

# Jean Adams: Teachable Moments

Seekers Church

June 1, 2003

Jean Adams

## Teachable Moments

Good morning.

This is the first time I stand at this pulpit. I came to Seekers in 1995. The church I was a member in for 20 years no longer seemed to be a fit. Sonya had introduced me to Seekers, and I felt at home. Therefore, it is way beyond time for me to be bringing the word!

Recently I went on a fantastic trip to South Africa, as one of three adults with 18 high school students from St. Andrew's Episcopal School where Roy Barber is on the faculty. He is Head of Music and the Performing Arts, and teaches a course in Race and Culture. As you recall, he brought the Bokamoso students here in January to produce their AIDS musical, "It Can't Happen to Me." Roy has an abiding commitment to social justice issues. This trip came about because of this commitment.

What I would like to do is tell you some of what we did, and tell you some of our reactions.

People ask, "Was it a life-changing experience?" Well, yes! Away from routine and familiar surroundings, our senses were extra – active. We were integrating new information with old.

There were many "Teachable Moments." You know how it is; there is a special sense of aliveness in such travels. The variety that Roy built into the trip was great. Being a pro in the business of performing arts no doubt helped. Being a parent

did, too, I think.

Our morning arrival into Capetown allowed time to take luggage to a storage room of St. Joseph's College (a high school) and then hit the trail up Lion's Head. There was a brisk breeze, and a wonderful view of Capetown at the top of this small mountain. That got the kinks out of our bodies after the 15-hour flight.

Our students were hosted in the homes of students of St. Joseph's College, and they experienced the culture of South Africa's racial diversity in that way. We had one African American student, a young woman of 18, who was hosted by a Muslim family. Their strictness in not letting young females out in mixed company after dark meant that she could not attend an evening gathering, which had been planned with other parents' permission. It took days for her to see this as learning, not just a deprivation.

In an 11th grade History class we attended, there was a discussion of the racial situation in South Africa. They said they had not yet brought friends of another racial group into their homes because the older generation was not able to handle that; they felt it would take another generation for friendships to include being guests in each other's homes. Days later, our African American student said this was depressing to her.

The History class presented us with some information about District Six, a thriving neighborhood in Capetown, which had begun in the late 1700's, and included families of Indian, African, Asian and European backgrounds. Stores, businesses and traditions were active within it. Because it did not follow the prescribed separation of the races during apartheid, it was destroyed. Families were forced to move into mandated areas. The rubble of the bulldozed District Six is all that remains today.

The Museum dedicated to bringing to life the story of District Six is located in the old Methodist church that Peter Storey served. The plaque his congregation affixed to the outside of their sanctuary was still there: "ALL WHO PASS BY Remember with shame the many thousands of people who lived for generations in District Six and other parts of this city and were forced by law to leave their home because of the color of their skins. FATHER, FORGIVE US."

Our black guide took us to Langa, a township on the outskirts of Cape Town. He told us a bit about it, and he told us what he had planned for us to see. Because it was a school holiday, all the children were there, and swarmed around us, which the St. Andrew's students responded to with warmth.

We were invited to go into a shabeen if we wanted to. It was a small wooden shack a kind of "pub." The tradition is that women brew a pot of beer, and men who come in and sit on the wooden benches along the walls, pass the pot from one to another, taking a drink before passing it.

We also saw an apartment in one of the many rows of just-alike tenement buildings. Thirty-five people shared this apartment, which had four bedrooms, a tiny kitchen and a small living room.

I believe this was the first time these students had seen abject poverty. I did not hear conversation about what they experienced; my guess is they did not have words for it.

We took a trip to Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela had spent 19 of his 27 years of imprisonment. His cell was about 6' by 7', and had a small window that looked out onto the high walled exercise yard. I reflected: "19 years. Why, the boy beside me was only 16. What a way to understand those 19 years, to look at all the development that is possible in a human being during those years. How, I thought, did Mandela keep sane? He had the passionate belief in his cause, he had

been raised in a close-knit extended family and he had "ubuntu," the belief in the connection of his life to all of life, including his ancestors." The students spoke of the high walls, razor wire, and guard towers.

Some chances to see the beautiful sights, Table Mountain and Cape Point, mitigated the bleakness of District Six, Langa Township and Robben Island. In addition, St. Andrew's students gave a concert for St. Joseph's College, and they responded with a marimba recital of their own. Saying goodbye was sad.

## **Johannesburg/ Pilanesburg/ Johannesburg**

The next phase of the trip began after flying to Johannesburg. From there we immediately went to a lovely quiet game park, Pilanesburg. Accommodations were comfortable, and we went on safaris, giving me the feeling that we were as close to Eden as we would ever get.

The United States' war with Iraq had just started two days before, incidentally. To see wild animals there, in natural habitat, amongst scores of their own kind was exciting.

There was adequate unscheduled time so that the group began to coalesce. The second (and last) night the kids put on a barbeque, (food bought at the campground grocery store) complete with candles and guitar music.

Each of the two afternoons, I took time to paint a small watercolor, which in essence anchored the experience of this peaceful place within me.

During the trip back into Johannesburg, I became aware of the ingrained prejudices that Afrikaners have about blacks. Our guide used "we" and "they" language as a matter of course. Later, when she accompanied us to and from Winterveld she acknowledged the friendships she saw between the kids. She had even gone to the internet to read the Washington Post's article about Bokamoso at St. Andrew's School in January.

Nevertheless, she said, “this would never be able to happen here.” One can only hope that a seed has been planted.

Johannesburg bustles. “Platinum mines” the guide had pointed out as we approached the city. “Gold mines”...The buildings were tall. The skyline was that of a big city.

We stayed at a hostel, called the Backpackers Ritz. A beautiful hillside home, in a pretty part of Johannesburg had been transformed into a hostel, with just basic accommodations. A cinderblock building had been added for extra rooms near the edge of the property. I had my most teachable moments in my room there. Quite by surprise when I went to bed in my tiny room, I began to feel claustrophobic. Very claustrophobic. I recalled Mandela’s imprisonment and what I believed had sustained him. I reviewed my ancestors, but then suddenly it was obvious. I wanted my mother. It is not necessary to explain more but just to say that I understood in a flash a dynamic in our relationship that was like a missing puzzle piece. It was a teachable moment! I slept well after that, even dreaming a confirming dream.

The following day some of the MUKA Project participants met us. How wonderful to be greeted by them! They have expanded their work in schools, and have traveled to other countries to perform. It was an inspiration to hear of their work and reflect on the power of the arts to speak to people, and speak **for** people. They walked with us through some of downtown J’burg, A new member that I walked with spoke with enthusiasm about her discovery of herself as a storyteller. She goes into elementary schools, with two puppeteers, and tells African tales.

That evening we would participate in the Paballo Ya Batho feeding program for homeless run by the Central Methodist Church. “For those without place, without name, without value in the city.” the program’s brochure reads.

In a preliminary meeting, we were told what to do: We were to interact, talk with each person we gave food to as we distributed hot soup, bread and water to each homeless person on the street.

We went out later, after darkness had fallen, with the food van and the medicine van, which stopped at regular stops where the homeless people were. They lay on corrugated cardboard in one long row, from one end of the block to the other. Most of them were wrapped in plastic against the cold. Across the street was the same arrangement: body after body after body, the whole block long. There were several stops like this.

Here is where the students shone. Without exception, they carried food and talked with each person, with great caring, and a sense of purpose.

Zoe had concern for a man with a bad open sore on his leg. She got Judy, the leader, to look at it. Judy arranged to meet the man in the morning and take him to the hospital. She bandaged the wound, placed her hands on his leg and remained quiet for a minute. Prayer must be a part of this ministry, too.

After all food was given out and we were back at the church, Judy invited our responses to what we saw and felt. John, usually very talkative, sat hunkered down. He spoke about conversing with a man – an interesting conversation. But then he realized he had to leave.

The man said “God bless you!” John’s response to us was “He said God bless **me**. And **he** was the homeless one!” He shook his head. It seemed to me he was close to tears.

Was this a teachable moment for John? I believe so, just as Serena had that night, also.

She said she was a fearful person. She had not wanted to go out this evening. She had to summon up great courage to participate. Now she was glad that she did as she really felt

she had been helpful .Without exception, as people spoke, this evening's experience had opened eyes and hearts.

## **Soweto.**

Somehow going to Soweto the next day felt very special. It is not as poor a township as I thought it would be. There were solid, neat, attractive small homes and well-cared-for yards in part of Soweto. There were also shelters made from scrap materials, without water, etc. at one edge of the township.

Here is a memorial to the unarmed schoolchildren who were shot and killed as they demonstrated against the use of the Afrikaans language as a medium of instruction. There was also an excellent museum about apartheid.

Have you heard of Regina Mundi Catholic Church in Soweto? I had not. Yet this church is where anti-apartheid meetings were held. Government forces had shot into the building; we were shown the bullet marks and the chipped altar. It is a very large church. I was very moved by realizing that this church stood for truth saying. It was the Body of Christ made real. The students moved about the space quietly. They noticed the Black Madonna. They pointed it out to each other.

The last segment of our journey was a visit to Wintervelt. The bus driver reluctantly turned the big white bus off the paved highway and onto a dirt road. We had entered the Township of Wintervelt. He was not comfortable about this. I could hear him making small noises under his breath as I was sitting close to the front. After a bit, there was a deep gully across the road, caused by a recent rain, and he stopped the bus, announcing this was as far as it was going.

As we got our suitcases and backpacks from the storage area there were sounds of joy...some of the Bokamoso troupe had seen us coming. We stirred up a big cloud of dust! Therefore, the troupe came to meet us. There was jubilation and a sense of

homecoming as we headed down the road to the Guest House.

Right away, I could see Jackie and Dave's work of last summer: the staff was warm and welcoming, the meals were "the best on the trip!" volunteered some of the kids, and the building had some details I knew Dave had had a part of. It was a nice feeling to remember their presence and hard work.

Lots of visiting followed. We went to the Bokamoso Youth Center for an official welcome: much, much singing and dancing. We were invited to have lunch there. Then we all took a walk around the neighborhood. Small, small homes, walls composed of local bricks, others of corrugated metal pieces or composite board – whatever was available. Yards were bare of grass. In most cases, they were swept each morning. Yards had plants along the edges; a few had some flowers. Wash hung on lines, on fences. Children and adults were about, and some chickens. There is electricity and water only at the Guest House, and at the Bokamoso Youth Center. Water for the homes in the neighborhood has to be gotten from a spigot located on a nearby dirt road.

The land itself is beautiful in its own way. It has no drama, being rather flat, with some small trees and many long grasses. The roads and footpaths that crossed the land in irregular fashion were orange-brown.

The Bokamoso kids and St. Andrew's kids played a soccer game took a hike to a meteor crater. They played cards, sang together, listened to CD's, talked, visited Haven, a program for pre-schoolchildren, some of whose parents had died of Aids..

It was time to leave.

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In reflecting on their experiences several St. Andrew's students made these comments, and I will let them have the



last words”:

*“.. These homeless people are fully human...but what some of them lack is nourishment and motivation and support. ... So last night I realized the utter importance of human support. No one in this world has ever made it on his or her own. Therefore, every human needs light to find the way in the darkness. And it's our duty as humans to help spread that light into dark corners ...where people have been pushed aside.”*

*“Reflecting on my trip, I don't wonder why they value community or ubuntu so much...I don't wonder why they don't live like us, but why we don't live a little more like them.”*

*“The more we observed the more we understood. We traveled a lot, so everywhere we went our friendships were fleeting. Still I couldn't help but fall in love with the warm, genuine people that made goodbye so much harder than expected.”*

Too be honest, when we left Capetown I did not see how the trip could possibly get any better. And in a way, I was mad that we had not left the best, or most beautiful for last. However, the highlight of my trip was not in Capetown ... but in Winterveldt, (which) in its own way was just as beautiful.

Winterveldt is filled with youth that have the potential to change the world; and the Bokamoso Youth Center is a place where they can make something of themselves by knowing there are others with similar hopes and dreams. I stopped looking at them as people I felt sorry for and began to look at them as my friends. We wear the same clothes, listen to the same music and laugh at the same jokes. But by luck, I was born into a world with more opportunities. And now my only fear is that they may never leave Winterveldt to become all that they are capable of being.”

“We and some of the students from Bokamoso went to Haven. We

did not speak the same language but it did not really matter, because all you need to do to communicate with kids this young is to make faces or tickle them. While playing with them it hit me. I did not really think about how these kids might have HIV, that they were poor, in one of the poorer areas of South Africa, that they were black, that they were orphans. I did not even think about how we were in South Africa. I saw them just as kids, nothing more. I then realized that that was the attitude I should have been taking about people the entire trip, and the attitude I should be taking for my entire life.”