

life-changing experiences

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Most politically involved South Africans can think back on at least one experience that transformed their understanding of our situation and shaped their commitment. Rita Easton, of the Natal Coastal Region, reflects on her life-changing experiences.



Like other white South African women who were brought up in a privileged environment, I have never known what it is like to live in a perpetual state of fear and deprivation.

When I married the pattern did not change. There was always enough food. Always enough for the pleasures around us.

Today, with our children married and gone, the same ease of living has not altered.

But in many respects we, as people, have changed. For while in our youth we took what was given to us — our privileges — for granted we have since undergone a transition which has broadened our

outlook, widened our perspective and, above all, evoked a level of concern we had never before experienced.

Yet one of the things we still tend to think about (and even feel guilty about), is the time we took to reach this transformation. At that time we liked to think of ourselves as liberals.

Yet, like others who believe themselves to be significant in our 'classed' society, we tended to be very tentative about building lasting relationships with people of colour. If and when we did, it was only on a sporadic basis due, in part, to our being overly sympathetic and, at worst, paternalistic.

We still remained locked within the inhibiting ambit of our personal identity and fears. While we were prepared to acknowledge the need for some sort of 'political upliftment' for blacks, we were subconsciously resisting their total liberation. So we tended to speak about a qualified vote (for them); required standards of education (for them); and, just as unwittingly, a patronising selective magnanimity, entitling 'them' to become members of 'our' clubs, play sport with 'us', use 'our' beaches, etc.

It was in the midst of these beliefs that I came to join the Black Sash, although I was not yet in tune with its principles.

A number of factors precipitated my joining. I had assumed a sort of self-assigned do-gooder status in a

tightly-knit parochial community (we were still living on the lower South Coast of Natal, then). My liberally-styled letters to the press, and my concern for all the racist incidents which continually seemed to pervade that area, led to my being sent a circular from the University of Natal, informing me of a conference planned for September 1982 on the effects of detention and security legislation. It was a subject I knew hardly anything about but one that had begun to gnaw at me.

So with my R25 paid, I was for the first time exposed to the real tyrannies which were being used to silence the majority. I remember being shocked, sickened, and sometimes either in, or very close to, tears. Each paper seemed to be more harrowing than the next. Solutions were not given, only facts. And to me, this was a very sobering experience and a stark revelation of the brutal mechanics which had been designed to quell resistance.

I was prompted to write to the Black Sash in Durban and express my desire to join the organisation. Once I was accepted, a lot began to change for me.

Our move to Durban hastened this process, for it allowed me upfront involvement and the type of educative influences I needed. As my metamorphosis continued my fears weakened, my feelings changed; but, above all, I was able to abandon the tendency to categorise blacks, to think of 'them' as a collective entity rather than as individuals.

This was an important step in my learning process.

Then I became involved in the advice office. There, my experiences evoked deeper emotions: despair, depression, and a huge compounding anger.

But more markedly, both my husband and I found we had become less and less interested in those who had once been our social acquaintances. Outside diversions became increasingly minimal. Our lives now centred on a different understanding of reality.

We do not have regrets about this self-styled yet, to us, relevant alienation. It happened. And for this we are grateful. □