

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KBP-10

Institute Speech

38 Magnolia Lane  
Princeton, New Jersey  
May 31, 1983

Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
Executive Director  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
Wheelock House  
4 West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Peter,

It snowed in Johannesburg in September. It was the first time that had happened in seventeen years. The unexpected snowstorm coincided with another unusual arrival in South Africa; a young black writer and fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs by the name of Kendal Price.

Having just come from the humid warmth of late summer in America, physically I felt the cold quite a bit. Emotionally however, I was as hot as a poker straight from the fire. My eyes and ears were wide open and I felt and reacted to everything I saw.

Driving through Johannesburg during the storm I remember feeling as if I had just stepped into a real life scene from a Dickens novel. It was so terribly bleak. The snowstorm had caught all by surprise, and while whites left their cars to playfully romp in the snow that some of them had never seen in their lifetime, the blacks--their clothes dark with wetness--stood huddled and sometimes barefoot in the ankle-deep slush, looking cold and miserable. For the first time in my life I cursed the snow and my inability to control the weather. When a white woman threw a snowball that hit a completely soaked and shivering black man in the head, I cursed her silently, but had to stop and think for a moment when I was about to curse my inability to do anything. I really could do something, but what I had already decided by coming to South Africa as an honorary white, by planning on staying for two years was that I would not do anything. Thinking about what I might do for that uninjured but cold and unhappy black man, or what I might say to that cackling white woman snug and warm in her BMW was irrelevant now. "You're in South Africa my boy. And if you want to stay and do what you came here to do--observe, that is--you had better remember you left a lot more at home than your hat."

In the first twenty-four hours of my nearly two year stay in South Africa I faced the painful reality of what it meant to have become an observer. I would be restrained from reaching out, and for me that was to be restrained from one aspect of living I felt was fundamental to my being human. I never imagined there would be such a high cover charge just to watch this show.

But watch I did, and in the beginning it was almost too much to bear. As the days went by I was astonished at the number of black people there were in comparison to whites. In the all-white suburban neighborhood where I stayed at first I could not believe the number of blacks tending the yards, washing cars, cleaning the streets, attending to white children and working in the shops. Dozens and dozens more waited in long lines for buses, or hurried along the roadsides with large shopping bags in their hands. The image was too chillingly like what I imagined the American south to have been like during slavery.

I found to my surprise that after venturing into this environment I would spend another day or two almost entirely inside the guesthouse. It was a lot to absorb all at once. No less tangibly than I needed to adjust to Johannesburg's mile-high altitude, I needed time each day to adjust my vision to a society operating in such stark black and white terms.

On my arrival two things occurred which drastically accelerated the speed with which I approached immersing myself into South African society. The first was the unexpected news that my one year research visa was only good for 90 days. The second was the news from Mafikeng, Bophuthatswana that no Afrikaans speaking family could be found who was willing to have me live with them to learn the language.

Realizing that a course of slow introduction might be abruptly curtailed by the Department of Interior I changed plans drastically.

Capitalizing on the few contacts I had made I chose a direction, acquired a car, and took to the road. I had met a fellow in the South African Army, and on the basis of his introductions I drove to Windhoek South West Africa/Namibia to talk to his friends still in the service there.

I was both surprised and comforted to find out there was not just a small number of soldiers totally opposed to the war. A few of the legal officers with whom I spent time talking were adamant about the amount of frustration and disgust felt by many of the white South African troops fighting on the border. These same men were convinced the so-called "colored" or mixed race troops were only in the Army because of the incredibly high unemployment in their areas. The black troops were either Portugese-speaking ex-Angolans, politically naive Namibian Bushmen, or in the smallest percentage, rural blacks from the republic.

The parallels between America's decade-long Vietnam War and South Africa's 17 year old bush war were many and strong. Pretoria's escalating belief in their military gadgetry, increasing reliance on body-counts as a measurement of success, and totally unrealistic appraisals of their support by the local population was a discouraging reminder that even recent history repeats itself.

From Windhoek I returned to Johannesburg. I was now among a circle of white South Africans so out of touch with even what was going on right around them I could not possibly expect them to know or care what was occurring in Namibia. And they did not.

After applying for an extension of my research visa and residence permit I made a trip to Cape Town with one of these stellar examples of animated human semi-consciousness. The visit to Cape Town included a stay with what would qualify as poor whites and those of the upper crust. After a week spent split between the two, I would have to say I much prefer the soggy bottom.

Back in Johannesburg a week later I celebrated Christmas in the excruciatingly awkward company of two young white couple who could not avoid using the term "bloody Kaffirs." Translated into American English it means "damn niggers!" However, I was already developing confidence in my self control, and I managed to utter not a word of protest to these albiet articulate, but nonetheless complete ignoramuses. These were supposed to be learning experiences I consoled myself, and meanwhile wrapped my heart in an idiotic grin of complicity. Even at this stage I knew I was more involved than I had ever planned, and that an objective American black in South Africa was inherently a contradiction.

It was in January that the steel-armed might of the State introduced itself formally into my Fellowship. When I had left Windhoek in December I had made what would turn out to be the first major error of my visit; I had left my working notebook behind when I checked out of the hotel. The staff found it the same day, and although they claimed to have sent it I would not receive it for another three months. During that time however, the one couple whose name and address was in the notebook and whom I had also visited, were in turn paid a visit by burglars remarkably uninterested in stealing anything. Their house was ransacked, all papers and books searched, and nothing stolen. I thus incurred my first truly personal debt. My presence may have only been the catalyst, but it was still an active part in someone else's heartache. My new friends were devastated, but they somehow managed to direct their anger elsewhere and we continued to socialize. They were unique because they refused to be manipulated into rejecting me.

About this time a southern African specialist who was also one of my Institute advisors paid an unexpected visit and discovered me in this condition of technical limbo. With it now having been months since I had applied for the new permits I was literally unable to make any long-term plans. As a way of possibly rectifying this my advisor introduced me to a unique Afrikaner friend of his whom I will call Hans. (Pseudonyms are often necessary to protect others beside the speaker.)

Hans is a well known writer and editor who openly admitted he would assist the South African security branch if he felt the welfare of South Africa was at stake. It was felt if he got to know me and gained confidence in my legitimacy as a Fellow of the Institute, then he might make the appropriate phone calls in my behalf. In this department however, even he and my advisor's relationship had certain limitations. He said he would consider helping me out only after I got rejected, but in the meantime he would try and get to know me and show me around a bit.

Through Hans I was introduced to a broad spectrum of Afrikaners. The following month was filled with countless late-night boozy discussions on South Africa, and numerous arguments about who and what I was. To a person, the Afrikaners considered my claim of blackness to be some form of humorous intellectualized exaggeration. A person with my education and background could not possibly be a genuine black they maintained. I discreetly tried to tell them this logic only proved they were a bit soft upstairs.

They indiscreetly told me racist jokes to prove according to them--if I laughed--that I could not possibly be black. These discussions often gave me a pain in the head. What was worse however, was that many of these people were also convinced I was a CIA agent.

Hans, in the middle of a discussion weeks after we had met said about a comment of mine, "that's interesting knowledge for an English major from Dartmouth." "Hans," I said, "my school had something called distributive requirements. I studied a few things besides literature." He turned quickly, and staring me straight in the eye asked, "are you sure you didn't learn that down at Langley?"

Another Afrikaner acquaintance met a man who stayed in the same hotel as me, and knew who I was. This acquaintance asked the man what he thought of me and fellow replied, "I think he's a spy." And this man had never even talked with me.

At the risk of doing the same thing I charge them with I would have to say that a large percentage of the Afrikaners I met had a discouraging tendency to form and express an opinion based on the scantiest information.

They also had the capacity--when they felt it was all right to be frank with me--to be more personally insulting to my face than any other group of people I have met in my life. Being forced to be diplomatic in session after session of such polite verbal abuse I came to what I believe is a true understanding of how wars get started. Quite simply, normally reasonable men decide to kill insufferable dinner partners.

My contact with these Johannesburg Afrikaners ended abruptly when my permits and long-lost notebook arrived within three days of one another. So, it was off to Mafikeng, Bophuthatswana, only seven months later than originally planned.

The time spent in the independent homeland of Bophuthatswana was at a considerably slower pace than I had been maintaining. As if to insure my appreciation of the rural pace, two negligent mechanics managed to destroy the engine of my Institute car and I went afoot for the next month. It was a good lesson.

Black South Africans in general spend a good portion of their time travelling to and from home, work or stores. Blacks living out in the country spend most of their time doing that. Through first-hand experience I learned something else about what it means to be a black on the roadside. Both black and white motorists drive as if they do not care very much about what happens to people walking by the roadside. There was a prevailing attitude that it was somehow the fault of the pedestrian that he or she was not riding in a car. But that failure to empathize--a failure of which both educated whites and uneducated blacks were guilty--has roots with interesting origins.

A theory was advanced by a few sensitive Afrikaners and supported by my black friends with university or professional degrees. The South African educational system uniformly stifles creativity. Thus, without a reasonably well functioning imagination such exercises as envisioning oneself in another person's position--empathizing, that is--are next to impossible. It was one plausible explanation for why South Africans could be so incredibly rude and aggressive toward one another.

I found Bophuthatswana a mixture of good intentions, mediocre performances, and a lot of hype. Having within its so-called borders the mines which produce 30% of the world's supply of platinum is what keeps it afloat. Even with a white South African as minister of finance, the government gets no awards from me for displays of fiscal austerity. Five kilometers from the capital there are children suffering from malnutrition, and hundreds of others forced out of school for want of approximately ten dollars each a year in school fees. The country's entire budget is only 350 million dollars and yet while I was there President Mangope bought himself a nearly three million dollar private jet.

The reports that Bophuthatswana was a net exporter of corn last year I do not find plausible. Despite the civil liberties laws on its books which set legal precedents for South Africa, there is an undeniably active security (i.e. secret) police and a tangible amount of apprehension in the general population. The university while ambitious is staffed with far too few talented professors black or white, and far too many has-beens and aspiring academic potentates. While Bophuthatswana has done very little to materially improve the quality of life for the majority of its so-called citizens, it has provided a non-segregated refuge for a small number of South African whites who wish to live in such an environment.

My own experiences went from good to bad to worse. When I first arrived I enjoyed the low-key pace of the town, as well as the diversity brought about by the influx of foreign national professionals. However, after I

was assaulted by an off-duty policeman, and then insulted by the government's farcial and crude response I found it hard to even pretend to be an apologist for what was fast appearing simply a banana republic where the buffoons are black.

So, in November 1982 I returned to Johannesburg and settled in to observe that social conundrum with what I hoped would be a more dispassionate eye. I might have succeed had it not been for an incident that affected me so personally I found myself reeling for several weeks.

One of my small circle of friends in Mafikeng was a runner like myself. She was a white English-speaking South African who spoke Zulu and Xhosa as well as Afrikaans. Her name was Winifred. We ran together every Tuesday evening, saw each other almost every weekend at the local dam, and wound up at many of the same dinner parties. We were running partners for a half marathon and were training to run together in a full marathon in December. We were pals, pure and simple.

In early November Winifred had an accident while horseback riding on a farm in the Orange Free State. She went into a coma and for four days floated in and out of semi-consciousness before suddenly dying. She was buried in Johannesburg a few days later. It was a tragic accident, but nobody was to blame.

I did not go to the hospital nor attend the funeral, but not because I did not want to.

There was a white man in my hotel with the same last name as mine. I did not know him but he apparently knew me, and during that period he took all of my phone calls, never once telling the switchboard they were sending the calls through to the wrong Mr. Price. On the day of the funeral my friends called five times. Whatever went on in that man's mind was beyond my comprehension. But what he did was to make me aware in the most painful way, that I had long since stopped being a neutral observer, and perhaps from the very beginning it had not even been remotely possible.

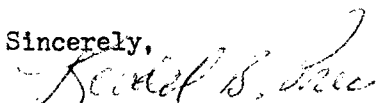
Even once I was back into a full schedule of interviews and photography I knew that none of it was or ever would be as significant as what I had come to realize back in November. Questioning the ethics of involvement was to prove itself more important than most of what I had observed during two years in South Africa. I realized I needed to know most of all what really was my role, what were my rights? What were the rights of those I was observing that could be abused for the sake of my learning experience? To what extent should I have adopted the mannerisms and methods of the local population? In someplace like South Africa, where there were such distinct and vast differences between various segments of the population, whose values should I have embraced?

Some choices I had made before I left the States. I had wanted to find out what was in the minds of the white South Africans. To me it was the whites who had the problem, the blacks merely suffered the results of it. But once I got there nothing was nearly as simple as that, and even trying to find a neutral position from which to observe created a continuous conflict within me.

So, how did I become insensible enough to survive a harsh and abusive environment and remain sensible enough to learn something from it? Or, how did I manage to stay sane when by my criteria of sanity the environment in which I lived was populated largely by lunatics?

I am not at all sure of the answers to these questions, but of this I am certain: the observing means nothing without the questioning of how the observing was done.

Sincerely,

  
Kendal B. Price