

About dream horses and REAL hopes...

Through the early morning mist swirling like tear-gas, I saw a white horse in the lush green field next to the school where I taught. A young boy stood talking animatedly to this magnificent creature. For a magic moment the world was transfigured and it was no longer a time of war. I imagined the boy riding that mythical horse beyond that mad and ugly time.

I walked closer and the mist thinned. The horse was tired and grey and already its eyes bore the mark of death of a lifetime of hard labour pulling the scrap dealers cart. The wire halter around its neck left its bloody mark.

A metaphor for our age. The sordid tacky reality of so many magnificent dreams laid bare.

A police van stood outside the school gates. It was the winter of 1985. The festival of mass rallies that was the first phase of the school boycott on the Cape Flats had turned dark. The increasingly vicious police action found its violent response.

Every day the barricades would burn on the highway next to the school. The half bricks would smash into commercial vehicles. The Casspirs would roar up and the game of hide and seek cum life and death with the 30 or so boys belonging to the school "action squad" would begin.

The students lined the school corridors to the beat of Michael Jackson's "Killer" blaring out from a ghetto blaster as they watched the action. The adrenalin rush, the orgy of action, the spiral spinning ever faster towards an inevitable conclusion.

One Monday in September 1985 towards midday, a farm lorry disengaged itself from the jam of vehicles piling up some 100 metres from the barricade. It drove slowly towards the burning tyres. The boys on the road rushed back into the school yard. They had seen the farmer pointing a shotgun out of the window of this vehicle before. A lone figure could not get back through the hole in the fence in time. A shot went off. The slight figure staggered and fell. After an age of silence a score of screaming children rushed out and picked him up carrying him above them with his arms outstretched like on a cross. He was pronounced dead at the day clinic. At the boy's home later I remember his mother saying "He was a good boy," over and over again.

To every death its meaning. It is the essence of our humanness that we seek to attach some significance to a death to affirm life. But for me, then, I could see no meaning whatsoever.

The boy was 16 years old and had dropped out of school some time before. He was not political. He had no job. He came to the school one morning to jorl with his friends and ended up on the wrong road at the wrong time with a stone in his hand.

The inquest found that the farmer who did the shooting was not culpable for the death. The lawyers representing the family did not attend because they had mislaid the file.

During the following year the naive political idealism of 1985 faded into the past and the gangster graffiti systematically covered the "viva ANC"s and "long live MK"s.

There was a girl who would walk the school corridors with a sad and desperate look. She had been the bright girl of her Std 7 year. She had walked with a swagger. She had hung out with

main guys of the joint SRCs and would lead the freedom songs. Now she wandered the school, sometimes strutting into a classroom to criticise the relevance of what was taught. She was the accusing angel, the grim reminder of the betrayal of youthful idealism and bravery.

"Nobody can tell that girl nothing," rang the complaints in the staffroom. She never finished Std 8. During that long dark year, three boys in the Std 7 class next to mine were killed in gang-related violence.

Today we stand on the brink of democracy. The older generations gradually reasserted their authority and the role of youth in the political dynamic became increasingly marginal. The 12 to 18-year-olds will not have the vote in the new South Africa. This is as it should be. Yet. The township youth only moved into the political sphere because society did not care for them. We face that problem still.

A language is emerging. It talks of the Lost Generation or Dealing with the Youth Problem. It is not a constructive language. At best it is static and fatalistically pessimistic. At worst it has a racist core, a stereotype assumption of this huge mass of uneducated, unemployable, embittered, violent black youth with nothing to offer but trouble.

The on-going revolt of the youth of the townships unleashed in Soweto 1976 in all its bravery and comradeship, in all its viciousness and terror, was the decisive factor in bringing us to where we are now. It was that which fuelled all the other pressures that pushed us to negotiation. It came with its terrible price in blood and blighted lives. We do have a damaged society. The young have suffered most. But humanity has the power to recover from the worst traumas. The human spirit lives on, it enables us to transcend all horrors.

When I ask today about whether that death on the highway was utterly futile, this I understand. That it was through so many futile deaths that the possibility was created of building a society where the young don't need dream horses to grasp real opportunities.

It is in building such a society that so many deaths without meaning will find their significance and we can all begin to live fully again. There is no alternative. We must impose a meaning on what, perhaps, has none. We must draw strength from the nameless, faceless pain. We must also remember.

The boy who died that Monday in September six years ago was named Moegamat Ebrahim. Long live Moegamat Ebrahim and all those forgotten thousands who died in so many violent and sordid ways.

The girl? She walked up to me the other day in the civic centre. She was there with a delegation of workers from her factory to protest against working and health conditions. "The struggle for the new South Africa must continue," she said with a huge ironic smile and she was again the bright sparkling person I had once known. And then she looked sad.

"But you know," she said, "I wish I didn't have to work in the factory."

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