

Africa in my soul

 By [Graeme Codrington](#)

9 May 2008

“Ladies and gentlemen, please fasten your seatbelts and ensure your tray tables are up and your armrests down. We are on our final approach for OR Tambo airport in Johannesburg.” The announcement from the air steward never fails to get my heart beating just a bit faster. The red-brown soil, peeking through the forest-like greentop competes with the sparkling blue swimming pools that dot the landscape of Joburg as I look out of the window of the landing plane. Africa is in my soul.

I look around the plane and see that this is true for most of my fellow travellers. Africa gets under your skin. There's something indescribable about the place, and a trip to Africa's shores lives with you forever. But I am not a visitor here. This is my home.

I am a second/third generation African. On my father's side, my grandfather was posted to South Africa during the Second World War, and married one of the East London Ball clan, a family who had moved down from British East Africa about a century ago. On my mother's side the dominant genetics are Scottish, but the family has been in South Africa over a century. My skin is white (well, more a pink tinge of cream, which darkens nicely in the Durban sun). And I am an African.

By birth. By choice

There is no doubt about it. I am African. I am African by birth. I am African by choice. And I love living in Johannesburg, Africa's greatest city - a throbbing hub of culture, commerce and activity. A city in a forest where the summer thunderstorms flood down from afternoon skies darkened by towering clouds, followed by that unmistakable smell of steam off tar and dust. A growing city, with a skyline full of cranes, fewer and fewer mine dumps and the stark ridges of gold-bearing reefs that gave this city its reason for life. A busy city, with bustling, sparkling malls, crowded townships, manic drivers and the best weather in the world. This is home. It is in my soul.

My heart belongs to South Africa, and Joburg in particular. But my heart is sometimes broken by this place. As George W Bush put it, in his own eloquent way at the United Nations a few years ago, “Africa is a country with many problems.”

Crime, of course, heads the list of these problems in SA. Our houses and cars should be castles - safe and secure. But they are not. This causes low level anxiety and stress to be a constant companion.

It's difficult sometimes to know what we can each do. We've all secured our property, shatter-proofed our car windows, paid private security armies and more. But the problem persists.

We can all do something

One of the root causes of endemic crime is unemployment, and this is where we can all do something. But then, Government over-regulation makes it difficult to employ unskilled labour. And if you think of Government, the spectre of corruption and mismanagement rears its ugly head. And if you think that the short-term, profit-at-any-cost corporates are going to try and solve the problem, you're badly mistaken. Down this path of thinking lies despair.

And so, it would be easy to look past the friendliness and resilience that define South Africans. As you weave through street vendors at intersections, and narrowly avoid being hit by a minibus taxi, it's easy to overlook the entrepreneurial spirit so evident. Amid all the problems, there is hope that if we just find a way to truly unleash the potential of this country, nothing will be able to hold us back. Millions of ordinary South Africans are desperate to contribute and reap reward for honest hard work.

On the walls of the Franklin D Roosevelt memorial in Washington, DC, some of the great US president's words are etched in stone. They haunt me and speak to the urgent task that faces our new democracy:

“*“No country, however rich, can afford the waste of its human resources. Demoralization caused by vast unemployment is our greatest extravagance. Morally, it is the greatest menace to our social order.... The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.”*”

My family is currently in the process of making plans to move to London for a few years. It's a career opportunity, not an escape. We leave with sadness, and we will be back.

Holistic solutions

Part of what we want to accomplish while we are away is to study and work towards holistic solutions to poverty, skills shortages and unemployment. There are many people around the world beginning to suggest real solutions that can actually work.

None of these programmes will be easy, and there are no silver bullets. But that is no excuse for doing nothing, nor is it permission to complain without action. With concerted and integrated efforts, it is possible to rid the world of poverty and bring dignity to all people within our lifetime. I truly believe that. And I also believe that if any country has the chance of doing this, it is South Africa.

When every South African can tangibly see what they can do, we will be able to step back from the edge of precipice, where our young country currently teeters in mortal danger of imploding. But such a catastrophe is not the SA way. We are a nation of survivors. More than that, we are a nation that has tasted a miracle. We are a country filled with resilient people who will see the job through to the end.

I have hope for the future. Not because I have seen the path that lies ahead, but because I know with whom I share the journey. All around the world, South Africans of every tribe and language need to find the one small thing that each one of them can do to contribute towards a brighter future for all. And, to borrow the words of another dead president, we must ask not what SA can do for us, but what we can do for SA.

ABOUT GRAEME CODRINGTON

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