

A Morning in Africa - Lessons Learned

by

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1:21 AM

Good morning. I'm Scott Braspenninx. My message today is about an experience I had about 10 years ago while working as an environmental engineer in South Africa. This experience changed how I think about life. The title says Lessons Learned, but the learning is not over if I do a good job of telling this story to you today.

To prepare, take the next few moments to relax and open your minds to the scenes I'll be describing for you. Together let's take a few deep breaths and during these observe the environment around us, and also what each of our senses are telling us right now. We are sharing more than space and air. Take note of how this place sounds, appears, smells, how the air tastes, and how you and the things around you feel. I like this place and your company, and each of my senses finds this place pleasant.

So, the story. I'm in South Africa doing an environmental audit of a manufacturing plant I have environmental and chemical responsibilities for. This plant is in a developing area called Bronkhorstspuit, not far from the nation's capitol Pretoria. Nearby are dense residential areas that supply much of the labor to this industrial park, the working poor employed by these companies.

It was sunny Friday fall morning with cold that would disappear in exchange for a warmer afternoon. I was with Peter Manganye, a young environmental manager, well-dressed and of native African ethnicity who I'd known for several years. This day was an easy day after four days of intense but successful auditing of the environmental management system. The plant makes leather for automobile interiors from cattle hides, a chemical-intensive and potentially polluting process. We were outside in back of the plant, an area filled with chemical containers, forklifts, waste bins and trucks loading and unloading.

Peter arranged for us to audit the licensed landfill used for disposal of the plant's solid wastes, about an hour away through the countryside. We would follow a waste hauling truck, without the driver's knowledge, to observe. I was introduced to the waste truck driver, a dark-skinned well dressed man in uniform with nice leather work boots. I didn't anticipate any problems for today. Both Peter and

this driver to me were fine examples of hard-working citizens in a new and visionary post-apartheid South Africa. A quick lunch with Peter after this road trip, and I was off to a weekend in Amsterdam on my way to another week of auditing in England.

We hopped into Peter's Honda. Just a couple of minutes down the highway we noticed the tarp flapping on the waste truck, and leather dust leaking out onto the road and into the ditch. We considered the impact of this pollution, a fairly inert material, and decided not to pull the truck over and reveal our covert mission. This disappointing start caused both of us to wonder what else would go wrong this day.

About five miles further down the road, the driver ahead signaled to turn right. Peter sunk in his seat and shook his head, obviously distressed. He said, "This is bad, this is really, really bad." Now this day was getting much, much worse.

We turned too, and followed at quite a long distance. A couple of miles further, at a thick stand of trees and bushes in one valley, the truck turned left and disappeared down a path. As we also turned onto the path, I saw and then smelled the smoke of wood, plastic, hair and other putrid substances burning. The smoke hung within the trees and the entire valley. We wound through a hundred yards of bushes and trees to an opening and up a hill. Without having been here, I knew this was the illegal landfill I had heard about and that we had made very clear was to be strictly avoided.

The waste truck was now backing up to the hill's crest. As we reached the flat hilltop, a sickening spectacle emerged before my eyes. Before me was at least a 10 acre valley filled nearly to the top with rubbish and waste of every sort. While I couldn't comprehend their meaning or purpose, I saw little huts of wood and other rubbish built all along the part of the waste mass where no truck could dump on them. None were much more than about four feet high and eight feet square. Fires were burning in the waste and their smoke along with the odors of decay hit me like a hard punch through the open car window, a sensory overload that still haunts me. While we have with us a cauldron of hope, this was a cauldron of hell. This day just kept getting worse.

My brain didn't want to process the sight as real, but at least 20 humans were gathered in groups of 2 and 3 around these toxic-smelling fires around the waste pile. There were no cars that brought them here, or that would soon take them away. The truth sunk in that these people belonged to this place, as bad as it was, this was their home. I had seen the squatters at construction sites, but I could have never imagined this. We parked and got out to witness this scene that seemed so unreal to me.

About a third of these people were women and two carried babies in filthy slings of cloth hung over their necks and one shoulder. Staying close to the fires for warmth, they picked through the rotting, stinking mass for bits of metal and glass, and maybe other things, piling them on cardboard and other flat pieces of debris. Children of various ages, my saddest sight ever, were out there, generally in pairs trying to contribute with their own work or playing with treasures discovered in the pile that day. This place would certainly consume any child not experienced with its hazards within minutes, or seconds. Some of the people wore shoes, others had rags tied around their feet. How could I even be here?

I looked closely at what comprised these people's home. I saw residential trash, food waste, construction debris, industrial and commercial waste, chemical and pesticide containers, tires, appliances, jagged metal, glass, rotting animal carcasses and things from the tannery we had just left. At least some of this waste was chemically hazardous. Waste not acceptable at the licensed landfill ended up here. There was no daily cover, no dirt spread to cover older waste, nothing to fill in the voids, no machinery to pack it down, nothing to reduce the vermin and the rats, or to prevent sinkholes and waste slides from occurring. It was like climbing into the nastiest of half-full garbage cans that could be found, except about a million times bigger. The dumping here was not just a recent thing, it appeared to have been going on for decades.

The waste truck was 50 yards down the perimeter and preparing to dump. Half of the men and a few women scrambled to the waste truck as the box was raised. How they didn't get cut and bleed to death, or succumb to infections, I'll never understand. Maybe some had. They gathered to see the contents and determine whether digging would be worthwhile or not. The waste in the truck steamed in the cold air as it slid out and spread by gravity onto the mass. It caught three of the closest men out of position. Two of these men sprung out of the way but the

third stumbled. My heart skipped as it appeared he would be covered by tons of material. A quick grab and hard yank saved him from burial. The truck driver didn't react at all, not even slightly. As the waste box lowered the people returned to their picking and sorting.

I asked Peter how it came to be that these people are here. He shook his head and said that some would say they are here by choice, but he did not agree. He said possibly they didn't feel there was any other role for them besides what this place offered. I sensed from Peter and others in this country that an issue of class or caste sentenced certain people to the lowest rungs of life's ladder. By this time the stench had become a taste. I had to breathe through my mouth, and the flavor of this stench was making me spit at least a couple of times per minute.

Two pickup trucks had pulled in, contractors dumping their job site debris. They were quick to unload their trucks and get out of there before any of the dweller could close in on them. A couple of nice cars pulled through, staying down on the drive below. Without coming to a complete stop, they dumped what appeared to be fruit and other waste food items out the window onto the dusty polluted ground. One of the landfill women ran down there and waved to another to come down. Using a layer of their highly soiled garments like a basket they sorted and collected from what was there, this was how they got their food.

The truck driver hadn't noticed Peter and I. He had advanced the truck forward from the edge. The driver rolled the windows down, took off his boots found a pillow and laid down in the truck cab for a nap. I could barely hear his radio playing as the landfill become very silent. The man came up to the cab to ask the driver if he could turn up the radio so they could all hear the music. The driver yelled terribly in rage at this man, who was frightened and ran away quickly onto the landfill. Then I heard the radio go silent. Peter said the napping driver now had two hours to kill, since the round trip from the licensed landfill should have taken at least that much longer. I tried to block out what I might be inclined to do had I not been in a foreign country.

If I had imagined hell on Earth this could be the scene. I hadn't seen people trying to survive in such desperate, horrible conditions. People so ultimately filthy and without means. There were no controls in this place, no gates to shut, no attendant, no signs, no buildings, no running water, no bathrooms, no phone.

Out past the waste mass a small creek flowed along the far edge of the valley's flat bottom, through a drain culvert under the road and across a field to placed unknown. I wondered how many livestock and even people depended on this severely impacted waterway for survival. I shuttered at the thought of the rats and other disease-carrying vectors this place harbored, how overrun with them it must become in darkness, and what things must be like in the hot months of African summer.

Finally, I couldn't take it any more. I lost it and cursed out a storm of profanity. Not in these words I asked many questions and made many statements. How could they do this to us? How could this place even exist? How dare this waste hauling company defy us, deceive us, lie to us, cheat us and go against our strict requirement to use only the licensed landfill? I was fully ready to get very violent with anyone I could blame for all of this. It wasn't really my intention to say these things out loud, but I did, and very loudly I looked over at Peter and saw him staring down at the ground between his feet, shaking a little as he stood. What was supposed to be a final relaxing morning in South Africa had now become something worse than on charity infomercials, or in the pages of National Geographic. Except those I could shut off or set down, this horror was one I had to keep. It had become quite a bad day.

My self-absorbed, self-pitying rant subsided. My heart was aching for these people. How could we as a society, do this to these people? My colorless soul had never felt more embarrassed in its white, male, American privileged shell than it did here. I was part of a society that would cause these people to live in the gross discarded residue of other people's lives, and in the toxic leftovers of the industrial machine. I was ashamed that I wasn't affected even more deeply, not realizing the full extent to which I had been.

During all of this thought I hadn't even noticed that now Christian music was being shared from Peter's car stereo. I heard the car door close behind me, and Peter set down a cardboard box and put on Tyvek footies over his nice leather shoes. The box was full of brand-new baseball caps. The custom caps were intended for the members of Peter's business club at the University.

Peter handed me a half-dozen of the caps and pointed towards a group standing slightly off the waste mass to our left. Then he swiftly leapt onto the waste mass

with the box of hats and went around distributing them to people one by one. I walked over to my group and handed out the few hats I had. I've never seen people show more happiness or grace. They sensed I was still shy and even scared of their personally contaminated state. I think I held my breath until I had turned around and achieved some separation before taking another breath.

Peter was far different from me. These were his people, they shared language and heritage, and each of them shook his hand or shared cultural gestures that while unfamiliar to me seemed very sincere. He ended up having hats for all but two or three of them. Those who didn't get a hat thanked Peter as much as those who did. After the hats were gone, Peter ran back carrying the empty box and put it into his car. He wasn't willing to leave that piece of trash at a landfill that was illegal. Peter had showed me how to be a genuine person, his greatness in those minutes was nearly overwhelming to witness.

Looking at the people, I saw a scene like children on Christmas morning. They were all in one large group now, talking and laughing loudly. They were showing off and modeling their hats for each other, experimenting with the different ways they could be worn. I wasn't seeing any filth or desperation in this moment. These people worked, played, wept and celebrated together. They looked at, and looked after, each other. They were a community of human souls. Were these hats the only new things they have ever received?. I stood there a bit unable to move, sensing Peter was at the car waiting for me so we could leave.

When I got into the car, Peter, quickly and in fear of my wrath, expressed he would take immediate action for this injustice, that the landfill audit could wait until another day. I wanted to tell Peter he was completely absolved of any wrongdoing in my judgment and within my dotted-line authority as his overseer, and many other things. Instead I just said, "OK, it's going to be OK."

The dwellers headed down the path towards the landfill entrance. They formed lines of equal length on each side of the path and began waving, dancing and singing. Peter thought they were honoring us in a traditional way upon our departure. While I didn't feel deserving, they were doing that with all of their heart and no inhibition. Smiles upon all, they looked straight at us as we approached. Each extended an arm and reached out towards the path with their hand open and facing us. Peter and I each rolled down our windows and

extended our arm out. As we slowly crept forward, each of these glorious people looked us straight in the eyes smiling and touched our hands, palm to palm and sliding until our fingers parted, repeating this touch with each successive person in the line. The women with babies held them so their babies could see us, not just so that we could see them, and held the baby's hands to touch ours as we passed.

I could not get out of my mind the thought, or fact, that I was looking directly at God in the eyes of these people. I had never felt that before and was so completely humbled by it. These people were more outward and complete in their happiness and love than anyone I had seen. It wasn't just that Peter had given them the hats, but also that we saw them. We had acknowledged these people's existence as fellow humans.

They were now so beautiful to me, completely opposite from my first impression. The women had put dry flowers and weeds growing right there in their hair to decorate themselves. I hadn't noticed this before, but each adult wore a crucifix necklace that had been skillfully crafted by hand from discarded threads. I could still see their pain, not unlike that of the happy earthquake survivor pulled from the rubble three days after the quake, in a rescue shown over and over on the TV. As I looked back for a final glimpse of these precious souls, as we went out of sight down the path, they had joined together in a circle of prayer.

I was no longer thinking of what had brought me to that place on that morning. I turned towards Peter and said to him "You just did the single most incredible thing I have ever seen anybody do." I was surprised when he looked at me with a big frown. He waved his index finger at face level between us and said, "No, no, no, you can give me NO credit for ANY of that. I did only what God wanted me to do, and so deserve and accept no praise for what He does. I will speak no more of that."

And he didn't, ever again with me, nor me with him. I had to respect what he wished. I sat there silent for the rest of the trip back to the plant pretending to write notes in my binder. In my head I was trying to make some sense, any sense, of what I had just witnessed. Whether truly warranted by what had actually happened, or largely constructed by my own mind and my heart, I just had both the worst and best experiences of my life.

These were not people on the TV or in a movie. They were real, the result of a human society, a culture, a national policy, a lack of caring, a lack of doing, selfish attitudes, my employer, and me in part. They were for a few minutes my greatest horror, and then were a few minutes later the dearest of new friends. They loved me when I hated myself, and in doing so made me feel a sense of being "just human" that I had never felt so strongly before but wish to hang onto forever. They knew things that I could learn from them far more valuable than anything they could learn from me. I felt connected to this planet and these people. I loved these people. I felt the Earth loved us all, and that God loved us all. We were all part of one thing. Since that day when thinking about protecting the environment, I don't think just about animals and plants and trees and fish, but I think of those people, especially these people.

The waste hauling company did have hell to pay, the illegal landfill remained in use by others. As I had expected, many in management questioned Peter's diligence and lack of foresight. It wasn't Peter's fault or my fault, but our mistake was making an assumption. As much as I was able, I praised and acknowledged Peter to those who would listen, and advocated for a solution to the problem of that illegal landfill and its people.

I think about that morning a lot, and I'm still learning from it. If that landfill was licensed, where would those people be? Do the kids get any education? Where do those people get water? Did they ever leave there at night? Are they documented at all? What happens when one of them dies? How could I make things better for them? Why aren't all people who live with more, which is practically everyone, happier every day? Was it God that I saw in their eyes that day? So many questions, so much to learn.

Both Peter and I moved on from the company not very long after that morning, and lost contact with each other. Not long ago, I looked up Peter Manganye on the internet. I was very pleased with what I found. He was pictured and quoted in an article about environmental health in Johannesburg, South Africa. Peter is now the director of that large city's environmental health department. I'm confident Peter is still doing God's work, accepts little praise for what is accomplished, but self-imposes much accountability onto himself for any

shortcomings. It seems that he also was profoundly affected and changed by that morning, and probably by other times in his life there.

Over time I have come to realize what troubles me most about that morning, what grabbed and choked my soul. It wasn't the despair in which these landfill-dwelling people found themselves in, or that using an illegal landfill showed so little regard for the Earth. It was not even the overloading of my body's senses with extreme unpleasantness in that place. What bothered me the most is that nobody on the scene that day besides Peter and I seemed to care about what was happening there. For the others it was just a normal thing, the way things are.

I cannot allow myself to become complacent with what was wrong there, in my own community, or anywhere. Even when I can't do anything to help, that doesn't justify forgetting or dismissing or looking away. Just because something is wrong every day, and just because others have stopped caring about it, does not make that thing any less wrong. I can never stop asking how and why bad things are occurring and how and when improvements will be made. I need to do even the little things that I can, because those little things help people make it through until the big things happen. I must use all of my senses to detect what is right, and what is wrong, in each environment I find myself in.

What I'm feeling is well captured in this quote by Martin Luther King Jr.:

The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people.

When I hear the seven principles that Unitarian Universalist congregations affirm and promote, I honestly think of those landfill-dwelling people first, and how much they could benefit from those principles being followed by others. Then I next think about all of you, the good people you all are, and the good things you all do. Then I think of all of the good people in this entire world.

I ask myself, what if all the good people just carried out God's will for them? Or since some don't believe, and most don't know for sure about God, what if we imagined God did exist and we did what we imagined He would want? Or, what if we just put an extra "o" in God, and instead of worrying about doing the God-willed things, we simply did what we know to be good? What if we all just did our best in trying?

Maybe I should strive to be more like that group of landfill-dwelling people, who didn't base their happiness or faith on having lots of stuff, an easy life or the promise of a brighter future here on Earth. I also want to be a lot more like Peter Manganye, and a lot less like that waste truck driver.

I'm thinking I should live my life by trying to be an example of this, and to appreciate all that I have.

To wrap up my talk today, here are just a few statistics I thought were worth sharing with all of you:

The current human population of Earth is around 7.3 billion people. In 50 years, the population will be over 12 billion people.

1.4 billion people live without electricity

Almost 1 billion people live without access to clean water.

2.5 billion people, one third of all humans, live without adequate sanitation

1 billion humans live with severe chronic hunger

Over 80% of all humans on Earth live on less than \$10 per day.

2.4 billion people, nearly one third, live on less than \$2 per day..

Each day, 1000 to 1500 people die as a result of religious based persecution, far too many.

Each day about 21,000 children die, with 15,000 to 16,000 of these deaths coming from hunger-related causes.

By now I'm sure that many of you have realized the people suffering in my story, and most of those whose struggles are described by these statistics I've shared are not white people. The shade of one's skin has no bearing on whether that person is good, nor their inherent worth and dignity. But unfortunately skin shade still in general has a big bearing on how a person is treated, and correlates strongly with other circumstances of a person's birth and life. Black Lives Matter. Lives of all colors, shapes, forms, species, ages and places matter. The lives of everybody and everything besides "white humans" and maybe their pet dogs and cats need to matter far more to this world, this country, and this community. Matter more than what they have throughout much of history and especially yet today.

We all know what it is like to bleed, and we have all experienced pain. Therefore we CAN relate to the suffering of others, and in almost all cases we CAN do

something to help. Often, to the question of "how?", the answer can be found blowing in the wind.

Please join me in honoring those landfill-dwelling people by being happy in our immediate environment, in this place, together, today.

Thank you.