In the Soul

Before South Africa, the duality of the feline had never been clear to me. One moment, the house cats that believe they own our home manifest sleekness as they stalk imaginary adversaries; the next moment, if they have eaten or found a ray of sun to bask in, they roll onto their backs with a bloated look worthy of a satiated potentate. These are house cats, and, as with any coddled family member, we grant them their excesses. We don't really want to see them as the predators they would like to be.

Lions roaming the veldt are a different story. You lose your illusions about cats when you watch a pride of 14 lions hunting in the darkness at the apogee of their hunger cycle. With adult females leading the way, the pride embodies the term *stealth*, and every bounding move reminds you of the power within their legs and the potential ferocity of their being. Their darting seems choreographed, but the lightness with which they touch the ground and the ease with which they change directions suggest that these are no ordinary dancers in the darkness. These creatures own the night.

My mother, my daughter, and I watched this scene our first night in the South African bush. The lions came within yards of our Land-Rover and disappeared into a thicket. The ranger, the tracker, and the very urban Rothsteins listened intently. A loud rustling sound broke the silence, and we could hear an animal racing away—an animal that had come as close to death as anyone can come. The ranger told us that it was a kudu, a kind of antelope, and with that, we broke off our pursuit of the pride and left them to their business. My daughter and I searched for confirmation in each other's face that what we had seen was real.

The next day, the scene was more real to us. We found the pride of lions celebrating success. A zebra had not been as fast or as lucky as the kudu, and the lions had feasted on it most of the night. The striped skin just above the hoofs was the only clear evidence that the bones lying before us had once been a zebra. The zebra had been transformed by its predators—but in the process, its predators also had been transformed. The once slender, swift cats were now bloated, bellies round and stretched. They were rolling to and fro on their backs, looking as harmless as beach balls in a breeze.

We learned that lions readily eat 25% of their body weight at one sitting and then lie in the sun, basking in their excesses. We were repulsed and fascinated. The hollow profiles of the previous night had disappeared; a new species had been created.

We wondered how we would be able to tell people back home. How can you describe with any credibility the visceral reality of the great animals, the hunting pride, the scavenging hyenas, the screaming baboons, or even the enormity of the insects? I knew that despite the rolls of films that were building up in my bag, the images were only part of the story. I was destined to fail in capturing the soul of what I had seen.

The lions were not alone in their capacity to change, and change was all about us. In the land of apartheid, the jackals of white supremacy who scavenged a nation were in retreat, but the victors in the struggle for equality were gracious, and the willingness to forgive on the part of many black South Africans I encountered seemed almost biblical in its proportions. As we drove the streets of Soweto and Alexandra, we saw where blacks had once been forced to live and heard our guide allude to the torture he had received under the old nationalist government. We also heard his pity for people who could believe in the supremacy of one race over another.

Lions, by virtue of their genetic makeup, are destined to be transformed by the flesh of others, but people, as our guide demonstrated to us, choose whether and how to be transformed. While other people in his country were transformed by hate, he had chosen to be transformed by understanding.

I had gone to South Africa to teach, but I learned more than I taught. The trip made me think about our profession and the way it presents itself to the world. I wondered about our identity and whether, as we achieve professionally, we become satiated caricatures of our former altruistic selves. In a township a few hours' drive from Pretoria, I was reminded of who we can be. The village women had been in an exercise class and were eager to show us the difference it was making in their lives. In this place, physical therapy had preceded electrification! As her twisted fingers grasped objects, one woman read an inventory of functional activities that her arthritic hands can now perform—thanks to physical therapy.

Her therapy was part of the outreach program of an Afrikaner-speaking school. For many black South Africans, Afrikaner is the language of the oppressor. But at the physical therapy school in Pretoria, in a hospital named after one of South Africa's most notorious racist leaders, the people have moved beyond that ugly past. In Johannesburg, at the English-speaking physiotherapy school, they wrestle with issues of how to be more inclusive. People are learning about each other in South Africa. In what was once called the "dark continent," the light of a new day is blinding.

Reflecting on South Africa, I am wary of our sometimes bloated self-satisfaction, but I also am reminded of how noble our profession can be and how fortunate we are to shape its future. Baragwanath Hospital, on the outskirts of Soweto, is the world's most populated hospital. With 4,000 beds, "Bara" is bigger than many cities. The physical therapy staff is small and dedicated beyond the describing of it. I saw endless rows of patients, a state-of-the-art burn unit, and crowded surgical wards where the patients fear being moved near the nurses' station because that is where only the sickest patients go.

Despite the oppressive heat, the therapists were irrepressible, displaying energy reserves worthy of marathon runners. One of them was a young woman whose pale skin and blond hair provided a remarkable contrast to the blackness of so many of the faces around us. She was proud of the hospital, but also was embarrassed by some of their efforts. Mistakenly so. The veteran aide leading the class for patients with hemiplegia might not have been using the latest techniques, but in his commitment I saw a flash of magic.

As I left Baragwanath, the therapist talked of how she had worked elsewhere but had returned to this most famous, or (as some would say) infamous, hospital. She looked me right in the eye and said, "If you know anyone who wants to help us in this new South Africa—in this new country we are making—tell them about Bara.... Bara is the place for me. I think something is either in your soul or it is not, and Bara is in my soul."

They say you are never the same after visiting Africa. Whoever "they" are, they are right. My house cats look different, my urban hospital seems almost luxurious, and I see all about me the power to transform and be transformed. I am grateful that physical therapy is in my soul.

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Editor