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# The Last Word

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## Renegotiating Trust

I pulled up at the gate of this rather impressive, huge property in Bryanston. I had called the owners five hours earlier - responding to an advertisement they had placed in *The Star*, renting out their cottage.

I got out of the car, and was met by two bull-terriers. Later the gardener. And I was right on time. At least I could talk to the gardener. So I told him my story, and he disappeared for a long time before I heard a sound on the intercom at the gate: "You are here about the cottage? Sorry, but it was taken about an hour ago."

Feeling extremely humiliated, angry and worst of all, helpless to do anything about my situation, I proceeded to my next appointment - in Rivonia. I was not too surprised that both gates were bolted, and there was no-one in sight. I had made this appointment on the phone the day before, and the lady of the house had kept kindly advising me against her cottage because "I must tell you, it's very expensive", and "it must be so far out for you, I don't know why you would want to live here". On suspecting that the problem was my accent and my consequential blackness, I had asked this lady if the problem was indeed my blackness, to which she screamed: "Not at all, I am not like that at all."

I have to convince myself that she is a naturally rude person who bolts her gates and does not meet her guests whether they are black or white. Still reeling from my earlier experience, I waited anyway; if just to get a fuller story of how white people were behaving just over a year after the February 2.



*Nokwanda Sithole is editor of Tribute Magazine.*

She finally emerged. Not the kind of person I would like to live with anyway. She looked like something out of a horror movie.

"Is this your car?" was the first thing she said. "Very nice."

"A friend ... well ... a friend of a friend came a while ago and I had to give the place to her. I didn't even think you'd arrive."

At that time, I was already opening the car door and getting ready to leave.

On and on it went, until I spoke to an agent who said he knew someone who would accommodate a black professional. I couldn't stay with this new-

find, unfortunately. At our very first meeting, he wanted to know how many boyfriends I have. Or if I was going to bring my father and uncles and brothers to come and squat in his place. He linked that sentence which cast members of my family as squatters to another, referring to how worried everyone was about the increase of crime in the neighbourhood.

I started forming mental pictures of my relatives breaking down doors ... coming out carrying the loot of stolen TV sets and video recorders. I respect members of my family so much that those images hurt me deeply. But, as I left, I could not help thinking that if anyone broke into his house, it would serve him so right.

I have shared these experiences with a number of black acquaintances, and have uncovered even more horror stories related particularly to the search for accommodation - all happening at a time when we thought it was only the CP which was opposed to the imminent demise of the Group Areas Act.

All these people do not know me, yet they treat me with so much disdain. I have to admit that these experiences seriously clouded my opinion of the integrity of white people as a whole. At a certain stage, it was no longer "that person" who was mistreating me, but "whites". None of the people I came into contact with said no, we do not want your kind here; "I'm not a racist, I'll just bolt the gates and get my dogs out so you won't be able to get anywhere near me."

Yet if they had bothered to find out, they would have discovered that I am as worried about the upsurge of crime as they are. I am as opposed to promiscuity as they are. Indeed, I am as committed to the maintenance of high

living standards as they are.

The government was recently lauded for "finally liberating the land". With the small print came a clause about the protection of "shared values and lifestyles". Communities will still have the privilege of dictating "norms and standards" about who is desirable or not for the neighbourhood.

We are supposed to believe - after all our experiences - that the clause is really about standards. I don't. I think these clauses are about locking me out.

We live in a very trying period when indeed, apartheid is going to go from the statute books and unless we do something about it, we will end up continuing to further the aims of apartheid by continuing to practise the attitudes which have led to so much distrust in the past.

There is talk in South Africa at the moment of working towards establishing a collective South African consciousness. This will not see the light of day, while white South Africans bolt their car doors at the sight of a black man - however decent he seems. While white people clutch at their purses and wallets at the sight of a black person. While "black woman" is still associated with promiscuity in white minds. While they do not verbalise those fears, and merely make a lot of public statements which are "correct" for the post-February 2 period, and go home and practise the opposite.

The recent Gulf War was a telling experience. Many black people supported Sadaam Hussein, not because his strong-arm tactics against Kuwait were correct, but because white South Africans and George Bush were against him.

We will continue to knock ourselves over backward trying to find areas of disagreement unless we firstly confess our negative attitudes, and then find out whether these are wrong or whether we need to start working towards adapting to the next race's way of life, which we may not be accustomed to.

I know a lot of people who will not go public with the view that sanctions have run their course and the time to end them and begin reconstructing has come. They will not go public purely because that is a "white" thought.

The black person in the United States - decades after he was freed on paper - is still not accorded public trust by white locals.

Author Laurence Thomas, a Professor of Philosophy at Syracuse University and an affiliate member of the Political Science Department, has had a lot of personal experiences which evidences this lack of trust.

More recently he was at a midwestern university, dressed in tweed jacket and tie, and reading a bulletin board outside the conference hall.

Four campus officers were summoned to investigate.

"What on earth was I reported as - 10 feet tall in military garb?" he asks. "Or did someone say, 'there is a black man'? ... Now when was the last time that a headline read, 'A group of roving black males in tweed jackets and ties attack white person'?"

Thomas, 41, author of *Living morally: a psychology of American slavery and the holocaust*, argues that there is nothing trivial about enjoying public trust.

"... for to do so, is to bask in the recog-

nition that others expect one to live morally. And this recognition is part and parcel of how each and every person comes to take her or himself seriously as a responsible moral being.

"On the other hand, when - as with blacks - an entire people are denied the public trust, the result is a very deep psychic scar of relentless moral disconfirmation. Every black has this scar. It is simply that blacks differ in their resources to cope with it. The successful black whose attention is drawn from his supermarket shopping by the white who unsubtly reveals her suspicion of him, has the emotional salve of good fortune to ease the pain of this scar which has been freshly pricked again.

"But some have no emotional salve. Thus the scar of distrust festers and becomes the fountainhead of low self-esteem and self-hate. Indeed, to paraphrase the venerable Apostle Paul, those who would do right find that they cannot. This should come as no surprise, however. For it is rare for anyone to live morally without the right sort of moral and social affirmation. And to ask this of blacks is to ask what is very nearly psychologically impossible."

If I cannot walk into a shop without an over-zealous salesman or even security guard following close on my heels, the situation must be so much worse for those without what Thomas calls an emotional salve.

And without a concerted effort to redress the injustices which have put many in our communities in a rut; without a high degree of social affirmation, the walls of apartheid will crumble, and the rest will stay the same.

## **NOKWANDA SITHOLE**