit in my stall. Cause I Nigerian.”

A murmur of angry voices emerges from the crowd of supporters around him. “They attack us - our women and children - with crowbars, hammers, axes. Enough is enough. We fight back.”

“They take away our jobs. They are drug dealers and prostitutes,” counters a local.

“Not all of us are criminals,” responds a foreigner. “We make an honest living.”

The reporter continues.

As school opens tomorrow for the new term, it remains to be seen how attendance will be affected. It is also not certain whether all schools will remain open.

My school is in the CBD of Durban. It serves mainly the children of the locals who live in flats in the city centre, but also some children who live out of town and come to school in taxis with their working parents. There are also a few children of foreigners.

The foreigners, both legal and illegal, come to Durban seeking a better life. They are mainly from Nigeria, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. They are mostly men, but a few come with their wives. It seems most of the school-going children of foreigners remain in their own countries, but there are exceptions.

Benjamin Disi is a Rwandan. He is my top learner in grade nine and lives in Mahatma Gandhi Road.

Benjamin has lived in Durban for the last two years, with his father, a plumber.

I learnt from Benjamin that his mother and two sisters still live in Rwanda. It was his mother’s idea that he come to South Africa with his dad.

“He will receive a better education there,” she said.

Attendance is surprisingly good on opening day, but Benjamin is absent.

Romeo and Juliet appears irrelevant. I ask about my star pupil.

“Do you know why Benjamin hasn’t come to school?”

A jabber of voices volunteers answers.

“Maybe he’s ill, sir.”

“Sir, there’s trouble in the streets.”

“It’s not safe. People are attacking foreigners.”

“And why are they doing this?” I ask, seeing an opportunity for some real teaching to take place.

I hear the same clichés.

“Sir, they’re taking away our jobs.”

“They’re drug dealers.”

“And prostitutes.”

Teenagers break out in self-conscious laughter.

I talk to them about generalisations and stereotypes. They listen attentively.

I ask around in the other classes I teach. No one knows what has become of Benjamin. Or perhaps no one cares.

I express my concern for Benjamin to my colleagues during break. They respond with flippant optimism. “Don’t worry, I’m sure he’s fine.”

Or racist cynicism. “So you think you can change these people?”

Or indifference.

But for the rest of the school day, I cannot help but worry about Benjamin.

I express my concern to my wife when I return home. It’s just my wife and me now, with our sons working in Johannesburg. She’s a former teacher, now on early retirement. I have just two years to go.

“Why didn’t you call his parents?” she asks.

“You know the first day of term. There just wasn’t time. And I can’t do it now, I have all my records at school,” I respond. I promise myself that I would call Benjamin’s dad the next day.

After supper, I switch on the late news on TV. My wife sits next to me.

There are unconfirmed reports that violence in the Central Business District of Durban has claimed two lives. The victims have not yet been identified, but it is believed that they are a Mozambican and a Rwandan. One of them is believed to be in his thirties while the other is believed to be a teenager. Witnesses say that they were burned to death last night, in Mahatma Gandhi Road, though we found no evidence of this. Residents here say that this is a police cover-up. As soon as we get more details, we will carry these in our next bulletin.

The visuals of the previous day assail me again: barricades of burning tyres, emergency and police vehicles, rubber bullets and water cannons. A man with gashes on his head and arm. They somehow seem less shocking the second time round.

I hear the urgent beep of my cell phone. The message is from a friend. I switch off the TV. I read the terse message.

Watch this video. Warning: not for the faint hearted.

I press play. My wife watches with me.

I see a motley crowd in a circle, all shouting indistinctly. In the centre are two men, sitting on the ground with their hands tied behind their backs. Their torsos are bare. They have tyres round their waists, like floating aids. The picture is hazy. I cannot make out their faces. The older one seems to be pleading with a man standing in front of him, but earns a slap across his face. I strain to have a better look at the younger man. I am filled with dread as I realise that he appears to be a teenager; the boy looks around, bewildered.

Their tormentor, barefoot, in baggy shirt and pants, takes a few steps towards the crowd, stops and returns to check that the tyres and ropes are secure. He walks slowly to a section of the crowd. Someone hands him what looks like a two-litre cool drink bottle.

Egged on by the crowd, he marches back towards the victims, arms swinging high, one hand clutching the bottle. A wisp of dust marks every step.

The older one looks up, still pleading. The boy remains impassive, staring ahead. The man sprinkles the contents of the bottle all over the tyres and on the victims' torsos, legs and head.

“This can’t be petrol,” I think. “What a bluff. He’s scaring the shit out of these people. Any time now, he’ll break out into a laugh. Allow them to leave. Lesson learnt.”

The would-be executioner walks a few steps back. He reaches into his pocket. I imagine I smell petrol.

He walks back to the two. The one looks up to him. The teenager looks down. The crowd is in a frenzy.

The executioner lights a match, flings it at the tyres and runs back.

My wife gets up quickly. “I can’t watch this,” she says, but a perverse curiosity forces me to continue.

A burst of flame. A scream from the older one, who stands up and runs around in a grotesque dance. The youngster sits there, the flames wrapped round his body. The older one falls. He tries to get up, staggers, and falls again. I imagine the pungent smell of burning flesh and petrol. Black smoke fills the air.

The crowd ululates. A fat woman runs to the centre of the circle and does a jig. She runs back to the crowd in a swagger and becomes anonymous again.

The video then blanks out.

I feel numb with shock. Could the teenager be Benjamin?

I sleep fitfully that night. I see the burning teenager as I replay the video in my mind. Again and again. The more it replays, the more I convince myself that I see Benjamin’s face.

The first thing in the morning, from school, I phone Benjamin’s father.

“Hello, Mr Disi. Is Benjamin all right?” I ask.

There is a brief silence. I expect the worst.

“He in hospital.”

I feel an absurd sense of relief. Benjamin is alive!

“What happened?” I ask.

Mr Disi tells me the story of how Benjamin was all dressed for school and waiting at the taxi rank.

Two men brandishing knives are looking for someone. They are wound up with aggression. They stop at the queue waiting for the taxi.

“Where the *amakwerekwere*?” they ask, their hunter-eyes darting from face to face. It seems that they have a score to settle with a foreigner.

No one answers. Everyone tries to avoid eye contact with the men. Benjamin looks up. His eyes lock into the eyes of one of the men, momentarily. He takes fright, breaks rank and runs.

The men chase him. Benjamin is too slow. In no time they catch up with him. One of them trips him. Benjamin loses balance, but does not fall. They raise their knives. The first knife enters his back just below his shoulder. He falls face first. He writhes over and turns to face them, his hands raised in defence.

“Bastard!” they shout. “Son of a foreign dog!” They kick out wildly at him. The second attacker stoops and stabs him in the arm. He spits at the boy. Then they quickly turn and run in different directions, their revenge for some unknown deed taken on a convenient foreign teenager.

Some people in the taxi queue scream and run. Others stay put. No one goes to Benjamin's aid. By now the taxi has arrived and the people get in. Someone calls an ambulance.

"The doctor say he lucky. No serious damage done. He be out of hospital soon," says Mr Disi. He tells me that he's holed up in his flat, not daring to venture outdoors. "It's too dangerous. I cannot even see my dear boy in hospital," he says quietly.

This cuts me to the quick. "Don't worry," I find myself saying. "I'll visit him this afternoon." I take down details. "I'll let you know how he's doing."

At the entrance of the hospital there is a large statue of St Thomas, after whom the hospital is named. His arms are outstretched in entreaty. At the base of the statue are the words *Serve me through the sick*.

I am directed to his ward by the receptionist.

I take the lift up to the ward. I scan the four beds from the doorway. Some visitors are clustered around three of them. I make my way to the fourth and see Benjamin. He is connected to drips and is asleep.

"Hey, Benjamin," I whisper as I gently touch his forehead.

He opens his eyes. There is a smile of recognition. "How are you, sir?" he whispers.

I chuckle. "The question is, how are *you*?"

"Okay," he says.

"Here, I've brought you something."

He struggles to sit up.

“No, don’t,” I say, as I leave a magazine and a packet of sweets on the bedside pedestal. I adjust the knobs of the bed so that he can sit up. “Your dad told me what happened. He sends his love.”

“Thanks,” he says and grimaces, placing the palm of his hand on his chest.

“Are you in pain?”

“A little,” he says. “They’ll give me something before I sleep.”

“Did the doctor say how long you’ll be here?”

“Just another two days. I should be home by the week-end.”

“Good. Don’t worry about school. I’ll collect all your teachers’ work sheets for you. You should stay home for a while until you’re stronger. You can work at home. You’re our smartest pupil; you’ll catch up.”

He looks at me, not saying anything. His eyes brim with tears.

“What’s the matter?” I ask, handing him a tissue from the bedside cabinet.

He dabs his eyes. “I don’t think I’ll be coming back to school, sir,” he says quietly.

“What?”

He tells me that his dad has decided to take him back to Rwanda and leave him there. His mother had insisted on this. His dad would return, but he didn’t know when. Even when he returned, Benjamin tells me, he would return alone.

For a moment, I'm left speechless. Then I say, "I'm sure we can sort this out," not quite knowing how. "You take it easy and get well. I'll speak to your dad. I think you should finish your schooling here first."

I lie about how everyone in school expressed their concern. I have very little else to say. I think Benjamin senses this.

"I won't keep you up. You need to rest," I say.

I leave the hospital determined to speak to Benjamin's father, but am not quite confident of the outcome.

"Things have quietened down," I say. "Perhaps you and Benjamin should stay, Mr Disi."

"Quietened down?" he asks. "For how long? So many have been hurt. Five killed. No one arrested. How can the police arrest the criminals when they on their side? When they scared of them?"

I have no answer. Five years previously foreigners were attacked in other parts of the country. At least seven were killed then, but no one was arrested.

"They tell me that I take away their jobs. So they punish me by trying to kill my son. They cowards. They will come for me...the cowards will not rest until I dead."

"But how safe is it in your country?" I ask him.

He pauses before he answers, quietly. “There’s peace there now; it safer than here. My wife wants him back there, with her. She lost her brother in the fighting between the Hutu and the Tutsi. He was only sixteen ... innocent. Caught in the crossfire.

“He hid ... in a church ...with the others, but this did not stop those dogs. They shot them all. In the church. They were found dead, huddled ... sweet Jesus... in front of the cross. Later, they found that the pastor himself had betrayed them. Had the blood of the innocent lambs on his hands. The church became hell.”

“Your wife’s brother...was he Tutsi?” I ask, almost immediately realising the irrelevance of my question.

“Hutu...Tutsi. What matter?” he replies. “All same. All human.”

I try to convince him to stay. For the sake of Benjamin’s education. “I’ll take a personal interest in him. Guide him along.”

“You done a lot already. Thank you. Benjamin love you. But you can give no guarantee. His mother will never forgive me ... forgive herself ... if something happen to him ... here ... so far away from home. We have schools back home. Not the best, but good enough.”

“And you? What will you do? How will you cope without work?”

“I’ve saved some money. I’ll find something. Might come back here. Without Benjamin.”

I have nothing more to say. We shake hands and he turns to go.

“When are you leaving?” I ask.

“As soon as Benjamin feels stronger. He be discharged on Saturday. Have a week’s rest.”

“How will you go?”

“The same way we come here,” he says. He clearly does not want to give anything away.

“Can I see Benjamin before you leave?”

“I don’t think that a good idea,” he says. “For you or my son. But we can meet, if you want.”

And so we make arrangements to meet one last time.

It is for coffee at a restaurant. We exchange pleasantries and I ask about Benjamin.

“He making great progress,” Mr Disi says. “Looking forward to see his mother.”

“That’s good.”

We are silent for a while as we have our coffee. Then he looks at me and asks, “How safe do *you* feel here?”

“Excuse me?” I say, taken aback.

“You’re not from here. You’re different – Indian. How safe do you feel?”

“I’m South African. My great grandparents came here...they called them indentured labourers. I call them slaves. They toiled on the sugar cane fields in atrocious conditions. My

grandparents, my father and mother, were born here. So was I, my wife and sons. Can we be anything but South African?"

"That's what it says in your I.D.," he says. How *safe* do you feel?"

"As safe as anyone else can at this time," I respond. "Sure there are people who threaten others... because they themselves feel threatened. Those who blame others who are different... for their own shortcomings. But good people always prevail; otherwise no human being would have survived thus far."

"But some unfortunately die," says Mr Disi.

"Yes," I say. "Unfortunately, some do."

There is nothing more to say. We drink our coffee. I wish him and Benjamin well.

"Tell Benjamin I'll pray for him."

"Sure," he says. "I ask him to keep in touch."

"Yes, thank you." I reach into my pocket. I hand him a wad of notes. "Here's five hundred rand. It's all I can spare. Use it as you wish." He takes it and looks at me.

"Thank you," he says. "May God bless you."

It's the last I see of him or Benjamin. I try phoning Mr Disi a couple of times, without success. My pupils and some colleagues ask about Benjamin; when I tell them he has gone back to his own country, they drop the subject as though that was to be expected.

I sometimes think about what Mr Disi asked me about my own safety, but the thought passes quickly. I cannot say that I am overly concerned about myself or my family. I try to

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immerse myself in my teaching, but every time I think about Benjamin, a sense of unease creeps up on me.

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