Racial Justice, Religion, and Reconciliation in South Africa

Throughout my first year at Boston College, people always mentioned the "BC Bubble", joking about how easy it is to completely cut yourself off from the outside world while on campus. With homework, exams, clubs, sports, friends, and, if you're lucky, a job or internship, this isolated mentality is understandable. I personally felt so overwhelmed by my day to day tasks that I never payed attention to the world around me. Like many other students, I sleep walked through the reality around me. Until I went to South Africa.

We landed in Cape Town around 10:00pm local time after 24 hours of travel. Despite the jet lag and darkness, there was a tangible energy to the pitch black landscape dotted with lights and dark, looming mountains. The highway that connected the airport to our guest house was lined on one side by shacks piled up against each other, and by massive grocery stores and parks on the other; the illuminated concrete highway existing as a barrier between the first world and the third.

From that moment on, The Land of Extremes took my previous conceptions of South Africa – and to a larger extent, the world – and turned them upside down. It was no longer possible to sink into a comfortable rhythm of work and play, the way it was for me at BC. Every day was packed with a mixture of lectures from famous South African figures, first-hand encounters in areas directly affected by the topics we were studying, and breath-taking tourist attractions. Even on our days off, which we filled with safaris or scenic drives along the coast, we could not escape the surrounding injustice that manifested itself in high unemployment, poverty, HIV/AIDS, lack of adequate education and access to clean drinking water.

As our trip progressed, I transitioned from wanting to tour this foreign and beautiful country, to wanting to further engage myself in the various communities we visited. This immersion was possible through the hard work and passion of our instructor, Professor Stephen Pope. He filled every day with mind blowing presentations, meetings, and excursions. I was so afraid of missing out on the continuously shocking experiences that, even when I was sick, I refused to stay behind.

The individuals he connected us to played a major role in challenging my previous perceptions. During one of the conferences we attended, I was part of a reflection group with four South African women. We were asked to talk about what "wounds" we carried and how we might try to overcome them. Between the four women in my group, two had been sexually assaulted by family members at a young age, one of them falling pregnant as a result. One had been sexually assaulted at gun point the week after having to identify the body of her best friend, one had been a political prisoner and had been told that she would be executed, and one lost both of her parents to HIV/AIDS. These women, one of whom was not much older than myself, sat in front of me, able to smile and laugh and sing and dance. It was impossible to look away and impossible to walk away as the same person I was before.

For the first time, during what felt like the fastest month of my life, I was not sleep walking. I was irrefutably awake, partly because of the structure of the program, but mostly because of the people around us. These men, women, and children were certainly not sleep walking through life. They were awake and engaged in the world around them. They spoke out against the injustices in their lives, challenged oppressive structures, debated with people of all different viewpoints and origins, and protested and persevered until they saw results.

I may have been comfortably living inside the BC bubble before, but now I can say without hesitation that that is no longer true. The people of South Africa shattered my bubble in the most inspiring and motivational way.