

One family's quest to confront its own past in a racially divided society.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu is not least famous hoping for a rainbow nation in South Africa. His hope holds identical significance for Namibia. Religious and political leaders often reiterate the call for a non-racial and non-sexist society. But what is the meaning of this in our own lives? Does such hope turn into reality because they pronounce it so? I want to take you on one family's journey who attempt to give expression to the just and moral ideal toward an equal society.

It is true that government policy has slowly brought those who used to be artificially divided closer together. Residential separation and the prohibition of mixed marriages is slowly giving way to a new normal, but it is slow and often resisted.

The descendants of the Schmelen-Kleinschmidt family have taken the lofty ideals toward active grass-roots realisation. There were circumstances that propelled us to act because race and social standing divided this family for over a hundred years. We mirrored the politics of the day. The incantation of 'love thy neighbour' had failed for generations, despite our family's deep missionary roots. If this failure was born out of ill-will the failure would be easy to pin point, but instead failure occurred despite the best biblical instructions. Could the descendants of those who perpetrated hurt, pain and hate acknowledge this failing? What did the descendants of the victims seek?

With trepidation, we took the first steps into the unknown. What if the dark-complexioned family responded with resentment and rejected us, who thought of ourselves as 'white'? Whom could we turn to for help or were we on our own? The absence of a defined and proven road-map was not heartening.

Despite all, we, whose European ancestors pre-date German colonial rule by two generations and whose African ancestors have been here since time immemorial, in 2014 crossed the persistent barriers and taboos of the past. To our collective surprise, once the first door was opened other doors opened readily. This did not provide instant comfort and acceptance but it took us beyond the superficial talk that we are united and at peace with each other. We sought words and expressions toward embracing our common humanity without abandoning sub-ordinate identities that make us different. Some of us had to learn that our claims to diversity were entwined with concepts of a racial hierarchy in which 'we' were always at the top. History could not be ignored and old assumptions need re-thinking. For example, our missionary forefathers confused Christian conviction with their European culture which they sought to impose.

From across the spectrum of different backgrounds a few of us arranged this first and then a second family gathering. In 2014 in the Nama village of Komaggas near Springbok in the Northern Cape one-hundred-and-fifty relations met. And again in 2016, similar numbers met in Fransfontein, the home of the Swartboois. Those present came from Finland, Germany, Namibia, South Africa and other countries. On each occasion, we met for several days where long evenings around camp fires promoted story-telling of poignant memories and by telling them to each other, they became part of the healing.

Could we repair the fracture of pre-colonial, colonial and apartheid rule? At the gathering in the village of Komaggas first, second, third and fourth nieces and cousins met for the first time. Two Windhoek school girls, one dark and the other light complexioned attending the same school and class, hugged each other when they discovered they were cousins.

There were those who remained apprehensive and several declined the invitation. Among the sceptics it seems White identity politics that is hardest to overcome. The family considers this unfinished business because no-one is to be excluded. Among those who declined to join us are those who perceive reverse discrimination since Namibian independence. Some had served in the South African army in Angola 'because the pay was so good' without a willingness to confront the morality of their individual or collective actions. It was war they say, as though it justified everything. Their continuing choice of vocabulary, generalisations and tone, challenges the family project which remains work in progress.

We constructed a family tree that demonstrated just how twelve generations were related and connected. On the European and the African sides, we named ancestors going back to around 1730. The threads of the two histories were first entwined with the marriage in 1814, in the Bethany region, between German-born missionary Johan Hinrich Schmelen and African-born Zara Hendricks-//Geixas. Their daughters married the missionaries Kleinschmidt and Bam and both of their families settled in Namibia. The Kleinschmidt branch identified as white, with one exception by which the Kleinschmidt's are related to the Swartboois. Missionary Bam was of mixed racial origin and his offspring were called, through social convention and then political dispensation, 'coloured'. The hundreds of entries on the family tree were enlarged on newsprint 1.5 in height by 25 meters long and put on the walls of the Komaggas community hall. Family arrived with photos and pens and added countless more relatives, wrote up anecdotes and in this way enriched the 'tree'.

Amongst us were those who sang ballads dedicated to the generations past, those who could preach did so, those who wanted to debate or write did so, others provided accommodation to strangers in their homes and yet others provided meals for four days! - It changed our lives forever and we thanked each other for having crossed the bridge to find immense personal enrichment. We now proudly blow our own family trumpet, and proclaim openly the onetime secret of a dark-skinned ancestor, a marriage at best referred to as a 'mistake'.

Through the determined effort of a cousin, Ursula Trüper from Berlin, we explored who Zara was. According to Hinrich's own writings she was the guiding light next to him. He writes of a loving and intellectually active couple. Affectionately he called her Gwarretjie, 'fountain' or 'source' in Nama. They wrote the first Namaqua grammar, first invented in writing the 'click' sound and translated the Gospels into Namaqua and published the first Nama Bible. Through Ursula's writing Zara became visible in history, next to a white man who had until then, as is usual in all history, received all the credit. Next, through artist Christine Crowley, an image of Zara was created. We have an etching of Hinrich but we wanted Zara to have a face, another key to restoring her identity. And we found the early traveller, Robert Gordon

who drew images of Zara's father and family near the Orange River around 1798. Then we searched countless farm graveyards in the Swartland area of the Western Cape to find where she was laid to rest in 1831. Farmers whose land we combed were suspicious that we were in pursuit of a land claim. Eventually the labourers on a farm in the shadow of the Heuningberg, just beyond the Berg River, took the farmer and us to a graveyard long forgotten. We cannot say which is Zara's grave, but significant evidence pointed to this cluster of graves farmer Botma, 'friend of the missionaries' allocated to religious folk heading towards or returning from places far north of the colonial border. Before gathering in Komaggas we descended on the farm in question, now owned by the Mouton family, to pay our respects to the ancestor's grave hidden in the renoster bush. Mr Mouton, reflecting on his own family came to say, 'Yes, we also have such a story hidden in our family'.

Sitting in a huge circle the family then held its own Truth and Reconciliation discussion (as was done after 1994 in South Africa, but not in Namibia, on an official level). This required a need for dialogue; not a one-way telling of suffering but statements from the lighter-complexioned family also. Could the beneficiaries of the past express acknowledgement and would they say more to the former victims than 'Shame, how terrible'? Might they harbour sentiments of 'Get over it, that is now in the past' or 'It was not my fault'? How does one express contrition, acknowledgement and admission and to whom exactly? Amongst us, nobody was a perpetrator of violent action against the former disempowered and disenfranchised. But what about our fathers? And what type of generalities and prejudices were we educated into? Did we witness and passively partake in discrimination?

The human capacity for cruelty to others seems infinite, but so is our capacity to restore and heal. Acknowledging and revealing personal and family deeds or failings, hidden over long periods is liberating. It was not easy for me to say in front of this family audience, that my father sometimes held his pipe back to front, pretending it was a pistol, and aimed at on-coming black men on bicycles, causing them to fall off the shoulder of the road and flee into the bush. My mother would say, "Don't be so cruel", to which my father replied: "I'm only having some fun". Or, that I accepted the wisdom exchanged in white Windhoek that the vacated Old Location had to lie fallow for many years for the disease and vermin in the soil left by those driven away to disappear. I never saw a hand lifted against those whom we disliked, but our vocabulary was packed with hostility and prejudice against the 'other'. It still shames me to put this on paper – but it is the truth. And those on the other side were waiting to hear it in words from a person of privilege, face to face, with people who still feel there is so much unfinished business from the past. And, it does not make me love my parents less. I embrace them fully knowing they were products of their time.

In Fransfontein (2016) we pursued the discussion, often at an informal level. Examples of tragedy, even suicide, of rejection and exile abounded. Hard talk from both sides made us cross a new threshold without which nothing was to be gained. We stayed together, ate together and prayed together. We attended a thanksgiving service in the local Lutheran Church, as we had done in Komaggas, and this time Charles Otto //Uirab and I walked down the aisle of the church to tell the congregation in Nama, Afrikaans, German and English that we had made progress on the road toward reconciliation. It did not mean that all was resolved but at least we now had building blocks on which to build a kinder future.

We experienced our new awareness as empowering. We found words to express and we listened like we never listened before. Most important is the realisation that the rainbow or the non-racial and non-sexist tolerant society does not happen by itself. It requires our active engagement.

May our experience encourage others, in similar circumstances, to follow our path.