

Muthal Naidoo

From my Journals



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Muthal Naidoo

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14 June: As I have no inspiration for writing anything at the moment, I will do some cooking. I became a vegetarian in 1998 but recently have felt, completely instinctively without any scientific evidence, that my body requires the protein that one gets from fish and meat. So I cook a fish biryani. Not having eaten fish for many years, I have forgotten about bones. When one pricks my throat I go into a panic, think I have been stabbed to death and spend the rest of the day trying to extricate the bone. No luck.

No more fish. I really can't stand the way it smells up the place.

15 June: It occurs to me that I could keep a journal and record the turmoil of thought and emotion that has been plaguing me in contemplating that I am in the last phase of my life.

So I am back in front of my laptop again.

In *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, the question is asked, 'Why do we prolong life?' And the answer given is: 'To prolong life.' As I do not understand the answer, I ask, 'For what?'

We spend time and money in our efforts to prolong life: organ donations, transplants, vaccines, stem cell research, identifying the human genome, epigenetics, anti-aging recipes, the body cult, exercise and diet. There's Dr Mehmet Oz on the Oprah Show holding up a couple of omenta (tissues that cover the intestines) from autopsies: a small, thin one from a person with the ideal weight; an enormous, gangling one from a person not grossly overweight who died of a heart attack.

Dr Oz doesn't mention how the other person died, the one with a small omentum that didn't prevent death. The good doctor exhorts us not to eat to kill ourselves. He tells us what to eat and

drink and to exercise in order to prolong life. You look around and everywhere you see people ‘running for life,’ (actually from death). Everyone is obsessed with survival.

Even more so in movies.

We have science fiction that takes us into the future of the future, into new worlds and parallel universes through wormholes, to escape the death of our planet. And we create Superman who lives forever, beyond the boundaries of death.

Is life merely a frenzy to escape death?

We stare the horror, Hannibal Lecter, in the face, and do our best to contain our fear but we cannot evade it so we write paeans in praise of those who defy death.

Though we fear it for ourselves, we do not hesitate to dispense it for our protection: weapons, police, death sentences, armies, war.

Dylan Thomas looked death in the face and said, ‘Do not go gentle into that good night,’ so there are countless people telling you to ‘get a life’ and if you listen to them, you find yourself engaging in frenetic activity, parachute jumping at age 70, to prove you are alive; but we all know that we are alive, our obsession with death and dying tells us that and ‘getting a life’ doesn’t make us invincible.

Why do we have to get a life, when we have one? Why is engaging in frenetic activity regarded as ‘truly’ living and a sedentary occupation like reading a book as not. Reading takes us into all kinds of adventures and new experiences and as I cannot ride a motorcycle or climb mountains, I am glad to have these experiences vicariously.

Though reading gives us all kinds of new experiences, it does not make us immortal, but it gives us a chance to meet the immortal ones. Superheroes! Antigone and Hamlet – who go through cycles of reincarnation throughout the ages. Though it

was not given to writers and artists, they give immortality to their creations and through them may themselves achieve everlasting recognition.

Humans, in general, cannot accept their mortality. We have invented religious systems that deny it; that insist this life is mere initiation from which we graduate to eternity. And there are those who actively embrace this notion in pursuit of life everlasting in paradise: suicide bombers; those who commit sati; the Pharaohs of old who took entire households into chambers underground.

And why do we want eternal life?

Look at Stephen King's mouse and policeman in *The Green Mile*. He gave them eternal life, for what? Even he, the creator, shows it as pointless, an existence of endless aging. Isn't it better to accept an end to life? But everything in our lives reflects the fear of death. The walls we build around our homes; security systems; safety belts.

People run for life in the hope of escaping death. But death is ever present. We carry it with us from the minute we are born. And everyone preys on the elderly, looking for signs of death and decay to remind them of what needs no reminder, the individual apocalypse.

16 June: I spent the early hours of this morning tossing and turning in bed trying to solve the puzzle of the bed sock. Some time ago I figured out the exact pattern for knitting a bed sock. Then I got involved in writing and all I remember of the pattern is that I once had it and it exists like a Platonic ideal that I am trying to recapture.

I have been going about it in quite the wrong way. Trying to remember how I did it before, turns it into a totally heuristic process; and all my trials end in errors. I realise I am being quite

unscientific and need to work out the pattern again without depending on it to emerge from memory complete and ready for use.

Perhaps I should embark on a *Zen and the Art of Knitting Bed Socks*. In that way, I would relate properly to the design and the technology involved in producing it. A bed sock can be reduced to a large isosceles triangle which when folded will cover the whole foot and the flexibility of the knitting will allow it to stretch across the breadth of the sole.

When I started on the sock the day before yesterday, I cast on forty-one stitches for the upper part – the cuff that fits around the ankle – and then proceeded to increase on either side to form the base of a triangle. But I couldn't get it to taper to the toe. I know I need to decrease stitches on the sides to reach the apex of the triangle but I didn't do that when I invented the pattern the first time. I shaped only the heel and the curve up to the toes.

My attempts show me that the foot is not simply a set of mathematical properties, length, breadth and height; it is a human thing with subtle planes, curves, arches and dips. But a bed sock is an artefact; it can be reduced to mathematical properties. I must divorce the subtleties of the foot from the pattern and get on with it.

The bed sock saga reminds me that I no longer believe in formal structuring of writing; organic growth is more exciting. That happened when I was writing the novella, "I am present", (which later became *Finding Hassan*). Despite my notions of structure, it grew in its own way and kept finding new directions and different ways to look at how we make meaning of our lives.

Soweto Day

Today, 16 June, being the anniversary of the 1976 Soweto Uprising, I watch a documentary and see again a panorama of death; but out of the ashes of that phoenix, was born the new South Africa. A good deal more death was required before it could rise in triumph. After the Soweto documentary, I watch another – *Ghosts of Mississippi*, which tracks down the murderer of Medgar Evers, the African-American activist, who, like Chris Hani, was shot and killed outside his home. The documentary shows the efforts of a dedicated lawyer who finds the evidence that finally convicts the killer. The man had been tried twice before and acquitted by all-white juries in a Jackson, Mississippi, still clinging to racism after civil rights liberties had been won.

17 June: I got up to watch *Everyman* a BBC documentary series dealing with spirituality. I watch it because I am interested in the understandings of existence to which religious beliefs and faith lead. I am an atheist but that does not mean I do not have faith. I do not believe we would have societies and a dedication to progress if we didn't have faith. But for me, faith does not mean faith in God; my faith is in humankind.

I do not believe in a supernatural presence, but in power that is immanent. For me there is no connection of athman with Brahman. No. The way I see it, the connection of athman is with athman – Ubuntu, human connection. In other words, I think I am, what academics call, a secular humanist. I simply call myself an atheist. I believe in *human* connectivity and creativity.

We live in an eternal question mark; surrounded by a mystery so deep, it can never be penetrated and it is up to each one of us to find individual answers for why we are here. There is no one generally agreed on answer that applies to all of humankind. So we need to contemplate the mystery of our

individual existences to find – each one for himself – a meaning.

For me, it means finding the answer to the question that *Zen and the Art of Motor Cycle Maintenance* poses; why do we wish to prolong life?

And now I have the answer: because it is life. I have life and life is potential – that is the whole meaning of my existence. I am potential that I can either develop or neglect. And I have community in which that potential can be developed or neglected. Community provides me with the context in which I become the creator of my existence as I make my contribution to it.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

This morning the *Everyman* programme on TV was a documentary on Desmond Tutu. Watching it, (I have seen it before), I was again inspired by a man who has found through his religion – he is an Anglican and was Archbishop of Cape Town – the means to make his contribution to society. His religion is for him not just the trappings, the rituals, the mantras, the platitudes; it is *being* in the fullest sense.

I have always thought that formal religion because of its insistence on God the Father blocked growth and development as the individual remains forever a child. In the TV documentary there was this other religious leader, probably an archbishop too, whose patronising comments indicated that he saw Tutu as a child, not necessarily before God. For him, Tutu's speeches/sermons lack depth; for him, Tutu is not an original thinker and his utterances are not thought provoking but charismatic. It is Tutu's sense of humour that obviously confuses him. He is not amused when Tutu thanks the missionaries, the forerunners of the colonisers, and says, 'They

gave us the Bible in exchange for our land; I think we got the better deal". He cannot see that Tutu's statement actually challenges the capitalistic values by which we live. I am glad of Tutu's sense of humour. It indicates that he has thought objectively about what he believes.

Out of adverse circumstances, Tutu created for himself a life of resistance to the evils of apartheid, as well as a life of service to the community. Confronted by the contradiction between the callousness of Christian apartheid and the humanity of Father Trevor Huddleston, he was forced into deeper exploration of the meaning of his beliefs. And he discovered, through them, the means of defying the inhumanity of apartheid. He is an inspiration to all.

As I am an atheist, this may seem contradictory; it is not. I believe that each human being makes for himself a meaning of existence that determines his progress through life. For the majority that meaning includes God; for me it does not, but that does not allow me to disparage those who are believers. They too take responsibility for their actions though they attribute them to God.

New Life

After I retired in 2000 (officially 2000, actually 1998, when I was kicked out of Giyani College by the students), I took up writing seriously as a means of learning about existence. I am reading fiction again and discovering how writers invent the rules by which they work. These rules are not to be found in academic textbooks and in workshops on writing; they can only be discovered in the writing process itself. And each writer creates a unique set of rules that constitutes her style. This journey of discovery, the journey of every artist, great or little, is the journey into freedom.

And in at last being able to follow my own inclinations, I gained such a great sense of freedom that I felt a little guilty. I knew I still needed to make a social contribution as I accept the Ubuntu principle, *Motho ke motho ka batho* – a person is a person through other people. My freedom, therefore, was a gift to me from society. So in 2000, I also looked for an organization that needed volunteers and found one.

When I received a pamphlet with my rates bill, asking people who could spare a couple of hours a few days a week to volunteer at Irene Homes, a facility caring for mentally challenged women, I called and was accepted. And from 2000, I have been working in the Curiosity Shop that raises funds for the Homes. I am the only black volunteer.

Most of the volunteers in the shop, there are about fourteen, are people who have retired, live alone, have skills and need the stimulation of work and meeting people. They are hardworking, competent, friendly, courteous and caring. And the shop is a very pleasant place in which to work. All kinds of people come there, from people who live in squatter camps to glamorous TV stars. And they hardly ever see a sullen or disinterested face at the till or along the aisles. The shop sells second-hand goods, all donated by the citizens of the community, and is doing very well. That is largely due to all those superannuated people who cheerfully volunteer their time at the shop.

What if Carol Parsons, who runs the shop, had taken one look at this bunch of golden oldies and said, “Sorry, you’re too old”? She would have had to hire young people, many of whom are easily bored, and don’t really care about their jobs.

And that brings me to the heart of my concern; the many vital and competent old people that society marginalizes. They have valuable skills and experience but they are pushed to the

side lines. In a new democracy like ours, which needs those skills, we didn't try to find a way to have the experienced work side by side with the inexperienced to create the new order. The people with experience were jettisoned, leaving the new society limping along and finding its way into corruption and relentless poverty. There are historic reasons for that, chiefly our conditioning in racism. As I don't see racism dying out in my lifetime, I wish we could simply take a laxative and have it pass out of our systems.

Democratic charters, like the Freedom Charter, all proclaim that every individual is of worth and needs to be cherished. But governments find it very difficult to help poor people, who, like old people, are on the margin and, regardless of ideology, are passed on from one government to the next and remain in penurious existence.

In South Africa, we talk about job creation but leave poor people to eke out a living begging or in precarious self-employment. This is where senior citizens could be active in helping to develop the sector of small businesses, for example. Retired people, with skills, can make a difference. Those who are willing to offer their services to society should be included in organisations. Instead of leaving senior citizens to slip into senility or dementia to become an additional burden, they should be welcomed and actively sought out for their skills.

New Career

I was a teacher for many years and that was something of a roller-coaster ride. Except for my experience in the 1950s at Dartnell Crescent Primary School in Durban, I was kicked out of every other institution at which I taught in South Africa. I look quite harmless, but I am a nonconformist and schools require almost total conformity.

I studied for four years (1965-9) in the Indiana University (IU) Department of Theatre and Drama and there discovered that originality was really valued and I could be myself. So I stayed on in the States exploring new ways at IU and then at Washington University in St Louis.

When I returned to Durban in 1976, I became involved in the anti-apartheid movement and wrote a number of plays and revues. My revue, *The Master Plan*, was banned by the apartheid government, the only official recognition of my writing that I have ever received.

After retiring from teaching, I dedicated myself to writing. I was encouraged in my efforts by Francois Smit, of QUBA Motion and Design, who gave me a website. I wrote a few books and in 2005, was short-listed for my story, *Jail Birds*, by the organisation that offers the Caine Prize for African Writing. I went to London for the final adjudication where I met the other finalists, who were mostly from North Africa.

In London, we were confronted with the question of the authenticity of African writing. I was amazed. Why was the authenticity of our writing being questioned? Because we write in English? Some of us, about life outside Africa? When Europeans and Americans write about people in other countries, the authenticity of their writing, as far as I am aware, is not questioned. But because we were Africans, it was a matter of concern for those to whom we were introduced.

Racism spans the globe.

So I wrote the following article for The Guardian but I don't think it was published.

*****Authenticity in African Writing**

Is it only the authenticity of an African writer or African

writing that is called into question? Why?

When you are an African author, you are suspect if you don't live in Africa and/or you don't write about preconceived notions of what is African: i.e., indigenous traditions, customs, and projects that present a simplistic view of life in Africa.

So what is an African author and what does African writing entail?

When one speaks of an African author is that a reference to ethnicity? If I do not have an indigenous identity – Zulu, Xhosa, Ibo, Tutsi, Shona, etc. – does that mean I am not African even though I was born in Africa, lived all my life in Africa and regard myself as African?

Is it a reference to traditions and customs? If I do not wear traditional dress, do not follow rituals and customs indigenous to Africa, have not adopted a religion like Christianity and have become an atheist instead, does that make me un-African?

Is it a reference to language? If I do not speak an indigenous African language – Zulu, Xhosa, Ibo, Yoruba, etc. – does that mean I am not African?

Is it a reference to where I live? If I no longer live in Africa but in another country, have I lost my African identity? If so, what have I become?

What are the criteria for being African?

Of the five people short-listed for the Caine Prize in 2005:

- four can be disqualified for not living in Africa
- at least two can be disqualified for not speaking an indigenous African language (that includes me though I live in Africa)
- all five do not wear traditional dress; one or two use it only for special occasions

- one or two are not ethnically African.

But all five write about the African experience, whether in Africa or abroad, and all five regard themselves as African.

So what makes them African?

The same thing that makes an English person, English, a Japanese person, Japanese, a Brazilian person, Brazilian; they identify themselves as such.

The desire to pigeonhole the African writer is a desire to confine her to a limited spectrum of customs, interests and forms of expression. But that is not possible. Was it ever possible? When human beings interact they leave their influences on one another. Even before European colonisation in the 19th century, African people had come into contact with people of other lands: Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Indians, and there were cultural exchanges.

When Europeans came into the continent and established colonies, Africans absorbed a great deal from the colonisers. They learned to speak European languages, adopted European dress, learned to read and write in European languages and acquired European values and attitudes. They no longer lived in pristine African-ness – if they ever did.

So there is no such thing as pure African-ness. And writing designated African is writing by people who identify themselves as African because they are from Africa.

Some writers are indigenous to Africa – Zulu, Shona, Ibo, Yoruba authors. Others are descendants of people who emigrated from Europe, Asia, the Middle East or America. Just as Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, Imamu Baraka and Sonia Sanchez are African *Americans*, people, whose forebears came from other countries to live in Africa, are European *Africans*, Asian *Africans*, etc.

If we are looking for writing that is evidence of a pure, unadulterated ‘African’ culture, we are going to have to travel back to prehistoric times to find it.

I was born and brought up in South Africa; my parents were born and brought up in South Africa. My grandparents came from India. I do not speak an Indian language and do not practice Indian customs – but all my life I have been called “Indian”. And it is quite ironic that of the five Caine Prize nominees, I am the only one who actually lives in Africa but, in my country, I am referred to as “Indian”.

So did I become African just for the Caine Prize?

No, I became African the moment I identified myself as African and that was some time ago, before apartheid walls came tumbling down. I am African because I was born and brought up in South Africa. When I was a teenager, sixty odd years ago, South Africa was a British colony and I sat with my parents, my brothers and my sister and listened to BBC radio comedies: *The Goon Show*, *Take It from Here*, *Much Binding in the Marsh* and all the BBC radio dramas. I was as thoroughly colonised as one can be. I am not ashamed of it. There’s no point in being ashamed or feeling guilty. That’s how I grew up.

From the mid 1960’s to the mid 1970’s, I lived in America. Coming from apartheid South Africa, that was a mind-blowing experience; it transformed me and gave me the courage to write.

I am aware of the diversity of influences in my life and I am glad of them for they give me the power to be creative. And as I am from South Africa, I am an African writer.

It is simply a matter of geography. ***

June 20: A few days ago, I was in a grey mood and began to look at the world as peopled for the most part by holograms.

When I turn on the TV and see so many people who have adopted wholesale the culture of the West, as I have, I feel a sense of inauthenticity. I grew up in apartheid South Africa, in a culture different from that of my Indian forebears, and with a view of myself as an inferior being. This view made it impossible for me to relate to people in a meaningful way as I was obsessed with the notion that I was not good enough. Even now I am not entirely free of that curse. These days, I see little black children in TV commercials (formerly TV was pristinely white). Will they grow up, as I did, with incipient feelings of inferiority?

I watch a TV programme called *La Familia*. It is set in the rural Northern Province where I spent ten years teaching at Giyani College of Education. In the TV show, I see people who understand their culture and from it reach out to embrace ways that come from other cultures. They do not have a sense of inauthenticity as I have.

To be called “Indian” and to be living a life quite divorced from the culture of my Indian forebears, has turned me into a kind of hologram. When I became a mature adult, I tried to escape a sense of unreality by going back to a neglected Indian heritage. I have been on this quest for years. But I do not change my ways; that would rob me of the little substance I do possess. I can expand my understanding without incorporating the ancient traditions of my Indian forebears.

Writing *A Little Book of Tamil Religious Rituals*, which I undertook in a patronising frame of mind (I was doing it for the people in Laudium), gave me a whole new understanding of Indian culture and the people of Laudium.

They are not the kind of hologram that I am; they have a different kind of hologrammic existence. They cling rigidly to Indian customs and rituals that have become ghettoized and

are meaningful only within a closed community. Their cultural practices depend on ritual that is becoming increasingly misaligned in the twenty-first century.

Those who cling to past traditions will lose their children, if they have not already done so. Living in a constantly evolving culture, children may begin to see their parents as cultural dinosaurs.

The emphasis on cultural “purity” is artificial and racist. I accept myself as South African with a culture that is South African; a mixed culture, predominantly Western, with Indian and African influences.

2014

18 March: I am working on my autobiography and right now am recording my time in Giyani. In 1988, I was invited by Tom Swart, Vice Rector of Giyani College of Education, to join the staff of the new college, and I spent the next ten years there. I was in the Theatre and Drama Department, where my students created exciting productions based on their experience, the Tsonga experience.

I found the journal I kept of the early days in Giyani and in transcribing it, I realize how very useful journals are. Reading through them, I find much that I had simply forgotten – events and thoughts which give a real feel for those days.

So now I am keeping this journal.

TV

At the end of last year I gave up watching television as I found myself at the mercy of programming – mainly soap operas and magazine programmes – that did nothing for me.

In apartheid days, there were many very interesting documentary programmes that I used to tape. Yes, videotaped; I still have a VCR – I am part dinosaur. Unfortunately, I kept only a few tapes from those days: *The History of the Bolshoi Ballet*, A series called, *Dancing in the World*, and a few interesting documentaries: *Jesus, The Gospel of Judas*, Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*, (which my nephew, Raschin, had taped and lent me and I had never returned). I saw a BBC documentary: *Light Fantastic*, in the 1980s or 1990s, which I will never stop regretting that I did not tape. It must be on DVD and I am determined to get it. It will be my birthday present for this year.

I also have on tape the films *The Matrix* and *Unbreakable*. I watch all my tapes over and over. Yesterday, I was on a world tour. I spent the morning in Giyani via my

journal; in the afternoon I was in Moscow, Covent Garden and New York touring with the Bolshoi Ballet and in the evening I relaxed in an English hamlet and a village, in *Lark Rise to Candleford*, DVDs that my neighbour, Rae Labuschagne, had loaned me.

When I told Rae, that I had given up watching television in favour of the freedom to watch what I like, she lent me a number of tapes and DVDs; tapes of the series *Yes Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister*, *Pride and Prejudice*; DVDs of *Lark Rise to Candleford* and *Cranford*.

Now I am buying up tapes from second-hand shops, the only places one can still find video tapes, and I have found a few: the Australian film *Strictly Ballroom*, *Jane Eyre* (with William Hurt as Rochester – very different from Orson Welles whom I first saw in the role) – *Shrek*, *Grosse Pointe Blank*, *The King and I*, *Harry Enfield's Guide to the Opera*, and *Upstairs, Downstairs*.

I have also bought DVDs: *The Life of Brian*, other Monty Python videos, Derek Jacobi's *Hamlet*, Ethan Hawke's *Hamlet*, *The Remains of the Day*, *Hearts in Atlantis* and *Johnny English*. Yesterday, Rae brought me two more DVDs, *Chariots of Fire* and *Paradise Road*.

My life has fallen into a routine: up at 4 or 5 in the morning, I write for a couple of hours, then exercise, shower, have breakfast and continue writing until noon. Then I watch a documentary or something light, after which I read. In the evening, I watch DVDs.

I have been reading novels by Richard North Patterson and Larry Collins & Dominique La Pierre. I classify them as historical novels. I have learned a great deal about the American justice system and elections from Patterson and a

great deal about India and Gandhi from Collins & La Pierre.

I am also trying to clarify the influences on my beliefs. I read the *Upanishads* when I was imprisoned in 1990. Fortunately, I was in solitary confinement and could secretly keep a journal. When I transcribed it recently, I rediscovered my excitement on reading the *Upanishads*. I must reread the *Upanishads*; it is next on my list.

I sent the manuscript of my book of essays, *Metaphoric Being* to Max Hartzenberg, graphic artist, who designed my last book *Rhulani's Dilemma* (self-published last year, 2013.)

19 March: I have been transcribing my Giyani Journal, begun in December 1988, in which I recorded the first four months of my life in Giyani and the setting up of the Giyani College of Education.

24 March: I have finally received the account for water, electricity and the various levies imposed by the Board of this housing complex in which I live. According to the accompanying letter the account represents the charges for February only. Apparently the municipality has been estimating, or rather under-estimating, our bills since last November, and we are now paying the shortfall. So I have to pay out 50% of my monthly income and I don't even water my garden because I cannot afford it. I don't know whether we are the victims of corruption or not. After reading: *How long will South Africa Survive? The Looming Crisis*, I know we are. There is little transparency in government and no transparency in the Board of this housing complex. Services are steadily deteriorating and corruption has become the norm.

I hate feeling like a victim.

25 March: Tonight, I watched again Monty Python's *The Life of Brian*. I haven't had such a good laugh in a long time. There are so many moments I love – the opening scene in which Brian's mother deals with the Magi, how Brian becomes the Messiah, the denominations of the Gourd and the Shoe, and the crucifixion finale with the song “Always look on the bright side of life” – I loved all of the film; laughed all the way through.

26 March: I watched the accompanying disc in which the Pythons explain how they put the film together and found it wonderfully ironic that it was shot in Tunisia with all the extras being Muslims playing Jews. I will watch *The Holy Grail* tomorrow.

28 March: I found a letter from AARTO [Administrative Adjudication of Road Traffic Offences] in my post-box which declared that the fine and penalty imposed on me were cancelled.

On 27 Jan I had picked up the first notice of the fine and penalty for exceeding the speed limit in the Blue Hills area last November, 2013, when I was returning from a visit to my brother, Reggie, who lives in Fourways.

Apparently I was doing 80 km in a 60 km zone. I am not sure whether the notification had been delayed by bureaucratic inefficiency or the Post Office strike. I sent off faxes to AARTO in which I stated I was not liable for the penalty as I had received notification after the stipulated date for payment of the fine. When the PO went off strike, I received another letter from AARTO saying that they would charge me for having to consider my case and I would have to pay the fine, penalty and charges.

I waited for the Post Office to reopen to get proof of the date of receipt of the notification of the fine and submitted it with my letter. Now after three months of haggling they have cancelled all charges on account of my age. It has taken them five months to figure that out – my driver’s licence has my ID number on it and ID numbers begin with date of birth: year, month, day.

29 March: I watched Monty Python’s *Holy Grail*; it raised only a few laughs not like *The Life of Brian* which is hilarious.

Scaling Down My Life

Having to self-publish has meant cutting the fat out of my life. I live with basic necessities – no new books, no newspapers, no new clothes, no luxuries, no travelling – I drive about only in Centurion. E-tolling and fuel prices have cut out my occasional trips to Johannesburg. About five years ago, I gave up the cinema, partly because of my growing deafness. I have given up broadcast television and my post office box. I am also seriously thinking of giving up my home phone. Now, with the rise in property rates, water, electricity, fuel and the housing complex levy, I have given up medical insurance. I gave up specialist doctors about eighteen months ago.

I regret having to reduce the time and payment of my domestic worker and gardener but I have little choice. I do not eat meals and have become what health nuts call a “grazer”. When I run out of whatever, I do without. People who visit me understand that I do not provide meals. I scour the advertising sheets in the local tabloid for bargains; previously I had simply used the tabloid to line my bins.

I need to do some house maintenance; painting the roof and changing my carpets. I need to put aside whatever I can for that.

Before I gave up TV, I was an avid follower of cricket and rugby, when we could still depend on the SABC to televise these games. Once broadcast of cricket and rugby matches became unpredictable, there really was very little entertainment for me on TV. Before 1994 there had been many documentaries that I had enjoyed watching. After 1994, the proliferation of soap operas made it difficult for me to find entertainment on TV.

There was one documentary series that I found magnificent – Johnny Clegg’s *A Country Imagined* in which he introduced us to South African artists and their work.

I eventually got DSTV (local cable TV) but as I could only afford the most basic bouquet, all I had in addition to the soap operas of SABC was Al Jazeera. Fortunately, documentaries and news analyses abound on Al Jazeera and I watched for a couple of years. When DSTV prices went up in 2013, I gave up all broadcast television, and now use my TV only for videos and DVDs.

Before 1994, I had videotaped the BBC documentary, *The History of the Bolshoi Ballet* and an American series, *Dancing in the World*. So now I make a weekly visit to the Bolshoi Theatre and take regular trips around the world to watch people dancing everywhere. With Carl Sagan’s *Cosmos* that I watch over and over, I have also become a cosmonaut.

In addition, my neighbour, Rae, has a whole library of videos and DVDS, and I have been watching lots of BBC programmes: *Yes Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister*, Jane Austen’s novels and Shakespeare’s plays. In addition, I am creating my own library with second hand DVDs and Videos obtained from charity shops.

THE MEANING OF LIFE

In Monty Python’s *The Meaning of Life*, life means having a

sense of humour and not taking oneself too seriously. That is just the opposite attitude to that of the Joker in *The Dark Knight* (the Batman series), who finds no meaning in life and takes himself very seriously.

If we are looking for THE MEANING OF LIFE in the universe, we are looking for the finite answer to the mystery of existence; for a beginning and an end. Like the Joker, we will never find it. But if we are looking for the meaning of life as it applies to human existence on earth – that is easy: it is what each individual makes of being.

For most of us, employed in institutions, the meaning of life becomes conformity to institutional requirements. It is difficult to avoid as all employment is based on the factory mode of production with assembly lines, division of labour, deadlines, standardized routines and outputs. All our institutions – political, religious, social, economic, educational – formalise the way in which we live and are factory-type production centres that contain us in set conventions and assembly-line logic. The words ‘standard/s’ and ‘process’ rule our lives; we follow standard procedures or conventions in practically everything we do.

And like those in prisons, in confinement, we abuse one another as a consequence of differences in performance of accepted procedures. The more rigid our loyalty to standardisation, the more aggressive we become – we see this most clearly in sexism, classism, racism and religious fanaticism.

When one retires from the production line of employment, life no longer means conforming to routines – educational, social, economic, political, etc. And freed from institutionalised living, we can now explore existence beyond convention. No longer tied to assembly lines and division of labour, we can deal holistically with life. Like artists and inventors, as authors of our own lives, we are free to discover new meanings of existence.

Retirement, therefore, is not withdrawal from life; it is, at last, real engagement in life, not through routinized living (though that cannot be totally avoided), but as participant–observers exploring our own uniquely individual understanding of existence. Retirement from factory labour, allows us, at last, to engage in a search for ourselves in our search for the meaning of life.

The meaning of life has to do with understanding that we create our realities in response or reaction to society’s demand for conformity. We either adopt norms and values or we question them – not like criminals who simply find them irksome – but as creative, evolving human beings. And those who question, in order to create and expand – not destroy – come to understand the ways in which we are conditioned, and how various forms of socialization inform our functioning. When we become conscious of the operating systems that control our lives, we are able to evaluate them and make choices about their relevance to our existence.

That enables us to loosen the controls we place on ourselves and to live our lives more freely. Exceptional individuals, geniuses, are able, early in life, to step outside the operating systems of socialization processes. They discover new and better ways of being and make possible new and better ways for all.

BEING

the human creature,
incarcerated
in chaotic collusion
of light and dark
dichotomised

its strength called God,
Satan, its weakness,
interrogates
the accident of existence
and contrives
meaning for life

This poem was meant to end my autobiography – an artistic end in conformity to an institutional idea that things must have a logical conclusion. But life is different; it goes on; there is no foreseeable beginning or end. So freed from logic, I continue and do not concern myself with tying things up neatly.

LIFE GOES ON

At 79, a pensioner, no longer considered a useful component of the system, I am often assaulted with the phrase, “Keeping busy, I see”. As I am not on an assembly line, my existence in society is regarded as meaningless and as an old spinster, living alone – doubly useless.

But I am free.

And as I no longer have TV, I am not being programmed to think along standardized lines. I am free to discover new and more wonderful meanings of existence through the exploration of great writings and my attempts to translate them into relevance for myself.

The meaning of life is not a one size fits all kind of thing; each of us has to find life’s meaning in our own unique way. I read and write to explore, discover and formulate my own understanding of the mystery of existence.

And being an ordinary human being, I also do keep busy: I read thrillers, watch DVDs, knit, bake, exercise, do jigsaw,

crossword and Sudoku puzzles and listen to music. No longer part of any system, I am free to reap all the benefits of society – limited only by my own interests, competences and, of course, finances.

So what is the meaning of my life? It is a truly existential question. We think of a meaningful life as a life which serves others. But according to Hinduism, as I am in the final stage of life, it is time to devote myself to discovering – guess what? – The Meaning of Life. The religion recommends that I isolate myself from the world, cut off all human connection, and find a way to become reunited with the source of life, the creative energy of the universe, Brahman.

Though I have in many ways isolated myself, I do not believe in isolation. What I do believe in is Ubuntu; that I am a person through other people; that my life has meaning here and now – not in the hereafter – as it emanates from being in community.

But I live alone so what does that mean? How can I be a person through other people, sitting alone in my house?

The way I see it, I may live on my own but I am not alone. I live in society and enjoy the benefits of society. I have a pension. Though it only allows for survival without any frills, and gives me the illusion of independence, it is a benefit bestowed on me by society.

The most important societal benefit that I enjoy every day of my life is the company of greatly evolved people. Books, DVDs, the Internet, connect me with great minds of this world and I spend my time learning from them. I was given a website by Francois Smit of QUBA Motion and Design, the best present I will ever receive; it allows me to connect with all kinds of people everywhere. I share my ideas on the Internet – some people endorse what I write; others

vilify me. Feedback, both positive and negative, means connection and, as I believe that it is through connection, Ubuntu, that life has meaning, I know my life has meaning.

I receive messages from students who ask me to become involved in their projects. Just this week, on Wednesday, January 21, I received a message from a high school student who is doing an assignment on a poem “Non-being” that I wrote in 1978. I was very surprised. I didn’t know that this poem had been prescribed in schools.

Non-being

non-white
non-entity
I think but am not
but to think I am not
is to be
not what I can
but what I must
invisible
unseen
in shades of yellow, brown and black
that fade in the white glare
of the being one

I once had a student call me from Paris, France, about this same poem. That young people are studying it, gives validity to my assertion that we are all connected. I sent emails to Gowrie Naidoo, school and college friend, and Sharmini, my niece, to tell them about the poem being studied.

Gowrie was thrilled. Her book, *Afrikaans is Easy*, and her tapes on speech production should be prescribed works. I have a

suspicion that her textbook *Afrikaans is Easy* has been plagiarised; I have seen textbooks with the title *Afrikaans is Maklik*. Though plagiarism conceals her identity, she, nevertheless, is the one connected and sharing knowledge.

Servant Supreme

I live in a complex with houses built among tall pine trees that give it the pleasant quaintness of a village setting. Its picturesque quality is, however, offset by the numerous pine needles that clog gutters; and all roofs need regular cleaning.

Men, working for others in the complex, used to volunteer to clean my roof. I lost the last volunteer when the people, for whom he worked, moved out. So here I was with no one to clean my roof.

When I glimpsed a man working in a garden close by, I approached Mrs P. the owner of the house to ask if the man would be willing to do my roof and prune some of my bushes. She said he was very busy and had a full schedule as he was employed by many people.

From my living room, a day or so later, I could see someone sweeping the roof of Rae's house. Ah, I thought, perhaps *he* would be willing to do my roof. I assumed he was a casual labourer. I went over and called up to him from the side of the house. I explained that I wanted to speak with him about doing my roof. He said he could not come as he had work at the next house. He pointed to Mrs P's house and I realised then that he was the man about whom I had approached Mrs P.

I explained that I didn't want him to come right away. I simply wanted to see him for five minutes to find out whether he would be willing to do my roof. I showed him where I lived and asked him to come over after work.

He did not come. And that was that, I thought.

But the next day, Mrs P arrived at my door. She came in and explained that the man worked for her and her son and that he would be working for some days at her house the following week. She was prepared to offer me a day or a half-day of the time he would be at her house. She would be away but her son would be supervising the man. She said she paid him R104 for a day's work and I would have to give that amount to her son who would pay the man.

I agreed out of politeness but didn't expect anything to come of the arrangement. The man hadn't come himself to negotiate with me and I tried to figure out why? Was he that subservient to these people? If so, he probably wouldn't want to work for me; he belonged to white people and wouldn't lower himself to work for a coolie. I had felt his reluctance when I had spoken to him. I was uncomfortable with the fact that he was being 'sub-let' to me; that I was being dictated to about how much and how to make payment. R104 a day was, in my opinion, exploitation. I didn't want anything to do with the arrangement. So I put it out of my mind.

Then a young man who was working for another householder in the complex came to me and offered to clean my roof and garden. We made an arrangement and he came and did the work. This young man, Matorhi, was his own agent; he had approached me and named his price. I liked that. He cleaned my roof and told me when he would come to work in the garden. He was not my slave; he was providing me with a service.

A couple of weeks later, I obtained copies of a very precious book, *Spirit* by Lionel Berman, which I wanted to hand out to some of the people around me.

On my way to deliver a copy to Rae, I caught a glimpse of Mrs P in her garden. After I had delivered the first book, I

thought I would hand one to Mrs P – I felt she needed it. I didn't see her in the garden so I rang the bell at the gate. I rang several times before she appeared out of her garage. When I gave her the book, she brought up the matter of the gardener again.

She explained that he was extremely busy and hadn't been able to come to me. I really didn't care but listened politely as she offered to send him to me as soon as he had finished the work for her. This was just an empty gesture, and I was glad to be able to tell her that I did not need her man; I now had someone to help me.

Medical Aid

With the rising costs of living at Cyprus Valley, I was struggling, and needed to cut costs. So I decided to change to a cheaper medical aid option. I wrote to GEMS (Government Employees Medical Scheme) in July requesting a change in option.

When I was informed that I had to provide GEMS with bank statements to justify my intention, I realised that I had once again made the ridiculous assumption that institutions allow freedom of choice. So I was forced to assert my freedom by resigning from the medical scheme instead of changing my option. I sent the following emails to GEMS:

Email 24-11-2014.

I have faxed the forms contained in the attachments to the relevant organisations and I have also faxed a GEMS form of resignation from the Medical Scheme. I have instructed my bank to stop the GEMS debit order with effect from 31 December 2014.

With the rise in the cost of living, I am unable to

afford medical insurance.

I am grateful for the support I have received from GEMS.

[The attachments were a resignation form and a letter informing GEPF (Government Employees' Pension Fund) of my resignation.]

There was no response.

KATY KHAN

November 21: Professor Kathija (Katy) Khan came to visit. I had been surprised by an email from her a few weeks earlier – she had discovered my website.

Katy, a former student of mine at Durban Indian Girls High from 1978-1980, is a professor at UNISA; she has been there sixteen years. Unfortunately for me, I couldn't remember Katy, but I was delighted to see her. It is always a great pleasure to be able to talk to people who can look at life objectively. So many people that I come into contact with are bound to the concrete, to the here and now, and when I am with them there is very little I can contribute to conversation. But with people like Katy it is possible to make a real connection and I can indulge that part of my persona which otherwise is shared mainly with my laptop and with Tom and Lionel.

Katy is busy promoting African writing and creativity. She is off to New Zealand tomorrow and will be visiting – with Maoris – I think.

Applying for a Pensioner's Card

November 26: I have decided to apply for a pensioner's card. Katy had recommended it; she had pointed out the many benefits of a pensioner's card. Sharmini had also suggested that I apply. I

didn't think I qualified for one. But as I have cancelled my medical insurance, a pensioner's card would give me entry into government hospitals if ever I became seriously ill.

So this morning I took a walk to the Home Affairs Branch in Centurion, and was told there that I would have to go into Pretoria, to the Schubart-Skinner Street Offices of Home Affairs for a pensioner's card.

Home Affairs

November 27: I had trouble finding parking at Home Affairs. I eventually found parking on a side street, went to the offices and explained that I was there for a pensioner's card.

I was given a number and when called would have to go through the processes of being photographed, fingerprinted and furnishing personal particulars. Each process took a couple of minutes; hours were spent in between waiting to be called.

When I eventually got to the fingerprinting, I discovered that they had simply assumed I wanted an identity card. That was when I discovered that I had to go to another department, the South African Security Services Agency, SASSA, for a Pensioner's Card. So I drove off to SASSA. As there was no queue there, it took a few minutes to collect a form and be told to return the following week with an affidavit, bank statements, and proof of membership of GEPP (Government Employees Pension Fund).

Economising

I had to give Matorhi, my gardener the bad news that I could no longer employ him on a regular basis; I could only pay him for odd jobs. I have to tell Roslina, my domestic worker, that this will have to be her last year with me.

And I have cut down on basics; things I once mindlessly accepted as necessities. I have now discarded medical aid, travel, cinema, theatre, new books, newspapers, most toiletries, new clothes, and domestic help – the list is not complete.

Smash and Grab

November 28: After I had spent some hours on my laptop, as I do every morning, I exercised and then went for my walk – a brisk twenty-five minutes up and down the hill that Alethea Street presents. On my return, I picked up a copy of the local tabloid, *The Record*, which is delivered every Thursday. After my shower and breakfast, I checked the advertisement sheets and saw that the Food Lovers’ Market had a special on cashews and decided to drive over to buy some.

On my way down Lenchen Street, I stopped at a robot just before the Builders’ Warehouse. Suddenly, there was a man at the window on the passenger side. He smashed the window, reached in, grabbed my handbag and ran off. Idiot me, I had left the bag on the seat.

I dashed off to the bank to stop my debit card. The bank was off-line and I was put through to some place or the other in K’s Castle, and the card was stopped. Then I dashed over to the Lyttelton Police Station, mainly to get a temporary driver’s licence. The police presented their usual unhurried, no motion service. When I eventually got to talk to one of the policewomen, she said I had to report the crime at another police station. Though I live in Lyttelton, and the incident had occurred in Lyttelton, she and her colleague wouldn’t help me; said they had no jurisdiction over the place where I was robbed, Lenchen Street in *Lyttelton*! I had to report at Wierdabrug Police Station.

When I got to Wierdabrug Police Station, I had to wait again for someone to condescend to speak to me. After I asked

whether I would have to sleep there that night, a police officer took the statement I had written at Lyttelton Police Station and said that the matter should have been handled there – crime can be reported at any station. He asked me if I wanted to open a case; that seemed rather ridiculous. All I wanted was a temporary driver's licence. As I did not want to open a case, the crime could not be reported. So in my experience, I found that crime cannot be reported at any police station.

I was sent off to the Traffic Department on Nelmapius Road where licences, etc. are issued. When I got there at about 14.00 there was a queue of several hundred people. And the place closes at 15.00! Some people who were leaving were complaining to others in line about the poor service. Apparently, not one of the employees had been at his station so someone had gone in and begun photographing the empty booths. Soon after, the booths became occupied and people were being served. They had been waiting in line and ignored for quite some time.

I didn't join the queue but went in to try to find someone to help me. I didn't think many people would be seeking a temporary licence and I would find that section empty. But of course there are no indications of where one goes for various requirements. When I asked someone at what I assumed was the inquiries desk, I was told to go and join the long queue of several hundred who had been waiting for hours.

I went home to calm my nerves – not because of the robbery – but because we cannot depend on people who are paid to serve us.

I sat down to watch a DVD, *Kavanaugh, QC* that my niece, Sharmini, had lent me. And just as Kavanaugh was rejoicing at having won his case, the phone rang. Tobie van

Schalkwyk from the Community Police Forum – a *volunteer* organisation – was calling to say they had found my ID. I gave him directions to the house and when he came, he brought my handbag plus all my identity documents including my bank debit card. The thieves (I got the impression it was some kind of gang working the area) had dumped all the bags they had grabbed that morning at a big church. They wanted cash only and had dumped my bag, along with others, with only money missing.

To express my gratitude, I gave Tobie a copy of my book, *Emerging Heroes*, for his child.

Now how's that for a most frustrating little adventure with a happy ending. Apart from having to fix the car window, there has been no real inconvenience.

Oldies, like me, have to be especially vigilant.

Not to be such an obvious target, I now wear a hat to cover my white hair.

November 29: I 'phoned around to get a quote for a window replacement, got one that I could afford and will go in on Monday to get it done. The cost of the repair and the money that was taken from my handbag means over a thousand rand contribution to other people's Christmases.

And no cashews for me.

SASSA continued

2 December 2014

I put together all the documents that are needed and a book to read – you have to spend many hours waiting to be served whenever you apply to any bureaucratic department – and go off to SASSA (South African Security Service Agency) to apply for a pensioner's card.

When I get there I am told to sit in a section filled with

other applicants. After some time we are all told to move to another section.

When I am eventually called, the woman who examines my documents tells me I need a statement from Old Mutual for the stipend of R400 a month that I am receiving. I also need a statement from NEDBANK for the R1000 that I receive from an investment. She points out where I can find the offices of these companies, tells me to come back to her after I have acquired the documents and sends me off.

This income is reflected on the copies of the bank statements that I handed in. But being bureaucrats, they trust no one.

I find the Old Mutual offices and in a few minutes get the statement I need. A miracle – I have not had to wait hours. I go off to NEDBANK, wait in a queue for at least half an hour, am then sent to a financial adviser, who cannot help. So I go home. I will get the statement from NEDBANK in Centurion.

3 December

I go to the bank. Pennie Nel, who has taken over from my previous financial adviser goes into a panic as he has not familiarized himself with my portfolio and cannot understand what I need.

Eventually I am given the name of another person, Denver Naidoo, a financial planner who travels from bank to bank; one has to make an appointment to see him.

Medical Aid

There has been no response from GEMS about my resignation from the medical scheme so I send another email:

Email 04-12-2014

Membership No: 000942810

Please note that my membership of GEMS ends as of 31 December 2014. I have faxed and emailed my resignation to GEMS.

No response.

10 December

I meet with Denver Naidoo. He has no problem understanding what I need and shows me what I have to present to SASSA.

It is close to the middle of the month so I decide to wait until after the Christmas holidays (the season of robberies and muggings) to go back to SASSA.

New Book: *Mirroring Nature*

December 2014: While everyone else is shopping, feasting, celebrating, I work to complete my second book of essays, a collection of articles which continues the theme of the first book of essays *Metaphoric Being*, but this time with an emphasis on theatre. In it I examine one or two plays and films as well as a novel for what they reveal about the relationship between Art and Life.

As I edit my own work (not a good thing but I have no choice), I have spent weeks reading and rereading and revising the book. A first title was “The Mirror to Nature”, then “Mirrors to Nature” and finally *Mirroring Nature*.

The Darling Buds of May

In between working on *Mirroring Nature*, I watch again *The Darling Buds of May* and find great pleasure in seeing Sidney Larkin living a life fairly free of the controls imposed on people

by bureaucratic governments and social conventions. The Larkin family combines independence of spirit and innovative thinking with real caring for others.

I keep asking myself: *Is compassion only possible outside the standardised conventional norms that industrial-capitalist democracy imposes on us?*

As I have recently watched *Downton Abbey*, I decide it is so. In *Downton Abbey*, tradition and convention are shown to turn most people into competitive, mean-spirited human beings. There is little compassion and a good deal of posturing and ill-will. I have to admit – it is truer to life.

The Darling Buds of May ends with Sidney Larkin's election to local government. I frown at that. It is a kind of fairy tale happy ending, contrary to what Larkin stands for – a mildly anarchistic way of life.

My view of government officials and administrators is that they do not understand the meaning of equality. The word does not mean we are all to be treated the same, like products on an assembly line. It means having the right to be regarded as unique human beings. Rules and regulations, therefore, are simply guidelines to be applied with humane understanding of individual circumstances. People cry for equal treatment but people are equal only in their uniqueness and each infringement of the law should take in individual circumstances not as special considerations but as necessary means to discover the real truth. Resort to standardized treatment can be quite unjust.

As a Government Official, who enforces regulations, Larkin would have to give up his belief in individual uniqueness and with it the compassion that informs his relationships.

As an administrator, will he be strong enough to

withstand the drive for conformity inherent in rules and regulations? Will he be strong enough to remain compassionate and humane inside a bureaucracy?

As he will be involved in *local* government, perhaps it is possible.

But having been a teacher in schools, which are much smaller bureaucracies, I know that compassion usually gives way to the demand for conformity – the suppression of individual uniqueness.

2015

January: I check my bank statement to see whether the debit order for GEMS has been cancelled. It has.

I will turn eighty in October. After I turned sixty-five, I dedicated myself to writing and continued to be creative. It is not what is expected of people after they retire.

Most people look to retirement as freedom from employment. For me retirement means the freedom to devote myself completely to the spiritual journey to which the events of my life have been leading. Over forty years inside systems, my thinking had become systemic. So now I find myself redefining former taken for granted notions, such as the meaning of logic for instance. Formerly, I believed it to be a reality, now I see it as the ultimate means of establishing conformity. And I understand conformity as a means to create the stability necessary in a continuously evolving existence.

As a person without employment, I have become marginal to society and most of those around me see me simply in terms of death. But those who connect with me via my website, can't see me, don't know me in the flesh, don't see my white hair, and treat me as a viable human being.

Though I spent over forty years in the teaching profession, for the first time in my life I have become something of a teacher. So retirement is not for me the waiting period before death. Some, those who have the means, fill their retirement with pleasant activities; those without means endure it. Some find relief in Alzheimer's disease which allows them freedom from conformity; at least they do not go 'gentle into that goodnight.'

But retirement does not mean abdication from life. The factory system of employment, which obtains in all institutionalized employment, determines a retirement age, sixty or sixty-five, when people are left to their own devices.

But after some forty years of following prescribed routines and working to deadlines, most lose the urge to initiate. Having been functional within systems, on retirement, bereft of function, they are suddenly required to be inventive and discover the meaning of existence outside of routine. If they cannot, they have no alternative but to wait for the physical death that will finally confirm the spiritual death.

Working as functionaries inside systems, we lose the understanding that life means creativity. Involved in mass production to which we bend our efforts, we lose the impulse to be individually creative. Retirement becomes for some, those with means, the freedom to relax and enjoy the amenities that life offers. With no need to strive for the material, they sit back like spectators, watching the efforts of others. Some live vicariously, especially through grandchildren, taking personal pride in their achievements.

As people see themselves getting old, they become concerned with trying to look young. The mirror forces them to concentrate on the physical – as does retirement from employment, as does ill-health. The spirit, which has been co-opted for forty years in routine, having lost its individual vitality, is given up for lost. And as concentration is on maintaining the physical body, existence becomes a living death.

At sixty or sixty-five, to become creative outside the mainstream is difficult because it means inventing oneself for the first time. But it is essential to do so. It means second childhood, not as a weak, muling, puking babe, but as one in whom the freedom to create has been reborn. It means the freedom to find oneself. That is what my pension has given me. Even though it is a very small pension, it has released me from the necessity of having to be involved in the drive to maintain

society, of contributing to the survival of the species and neglecting the promotion of the self. Now, no longer a functionary; my time is my own, unregulated, and I am able to take from society what I need and ignore offerings thrust upon us by convention.

I have found freedom.

Medical Insurance

13 January: I receive a letter from GEMS, dated **17 December 2014**, declaring that my medical insurance subscription is in arrears and I will be prosecuted if I do not pay by **12 January 2015**.

Why is GEMS still using a postal system that is on strike and to all intents and purposes has collapsed?

All my emails and faxes have been ignored; it is only the reversal of my debit order that has made them take notice. Now I wait to be prosecuted.

SASSA

This morning, I forced myself to go back to SASSA. The treatment that accompanies application to a government department for anything is always humiliating. I arrived at SASSA at about 6:55 and joined the long queue waiting outside for the offices to open. Their official opening time being 7.00, we waited only ten minutes after the hour before the doors were opened. We were ushered in and I sat in the section to which I was sent and pulled out my book, Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*.

The man next to me wanted to know if I was reading the Bible. He said it was good to read the Bible – good for him; my novel – good for me. My reverence for Kundera is probably equivalent to his reverence for the Bible.

After the first few chapters, I was called to one of the counters. My documents checked, I was sent to sit in another section.

After a couple more chapters, I was called to one of the cubicles. An official examined my papers and found a discrepancy between a document from the GEPF (Government Employees Pension Fund) dated 7 March 2013 which reflected a pension of R5538.74 for last year and my latest bank statement which reflected R5832.29 for this year – the difference, R293.55. I had brought the letter from the GEPF simply as proof that I was receiving a pension. It had not occurred to me that they needed a GEPF statement of the current amount I was receiving. I was now being told I had to go to the GEPF to get a statement. This was the third time I had come to SASSA.

I blew my top. I yelled at the official who, being a bureaucratic robot, was unable to see me as a human being – all he saw was a criminal trying to defraud the government of 293 rands and 55cents. My bank statements of the past three months were not sufficient proof of the GEPF pension. I told him I was not there for a pension; all I wanted was a pensioner's card. As I have had to forego medical aid, I needed a card so that I could go to a government hospital for help in the event that I became ill. But the robot was not able to understand anything that was outside his programming.

I left the office fuming, angry at myself for having put myself in the position of being humiliated. Here was a government bureaucrat, a robot, concerned about R293 that reflected the normal increase from the year before, when rulers were spending hundreds of millions of rands for their personal use on homes, cars etc.

I cursed myself: how could I, who saw governors and bureaucrats as callous power mongers, how could I have come

to them for help? I was ashamed. And that was the end of that.

Mirroring Nature

I sent off the pdf of *Mirroring Nature* to Max Hartzenberg, graphic artist, who lives in Cape Town. Max has designed three of my books, *Rhulani's Dilemma*, a short novel for young people, *Metaphoric Being* (essays), and *Kaliyuga* (poems). I feel very lucky to have been introduced to Max. As an artist, his thinking is outside convention, and he applies his own insights and creative talents to designing the books; so they are as much his as mine.

Autobiography

I plan to continue writing my autobiography until Max is ready to design it. When that happens, I will make no attempt to produce an artificial ending. I will leave the book hanging in the midst of whatever is occurring. In that way it will end like a life – without a neat, logical conclusion.

Prowlers in the Dark

15 January: At about 8p.m. last night, just as I was preparing to retire to my room to read in bed, I suddenly heard a tapping on the window at the front of the house. I was alarmed: someone had jumped over the fence and was knocking on the burglar bars of the window. I yelled out, “Who is it?” When I heard a voice, I went to look through the blind. Then I opened the front door and found the security guard who works for Ivan Pistorius, the Chairman of the Board of the complex. Outside the gate was Pistorius himself, waving a letter and a bill that he wished to deliver.

Why couldn't he have waited until morning? And what kind of person gets his man to jump over a fence after dark and

bang on the window of an old woman living alone? Being South African, I immediately put it down to racism – to him I am just an old coolie.

As I expected, the bill that he delivered with the letter, showed a huge mark-up for the use of utilities. I have decided to do something about it. Though I tend to be anarchistic (i.e. one who does not trust any form of government), I have decided that I must get on the Board and become part of the government of this complex. I need to understand more about the costs I incur.

21 January: When I bought this house in Cyprus Valley, I had thought of it as the place where I would live out my life. And for fifteen years this is where I have spent my time improving and refining my ability to write.

A few years ago, Pistorius, the Board Chairman, who runs the security company that provides the security for the complex, was challenged by one person, Jeannie Snyman, who stood up against him. She demanded meetings and financial statements. Meetings had gone from few to far between and then had become non-existent. We were not presented with financial statements and were not able to make input into Board decisions about the administration of the complex.

I was forced to crawl out of my shell and take note of what was going on around me. Jeannie Snyman had received little if any support from us, the owners of houses in the complex and she had moved out.

Now I am being forced to contemplate moving out. With my limited financial resources, it presents an extremely dismal prospect. I am trying to gain an understanding of why the costs of utilities keep going up. Yesterday I spoke to Les Labuschagne, a member of the Board, who said that I should

examine all my accounts for a year and check on discrepancies. I have not kept a whole year's accounts. According to the letter that Pistorius distributed, Les was the one reading the meters. But Les told me that it was Johan's father-in-law who read meters. I went to find Johan at his house, but it all looked locked and barred.

Reggie

Today I received two photographs from Diricilla, my niece. We had gathered at her dad's home the day before and after lunch she had taken photographs. She sent me two, one of her dad, my brother Reggie, and me, and another of Suzie, my sister-in-law, and me.

I had gone to visit as I had heard that Reggie had been quite ill just before Christmas. Apparently, he was completely iron deficient. After two days in intensive care, he had come home and then gone with his family to Groot Marico for a few days to see in the New Year. He is now on iron tablets. When I went to visit yesterday, Tuesday, January 20, I found him up and about. He has lost weight and though he kept dozing off after lunch, he seemed fine. He had had bypass surgery about twenty years before and is a diabetic; nevertheless, at eighty-three, he is going strong. At eighty, so is his wife, Suzie. So am I at 79.

People our age are subject to the alarmist attitudes of all those around them who keep anticipating our dropping down dead right in front of them. Perhaps we will oblige – but as a natural conclusion, not simply to put them out of *their* misery, i.e. anxious anticipation of our impending ends and the desire to confine us to the past tense.

For some of us, for me in particular, eighty is the beginning of life. I am out of the web (the Matrix), have been for fifteen years, and my eyes are open. People, who preface their

remarks to me with “At your age”, have no idea of who I am. They simply see a stereotype; they are still in the web.

22 January: Today I went to see Johan about the reading of meters: water and electricity. *He*, not his father-in-law, is the one who reads meters. He could relate to my concern about rising prices. Johan looked at my water meter with me and suggested that we check the toilets because a leak down the middle at the back of the bowl was usually imperceptible. And we discovered that the cistern in one of the toilets was indeed leaking. Now that I know, I am somewhat relieved. My paranoia about the administration of the complex has abated to a small extent.

I hear that a meeting is to be called soon. Though I am not an administrator type, I am going to try to get on the Board. Boards need members who are not bureaucrats; people who can look at the human beings that rules and regulations are meant to secure but often restrict and hinder, rather than protect.

Deon Claassens, Mr Fixall, worked on my toilet today, took down the ceiling fan in my bedroom and had his man fix an electrical socket.

25 January: As I am still not satisfied that the toilet is not leaking, I have weighted down the arm that controls the plunger because I think it is not shutting off completely.

I have asked Ivan Pistorius how sanitation charges are assessed and he has invited me to meet with him so he can explain. Roslina comes tomorrow; I will see him on Tuesday.

V for Vendetta

27 January: I have just watched the film, *V for Vendetta*, based on Alan Moore's graphic novel (comic book). As Moore had dissociated himself from the film, it does not acknowledge his authorship. In the film, V takes on the role of Guy Fawkes and sets out to destroy a corrupt, vicious, predatory fascist government that captures people and subjects them to experimentation, like animals in a laboratory. V, an escapee from one of these inhumane centres, is an anarchist and his mission is to destroy the fascist UK government – Britain is presented as a kind of reprise of Nazi Germany. V takes on the role of Guy Fawkes, burns down the Houses of Parliament and so destroys the fascist government.

I too am anarchistic, but I cannot see that the overthrow of a government is the answer. There is no guarantee that the next government that citizens vote in will be any better. The fear that arises from the happenstance nature of existence and the ambivalence of being, gives rise to all forms of paranoia that create the need for society. To see government as the only purveyor of fear, therefore, is to do what Guy Fawkes did – note the symptom, not the cause.

Society and government are our responses to fear – fear of the unknown. From car guards to alternative medicine to traffic cops to laws and regulations – all are responses to our fear of existence in an ever evolving, expanding cosmos in which we do not have absolute certainty about any of our undertakings.

Anarchists have proposed little governments to replace a central government but, in my opinion, that does not solve the problem; it simply multiplies it. We as humans live in groups, the most basic of which, is the family. All groups, organisations, are ruled by heads who often assume absolute power and become dictators. As long as we live in communities, we will have

government and the corruption that flows from power.

What we really need is a system of government that people truly control. Slogans like *amandla awethu* do not refer to political systems as they exist.

Power to the people is an illusion.

28 January: As I have cut down on my use of water and electricity to almost the basic minimum, I am suspicious of the constant increase. I went to see Ivan Pistorius about the rising cost of utilities. It seems we are dealing with exploitative tactics of local government and utility companies.

29 January: Just after six this morning, on my way back from my morning walk, I bumped into Christoffel from No 7, who was embarking on his morning run and asked him about being on the Cyprus Valley Board. He didn't have time for such a responsibility. Then I met Tshepo from No 19, returning from his morning run. He has indicated to Ivan his willingness to serve on the Board. He has not received a response. We will both remind Ivan that we wish to serve.

MIKE STAINBANK

30 January: In 1999, when I came to live here, in Centurion, Pretoria, I renewed my friendship with Mike Stainbank. I cannot remember when and how Mike and I got together again at the beginning of the new millennium, but in the last decade, we have become very good friends.

Mike founded the ES'KIA INSTITUTE and has devoted himself to keeping alive the legacy of Es'kia Mphahlele. He invited me to do some proofreading of books he was publishing – one, a treatise on the work of Mphahlele, another a compilation of Mphahlele's articles written for

Tribute Magazine and Mike's own book, *We Look at White People and We think, "Oh My God!"*

In his book, Mike writes about his conception of The Apartheid Museum, his registration of the trademark, "The Apartheid Museum," under his name, and the production of a brochure outlining his vision: the establishment of a museum as an interactive space in which people confront and overcome the negative influences of apartheid. Sending the brochure to influential people to gain financial support for his project led to the concept being appropriated by the brothers Krok, who had Mike's trademarks expunged, and then established an attenuated version of The Apartheid Museum at Gold Reef City as their initiative. And for 13 years, Mike has been engaged in a legal battle to win legal recognition of his conceptual property. Now in 2015, he faces three months in prison. He is accused of having defamed all those who took over his concept and set up a conventional museum.

I wrote the following to contribute to his struggle for justice.

*****Justice, the Whore**

Under colonialism and its extension, apartheid – justice was seen in black and white terms. White people had access to justice because they existed; black people were *non-whites*, a reflection of what is not, they did not exist. Having no reality they had no right to anything – let alone fair treatment. They were nothing. How could they require fair treatment?

So black people came to see justice in racial terms – as reserved for whites.

After 1994, when it was legally determined that black people were human in themselves, that they existed, they believed they would now have justice. But once the racist veil

of colour was lifted, they got the shock of their lives; prejudice was still alive and well. Colour had only been its facade. Now it was revealed in its true form as the division between the powerful and the powerless.

And justice is controlled by the powerful. As power is in the hands of government and of those who control the means of production – political power is married to economic power. And power has turned justice into a commodity and put it beyond the reach of the powerless. For those who do not have control of the means of production, there is no such thing as equality before the law.

Justice, the whore of political and economic power, lives in the bureaucratic castle of capitalist corruption which was, is and always will be, built on the exploitation of the poor.

Unlike Mike, I do not believe in the attainability of absolutes. I have what some may consider a cynical view of existence but I believe it to be realistic; I see life as both negative as well as positive – paradoxical, karmic; we have no idea of how it came about so we create “absolutes,” e.g. the Ten Commandments, in order to give stability to our existence.

But instability is at the core of our being. We are creatures of instinct over which we have imposed reason, and instability stems from their opposition.

The “absolutes” that we create, such as constitutions, laws, traditions and conventions are no more than ideals; they are not reality. At best they are guidelines.

Mike is reaching for the ideal – absolute justice – which does not exist. Life is a striving for the ideal; it is not perfect and our laws are subject to the human mind-sets of those who devise and administer them.

And our minds were set in apartheid times.

From House to Flat

31 January: When I had visited my brother, Reggie, and his family on the 20th, and told them of my problems at Cyprus Valley, Diricilla, had suggested that I sell up and move.

Last week someone from a letting agency had called to inquire whether I was selling/letting my house. I had indicated that I was not, but today I have decided it is what I must do. So I am going to look for a small flat and put my house on the market. As I do not wish to contemplate a destitute old age, I have to find a way to increase income and reduce expenditure. Selling the house would bring in the income and finding a small flat would reduce expenditure.

06 February: I looked in the local tabloid to see what was available in terms of rentals and properties for sale – everything is beyond my means. With the rise in the cost of living, my financial situation has suddenly become precarious. And I am beginning to lose my equilibrium. Perhaps I should consider an old age home.

I have written an essay in *Mirroring Nature* on Athol Fugard's *A Road to Mecca* in which he presents the attempt to move Helen Martins into an old age home as denial of her essential being as an artist. Old Age Homes are institutions and institutionalization always curbs humanity and freedom.

If I can find an affordable bachelor flat somewhere that is what I must do.

09 February: Checking for properties, I am beginning to think it will be cheaper to stay where I am.

Our Mutual Friend

Yesterday I watched the last episode of Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*. As I watched, I realised how differently I view the characters from when I read the novel about fifty years ago. I can't remember exactly how I viewed them when I was young; I must have condemned the 'villains' and loved the 'heroes'.

But now watching the DVDs, I found myself looking at Bradley Headstone as a tragic figure; Charley the beginning of a movement towards tragedy and Silas Wegg, another victim of circumstances. I couldn't hate them. Bradley and Silas, two people completely alone in their suffering, reach out in the most awkward, cruel ways to find connection and are rejected. People of low self-esteem are always on the defensive..

Ubuntu, like everything else in our worldly existence, is paradoxical. People become people through other people; they learn to love or to despise themselves through others. The circumstances in which they find themselves help to determine whether it will be love or hate. For some, circumstances make it easy to connect; for others, they are obstacles that do not allow connection so they live alone in the midst of others. In *Our Mutual Friend*, all the marriages at the end are symbolic of the ability to connect; all deaths and degradations – the inability to connect.

We are all responsible for the happiness or despair of other human beings. *Motho ke motho ka batho*.

The DVD presentation ends with a different kind of connection – a marriage of true minds. Mortimer Lightwood connects with Tremlow, a man who has sat silent in "society" (high society) discovering from observation how superficial and dehumanising connection can be when it is determined by perfunctory notions of conduct and materialism. Their friend-

ship is based on genuine respect and admiration, not on status and wealth.

10 February: On Friday, 6 Feb, I sent out emails to two estate agents; to one about a one-bedroom flat for sale; to the other about a bachelor flat for rent. I got an answer from one, Sula, about the one-bedroom flat and today went to see it. It is right here in the next block of Glover Avenue. So I walked down to meet her. It is a tiny flat just perfect for me. If I can sell the house, I will probably buy it. After showing me the flat, Sula came to look at the house and is going to send me an evaluation. I found her to be very friendly and accommodating and didn't think it was just an act. I had gained a little experience with estate agents when I bought this house. The ones I met in 1997 were not so friendly. Perhaps things have changed now in the twenty-first year of our "democracy".

I told Sula I want 1.2 million for the house as that would allow me to pay cash for the flat I intend to purchase. If she can sell the house, she will probably earn a good fee and if I can get my price, I will have some security for the future and will be able to continue publishing my writing.

As Sula does not operate in this area, she is going to recommend another agent to me.

Andrew Ndhambi, my friend from Giyani, happened to email me today and I let him know that I am selling the house; he is interested.

17 February: Yesterday I went to look at another one bedroom flat. It is in one of these complexes built like a prison. The flat was all right but it was like entering a prison cell with amenities. My house in Cyprus Valley, though sparsely furnished, stands separate from other houses and allows me to feel human – not

like a rat in a cage.

MIKE

Today Mike Stainbank has to go to court again; he is being threatened with three months in prison as he persists in trying to get justice. For about thirteen years, he has been involved in a legal battle to gain recognition for his concept, The Apartheid Museum, and for the right to set it up as he conceived it. This struggle is impoverishing him; one has to pay heavily for the dispensation of 'justice'. Why would anyone bankrupt himself in this way, if he did not have the truth on his side?

23 February: The estate agent Sula, who had shown me a flat in Feather Tree complex for which I did not make an offer, recommended estate agent, Anarene de Jager, for the sale of my house. Anarene works in the Centurion area; Sula does not. She was handling the Feather Tree flat as a favour for a friend.

I got in touch with Anarene on the 15th of February. She got to work right away and by the 19th the house was sold. She is a miracle worker. Not only has she a solid understanding of her function, she also attacks her task with tremendous energy, bringing in strings of prospective buyers. After only three days, she had an offer. She evoked my great respect and tremendous admiration.

Now I have to find a flat quick. I saw a little flat last Friday which I think is fine but I am not going to offer the full price; I need to be careful. I have to set aside enough to live out the rest of my life without having financial worries. On Tuesday I am going to see another place described as a funky loft flat.

Bersan Lesch, former colleague and friend from Giyani

College days, has been helping with details of retirement villages. I am going to phone around.

27 February: I have started on a new book of essays, tentatively called “The Logic of Systems”.

7 March: In the two weeks since I sold the house, I have been searching the Internet for one-bedroom flats and bachelor flats. I sent emails to several agents and got one or two replies. I found a really nice loft apartment which I thought was perfect for me, but was frightened off because some part of it had damp and I didn’t want to be fighting with a body corporate to get it fixed. I no longer trust any form of government and my experience with bodies corporate has been negative.

One agent, Gavin Bampton showed me a very nice little flat but I didn’t offer enough and lost it. I kicked myself afterwards. Since then Gavin has been very kind, keeping me informed of flats in the area. He showed me several, but I didn’t take to any of them. I have now found a flat in the next street for which I am making an offer, even though it is like a cell in a prison yard. This business of finding a new place has made it difficult for me to write – my mind is unsettled. I don’t sleep well.

In the meantime Max Hartzenberg has completed the layout of *Mirroring Nature* and has sent it off to Johan Botha at Minuteman Press. I expect I will have to collect the book sometime next week.

Max has also introduced me to Terry Pratchett, whose books I will now begin to explore. I discovered Alan Moore earlier and now Terry Pratchett, two free thinkers, with interesting views on existence. I am so glad to have discovered

them and am looking forward to finding more interesting writers like them.

Quite prematurely, I have begun the business of packing up my household. And of course, I now have to hunt through boxes to find bowls and plates as I can't pack away the need to feed. I have emptied most of my cupboards, discovered things I never use and have begun discarding. As I am moving to a one bedroom flat, I have sold the hardly used double bed in my spare room which stood empty for most of the fifteen years that I have been here. Bersan and Elmary bought the bed for Jane, their domestic worker, as part of a retirement package.

Jane, who has been with them since Giyani days, will be retiring in two years and will return to Giyani. Jane and I are the adopted grandmothers of Dieter and Mikhail, Bersan and Elmary's two sons; very bright young lads with great futures ahead of them.

Esmé Phalatse, the agent for the flat for which I am making an offer, sent me forms to fill in. One of the forms had this line: **ETHNIC GROUP: Asian Black Coloured White Other.** Imagine that – twenty-one years into the new dispensation! I was shocked and wrote this note to Esmé: *I hope you won't mind my pointing out that one of the documents requires one to state one's race/ethnicity. We no longer live in apartheid South Africa and racial identification is no longer necessary. I identify myself as South African.*

I hope this doesn't lose me the flat. I find it something of an irony that Esmé is working for people who still require racial identification.

Life is full of ironies.

MIKE

Since the end of last year, Mike Stainbank has been threatened with three months' imprisonment for continuing his fight against those who misappropriated his concept, The Apartheid Museum, and set up the usual conventional version of a museum. Mike has been fighting the system for years and is on the point of losing his freedom, and even his home.

Today I watched two episodes of the new COSMOS series. The first episode recounted Giordano Bruno's efforts to promote an understanding of the universe as infinite. He was punished, imprisoned and destroyed for his belief.

I was reminded of Mike.

10 March: Yesterday, I went first to see Esmé Phalatse at DIC Homes to fill out the offer for the flat in Basden Avenue. Then I went to the lawyers handling the sale of my house, to sign it over to the new owners. I have to go back today to give them the proper ownership document and cancellation of the bond I took out in 1998 when I bought the house. When they ask for documents, they don't specify and to someone like me, all this conveyancing stuff is precise attention to the mundane and I am rather careless with it all. Such devotion to protection against fraud! We care less about people than we do about property.

My mind is more at ease now that I am beginning to believe that my offer, half a million, for the flat in the Basden Complex will be accepted.

It is good to have been jolted out of a life "fallen into the sere, the yellow leaf" and was beginning to lose the vitality of questing.

11 March: I am trying to get a date for moving. Charles and Prudence Cele who have bought my house want to move in by

the end of April, but Louise Koekemoer, the conveyancer, is not sure that registration will happen by then; it may happen in the first or second week of May. So, I am not sure when I will move. I cannot move before the present occupants of the flat move out. I have asked Esmé to inform them that the flat has been sold and they will have to find a new home.

Esmé tells me it will take 2-3 months to register the flat in my name. That's too long. I can't be paying all that rent. Louise doesn't believe it will take that long. She is going to work on it. To my surprise, I find the lawyers at JM van der Merwe, Louise being one of them, very kind and efficient; they go the extra mile for a client. Very unusual in a law firm! The only other lawyer, I knew, who put the human being before rules and regulations was M.J. Naidoo, my uncle, who died in 1997. He never accumulated any wealth.

13 March: Today is Friday the 13th – an appropriate day for setting down my sense of being a fly in a spider's web. I am not superstitious; at least I try not to be. Superstition is fear of the unknown – a subconscious awareness of our random existence in the universe.

My consciousness of being a victim has been brought on by this business of having to move. I have lived fifteen years sheltered from officialdom. Suddenly, I am at the mercy of lawyers, conveyancers, estate agents, and municipal and government regulations. I am sitting in the middle of all kinds of legal procedures that demand proof that I am not trying to defraud the system and am made to feel that my personal welfare is of no consequence. All that matters is conformity to the law.

But isn't the law there to protect the individual? No, it is not; it is there to protect the collective against the individual.

Only those with power in the system have individual freedom. In this case, the developer who is selling the flat to me; she is concerned only with her ability to collect rent either from me or from the tenants presently occupying the flat. I am being forced into a situation in which I could be homeless for a few weeks; I may have to give up my house before I am able to move into the flat.

14 March: I have decided to move into the flat on the first of May. It may mean having to pay rent to the owner/developer as the flat may not have been registered in my name by that time. I am sure the owner/developer is relieved; she has been fixated like a scavenger, on occupational rent.

Now that I am involved in the world of realty, I begin to understand the financial crash of 2008 which arose out of real estate dealings. Conveyancing provides easy opportunity for fraud and exploitation. Sellers and buyers (even more than sellers) represent prime pickings for developers and agents as they are superbly aided by all the laws and regulations governing property sales – a minefield for buyers and sellers.

15 March: The Ides of March: bad luck for Julius Caesar, good luck for me. I have decided to buy a new TV today. Can't really afford it; living dangerously! Indulging myself! I have the first series of *Cosmos* and now the second. I have *Dancing in the World*; I have *The History of the Bolshoi Ballet*. If only I could get DVDs of ballets!

I have a couple of musicals: *West Side Story* and *The King and I*, but something has happened to my ability to suspend disbelief. I now find it ludicrous when people burst into song. It's not like opera where all communication is through song.

After I set up my new TV in the new flat, I will be off to the Bolshoi Theatre. The ballet I most want is *Spartacus* starring Irek Mukhamadov. He was its star thirty years ago. There is a new DVD version starring Carlos Acosta; he is a wonderful dancer too. Perhaps, I'll get that. The problem about ordering via the Internet is that I don't have credit cards. So Tom helps me out.

18 March

Today is Bersan's fiftieth birthday. I have been invited to an intimate family celebration at his home. I have written this poem for Bersan. It's really a poem for the whole family. They have been dear friends and a source of strength.

For Bersan

from an atheist-artist
to a believer-scientist
between us
we capture
the quintessence
of human existence
seeking absolutes
in relative truths
and finding love
to overcome

I may have made Bersan uncomfortable with my use of the word 'atheist' in the poem. People have such fear of atheists, but we are only people who opt to live outside metaphors and *maya* (illusion). And we don't proselytise. Fear of atheism is like homophobia; those who fear, subconsciously believe they

will catch what they fear. There is subtle ambivalence in such fear. Fear of contagion suggests susceptibility.

19 March: Yesterday at Bersan's modest birthday celebration, I met his brother Stemray and sister-in-law, Felicia. I am indebted to Stemray for delivering some of my books to the National Library, the Parliamentary Library and the Centre for the Book in Cape Town. I had a chance to chat with him and found him an exception to the way I view human beings.

For me, human nature is mysterious in its complexity; and as changing as everything in the universe. So we look for absolutes, the constants, on which to build our existences. Some human beings are able to reduce the contradictions in their natures and provide stability to those around them. Those, whose stabilising influence reaches out to multitudes, are universally recognised: Jesus Christ, the Buddha, the Prophet Muhammad, Mahatma Gandhi, but there are those with similar qualities, whose influence is contained within small communities. Though not widely recognized, these are also great souls. I see Stemray as one.

23 March: Today I am sending off copies of *Mirroring Nature* to friends – by registered post – in the hope that Post Officials will give registered post more respect than my usual fast mail and actually deliver the books. I have lost many books via the Post Office. Whether the present mailings will get through, I have no idea. Under apartheid, white officials may have despised us but they sent the post through; under democracy, black officials have a different agenda.

From the frying pan we are now into the fire!

20 May: I collected *Mirroring Nature* from Johan Botha at Minuteman Press yesterday morning and looking through it, see that I forgot to put in a foreword. I meant to use this poem as the foreword.

heroes
not anti-heroes
romance
not reality
nobility
to dazzle the eyes
and consistency,
consistency,
cause and effect
we need the lies
Jekylls not Hydes
the art of fiction
the fiction of art

Max's design for the cover: a black undefined face looking into a colourful face: Which is the person? Which the mirror image? If the black face is looking, and the colourful face is the reflection, then art reflects the romantic, volatile, complex vision of the artist. If the colourful face is looking and the black face is the reflection, then art represents the reduction of the complexities of life to comprehensible but dark truths. The cover says it all. No need to read the book.

A picture is worth a thousand words.

I am sending a collection of my books and articles to UKZN-Westville, formerly the University of Durban Westville. Quereshini, my niece, has just bought a posh new car. She and her sister, Sharmini, are driving to Durban and have kindly

offered to take my books to the university. UKZN-Westville has put together special collections of the work of Durban writers; being formerly of Durban, I have a niche there.

17 July: For the past few months, I have been working on three things: organising my flat, a new book, *The Paradox of Being*, and the editing of a couple of books.

My Flat

Bersan recommended Nico Smit as someone who could make changes to the flat at a reasonable fee. He sang the praises of Smit and I believed I would be getting a professional to do the renovations. Smit's quotes were within the limits I had set so I gave him the job of removing the bathtub (which was quite scratched) and putting in a shower cubicle instead. I also asked him to replace the carpet in the bedroom with tiles.

Smit is a hard worker but he seemed to want to cut corners and didn't seem to care about the quality of the finishing. I became uneasy and felt that he would take advantage of me as an old woman and a coolie (and therefore ignorant). I had the distinct impression that he was not going to do the grouting after laying in the tiles in the bathroom so I made a point of asking about it. He finished the work in about two weeks and I was grateful for that but his workmanship left much to be desired. The pipe under the washbasin leaks; the shower floor does not slope to allow for drainage and the drain is set too high. Water leaks through the door when I shower and the general finish of the whole cubicle is crude.

It made me wonder. He had said to me on the first day that he arrived, "I am not a racist." I had no idea why he would make such a statement or what had prompted it. I didn't respond to it, but being South African, it stuck in my mind. Then noting his

attitude to the work, I began to realize that what he had meant by the statement was that he did not mind working for a black person. His work, however, indicated that he did. And treating him as an equal was, I suspect, subconsciously most offensive. He must have felt it a presumption on my part. We, in South Africa, were conditioned to believe in white superiority.

Perhaps I am wrong about Smit; he may just not be as competent as I had expected. But, as I was born long before 1994, I grew up in a system that inculcated belief in a hierarchical ordering of races. And I am aware that the system in which one lives, programs one's attitudes and beliefs, and in South Africa, one unconsciously operates in terms of racial superiority and inferiority even though one may consciously repudiate racism. As the society has not lost its racial structuring, we remain in the mind-set of racial prejudice and it still informs our functioning, at personal as well as institutional levels. I am more conscious of race than I would like to be.

In other countries, the hierarchical structuring of society is seen in terms of class and occupation – poor people are seen as inferior; the rich as superior. Once we, in South Africa, shed our consciousness of race, we will slip into the way of the rest of the world and will discriminate mainly in terms of class and occupation. The one thing we will never be rid of is discrimination.

16 July: Today I had a very clear demonstration of what it is to have a racist mind-set. I was at MAKRO, in the stationery section looking for correction fluid. I was charging down an aisle – even though I am nearly eighty I walk swiftly – and I was wearing my hat (to cover my white hair) and my sneakers. As I passed two white women standing in front of the shelves, I heard a sudden yelp and out of the corner of my eye saw one of

the women dash with the speed of lightning to retrieve her handbag which she had left a little way behind on the floor.

I realised that her instinct had immediately registered me as a thief. I had to laugh. Being black, dressed as I was and moving swiftly, I fit the stereotype. If I were a thief, I would have spotted the handbag and it would have disappeared without its owner even being aware. But I gave up a life of crime when I was about ten.

GEMS

I am being threatened with civil action by the Government Employees Medical Scheme (GEMS).

In July last year (2014), with the cost of living weighing heavily on me, I decided to change my medical aid option; I wanted a cheaper option. I informed GEMS officials who demanded to see my bank statements. Insurance, with the strong element of coercion in all its aspects, is endemic to capitalism, but it still surprised me to find that I had little freedom of choice. I did not respond.

Then in November 2014, I sent emails and faxes to GEMS informing them that I was terminating my membership as of 31 December 2014. I had also faxed them a form indicating that the GEMS debit order would be stopped as of 31 December 2014. There was no response.

Early in December, I sent an email reminding GEMS of termination of membership. I could not post anything as the Post Office was not functioning. It was in the midst of a strike that would last four months.

In the middle of January 2015, I received notification *by post* that I would be prosecuted for not paying my medical aid contribution. It came a month after the date on the letter. Instead of emailing me as they often did with marketing news, GEMS

had been relying on a postal service that was not functioning.

So I forwarded copies of messages and documents that I had emailed and faxed to GEMS in November, and I indicated that I was not liable for any contribution as I had resigned my membership as of 31 December 2014.

I received another threatening letter in February 2015 (again a month after the date on the letter); then again in March (also a month after *posting*). I emailed explaining again that I had resigned at the end of 2014. I also sent a registered letter (hopefully the Post Office *would* deliver that) containing copies of all relevant documents.

Then I checked my bank statements and found that Standard Bank had not waited until 31 December 2014, which was my instruction, to cancel the debit order and I realized I was liable for the December 2014 GEMS subscription. I pointed out in a letter that the error had been made by Standard Bank. I deposited the amount for December in the GEMS account and made it clear I was not liable for any contribution in 2015 as I had made no claims after I had resigned. Then GEMS wanted me to pay for November 2014. *November?* I did not. My bank statements, which were included in the registered mail, show payment made for that month.

This business is a clear demonstration that insurance is about money and not assistance. It does not concern GEMS that a person at eighty has had to give up medical aid. Actually, it does not concern me either. I don't intend to be ill as I have also lost all confidence in the capitalistic medical service of the modern world.

It seems that GEMS employs people who cannot read (all the documentation I sent to show that I am paid up has obviously not been understood). GEMS considers me a thief, has blacklisted me and put me on the NCR (no credit rating)

list – clearly an abuse of power.

Telkom

17 July: I may now have to begin a fight with Telkom. Even though I cancelled telephone service on May 19, 2015, it is now July and I am still being billed. It is obvious that parastatals are run by people who do not relate to the written word.

I went in this morning, armed with documents to prove I had cancelled the telephone service and someone recorded all the information on computer and told me I would get a final account in August which would acknowledge my cancellation. I know it is against the ethos of capitalist parastatals to stop the regular flow of money from the individual into their coffers – witness the umbrage of GEMS at the cancellation of my medical aid – so I hope I have not embarked on another battle against the capitalist right, protected by law, to exploit the individual.

July 2015: I am now reading *How Long will South Africa Survive: The Looming Crisis*, a book by RW Johnson that Tom and Lionel lent me. The book describes the corrupt governance of the ANC. Is there any other kind of governance? In the modern day, computer technology has given corruption a big boost and the ANC, in the good old tradition of democratic government, is selling out all the people of South Africa. The word *Ubuntu* hangs from a cross.

I decided to alternate my reading with watching *House of Cards*, the BBC Series about corruption in government. It shows the same kind of corruption that Johnson describes in his book. Both the book and the TV series clearly illustrate that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. This may be a cliché but it is the *absolute* truth. As I see it, it is the only absolute; all other truths are relative but that corruption stems

from the misuse of power, is absolute truth.

As our vote gives government absolute power, it is not possible for a government, any government anywhere, to be trustworthy and honourable. And when people who have been disempowered, like the ANC, are suddenly given the power to rule, they revel in it, at the expense of the whole society for which they have taken responsibility. And having no experience of government, they see only the power to exploit.

We were very naive believing that we would have responsible government after apartheid. Our naiveté stemmed from our confusion of racism with bad government. We believed if we got rid of racism, we would automatically have good government. Like the three little pigs, once they got rid of the big bad wolf, they could build a decent house to live in. The problem is that little pigs turn into big bad wolves.

I shall not waste my time voting in the next election. Whoever governs will be as rotten to the core. Perhaps by 2019, the economy will have totally collapsed and there won't even be elections.

Meanwhile, the ruling mafia will continue to promote crime while it deplores the rising crime rate.

Editing

As I edit my own work, I believe I have developed skills as an editor. Of course I have no idea of the protocols of editing i.e. the standardised symbols used to indicate the textual changes needed, so I invent my own. Having worked on my own books, I have developed a sense of the logic of language; can see repetition (of which I am terribly guilty), the value of cutting and pasting and the need to recast sentences.

I edited a book for Charles Cele, who bought my house in Cyprus Valley. Then I offered to edit Bersan Lesch's book

on dysfunctional schools in South Africa. Bersan's analyses, his personal reflections and his radical proposals for regenerating the system, present real insight into problems as well as practical, economical ways of reviving a system that has all but collapsed. As Bersan's approach is sensible and can make a real difference, I doubt if it will be given a chance by the blind who lead the blind.

Der Ring des Niebelungen

21 July: In March, Tom and Lionel had lent me DVDs of the 2010-11, Metropolitan Opera Production of Wagner's *Der Ring des Niebelungen*, directed by Robert Lepage. I spent months, March to June, watching and writing up my appreciation of Wagner's wonderful tetralogy. It is the final essay in *The Paradox of Being*.

Der Ring makes up for all the evils in my world. It is such a tremendous affirmation of human creativity and understanding. It is as inspiring as seeing pictures of the planet Pluto which was photographed on Tuesday, 14 July 2015. The spirit of Leonardo da Vinci lives on in those who venture to the ends of the universe. Thank heaven we can fly with artists and scientists into unknown worlds and forget about criminal politicians whose whole effort is to keep us confined to the cesspool they make of life. I put my essay on *Der Ring* on my website. It has not evoked any interest.

02 August: This week, I bought the DVD version of Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*. The DVD has subtitles; I am getting too hard of hearing for the taped version that I have. Carl Sagan presents the history of the exploration of the universe through the capacity of exceptional human beings to look beyond the limitations of social conditioning and find those laws of existence that keep us

moving forward in our understanding of the miraculous nature of the life that has so fortuitously developed in this obscure corner of the universe.

Science gives us genuine reasons for being moral human beings, better than any religion, but most people prefer the metaphor. The depiction of hell, in all its religious forms that were/are used to make us conform, only confirms in us a commitment to destructive deeds (because, I suspect, no one really believes in hell or the devil – a person in red tights with horns on his head, really!)

But the planet Venus reveals the reality of the hell we can make of Earth.

Watching *Cosmos* again, I realize that Carl Sagan has helped me to a more meaningful understanding of Klaus Kostermaier's books on Hinduism; and in particular, concepts such as *maya* (illusion) and *karma* (the ambivalent nature of human action) that indicate the paradoxical nature of existence. Sagan has also turned me into an armchair cosmonaut. Such tremendous gifts! And my exploration of the universe continues in the second series with Neil de Grasse Tyson.

04 August: On Saturday, the first of August, I opened my email at about five in the morning as usual and found an email from Tom. He and Lionel are inviting me to a performance at the State Theatre of the BOLSHOI BALLET. I nearly died and went to “heaven” right there. The Bolshoi will be at the State Theatre in Pretoria on 3 October. So I think this is a birthday present; I turn eighty in October. I am a very lucky person to have two such wonderful friends.

I watch my video of the *History of the Bolshoi Ballet* over and over and know the Bolshoi stars of the 1980s and 1990's. I look forward to seeing the new stars.

[On 2 September, we learned that the Bolshoi tour was cancelled. I was not disappointed; I still have my video.]

Tom reminded me of the days when we boycotted State Theatres as they were for whites only. And that reminded me of the time that as one of the representatives from Gazankulu on the State Theatre Board, I had to travel down from Giyani to Pretoria for meetings. It was sometime in the 1990's just before Alan Joseph became the CEO at PACT (Performing Arts Council, Transvaal). Alan is the nephew of Marje Rughubar, my good friend when I lived in Durban. Alan had been the lighting expert in our theatre ventures in Durban in the 1970s and '80s. Later he joined Des and Dawn Lindbergh, then worked at Sun City, was involved in the Market Theatre from its inception, eventually became its General Manager, and then CEO of PACT. He was handpicked by the outgoing CEO.

I realize now that most of us on the PACT Board were affirmative action appointees. We had absolutely no idea of the complexity of administration of such an organisation and I don't believe we had any influence on the operations of PACT. I cannot remember anything we discussed at the meetings, only the fights about corruption just before the Board was dissolved and replaced by a small committee.

I was in exactly the position that RW Johnson describes in his book: *How Long Will South Africa Survive: The Looming Crisis*. I was serving on a Board in which those at the head saw it as opportunity to loot, and the rest of us had no understanding of what was really going on or any idea of how to manage such an enterprise.

07 August: Last night I watched *The Invisible Woman*, a film about Ellen Ternan, Charles Dickens's mistress.

Literature has given passionate love sublime status – holding it up as the highest form of fulfilment and decreeing that without it, life is meaningless. If we look at what the film presents, we see a woman who gives in to passion, the much exalted physical and emotional passion of poets; in doing so she becomes the invisible woman of the title of the film.

For the poets, passion represents euphoric human fulfilment, but in society, passion is brought under control in the institution of marriage to ensure the survival of the species. And we develop appropriate attitudes to passion through conventions and rituals.

But passion defies convention and consequently becomes subversive outside of marriage. Passion is spontaneous and cannot be prescribed to, while marriage is seen as a permanent state. By placing volatile passion within the permanent state of marriage, we expect it to acquire its stability and longevity. But passion is natural, instinctive, momentary, while marriage is meant to be permanent (till death us do part). Marriage is meant to legitimise passion and ensure the proper care of children and passion, outside of marriage, is considered illicit. Children born out of wedlock, bear the burden of society's condemnation – being called illegitimate; bastards.

As passion is not a continuous but an undulating state, it cannot by itself sustain a marriage. It needs the ingredient of compatibility, shared understandings, to keep it within a marriage. Where there is no compatibility, marriage becomes a prison sentence. That is what it is for Mr Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

That is what it may have been for Dickens who could not share the euphoria of his writing and his performances with his wife. In the film, she is shown as resentful of his artistic

creativity. When Dickens meets Ellen Ternan, an actress who loves his novels, he finds passion as well as compatibility, the formula for a lasting intimate relationship.

But what should have been a sublime experience, was turned into a somewhat tawdry and shameful intrigue as it defied convention. Ellen had to be hidden from the world and Dickens had to keep up the facade of a family man with his wife and children.

In modern novels, the idea of sublime passionate love has come under scrutiny. In John Grisham's *The Partner*, he challenges the idea of passionate love by showing us that even when passion combines with compatibility, it cannot compete with the exhilaration of power and greed. And with women's liberation, women like men, exult in their ability to exploit.

15 August: Last Tuesday, August 11, Sharmini, my niece, lent me Harper Lee's book, *Go Set a Watchman*, around which there is a furore involving the following:

- 1) capitalist exploitation by opportunistic publishers;
- 2) an eighty-nine year old author who apparently does not know what she is doing;
- 3) publication fifty plus years after the book was written;
- 4) the book as the first draft of *To Kill a Mockingbird*;
- 5) a clever editor who helped to shape it into the more conventional novel that became a hit and was made into a movie;
- 6) confusion about the book as a prequel not a sequel;
- 7) and most of all, the noble hero of *To Kill A Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch, shown as an idol with clay feet.

The general consensus: *Go Set a Watchman* is inferior to *To Kill*

a Mockingbird. It does not follow conventional expectations; it does not have the logic of cause and effect that traditionally turns a story into a work of art; and Atticus is not the noble hero who, in the Deep South, stands up against racism and espouses the cause of a black man's human rights.

But for me, the novel is like the character of Dr Jack Finch, Atticus's brother, who does not present his arguments in terms of abstract principles of logic. He creates his own logic which is made up of personal references – to which we may or may not have access – strung together requiring us to make connections and find personal meanings.

Unlike *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which fulfils standard expectations of good versus evil, *Go Set a Watchman* presents good and evil in a human mixture that applies to us all. It plainly requires us to work out for ourselves where we stand. We are not – like Scout (Jean Louise) – to follow blindly where her father, Atticus, leads. Atticus, himself, has worked through what he believes and his understanding of the situation is not idealistic; that makes him human. His beliefs are based on his experiences and we are not required to agree with his estimation of the situation.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Scout's view of Atticus as a model of integrity, reduced him to a romantic ideal. In *Go Set a Watchman*, she challenges him, and that is the moment of her liberation, as well as her father's liberation. She need no longer be dependent on him for what she believes and does, and he can be a human being who makes mistakes.

There is no such thing as perfection in the human condition; human beings are limited by their perspectives. When we become aware of our limitations, we become capable of change.

Atticus's understanding that people without experience

cannot make good governors, is logical. However, when such a perception becomes conflated with racism and leads to continued exclusion on the grounds of race, it requires more consideration than Jean Louise's simple condemnation of it as racist.

It requires a whole new perspective.

It is true that black people have been discriminated against and cruelly treated but their *suffering* does not automatically endow them with the ability to govern; suffering is not the basis for such a responsibility. Jean Louise's arguments are based on emotion not on reason; not on what is practicable.

To some extent, so are Atticus's arguments; he has always condemned unfair treatment of black people and has been compassionate at a basic level of interaction. But when Black people want to take on the responsibility of government, he finds them not competent. It does not occur to him that they simply lack experience and are capable of developing the required skills. Deep down, he is responding to his conditioning in a racist society. He is what we, in South Africa during apartheid, referred to as a white liberal.

Both Jean Louise and Atticus are thinking in terms of affirmative action – one for, the other against. But affirmative action is not the answer; it leads to cosmetic changes. Simply changing the colour of officials does not ensure good government and revolutions tend only to transfer power from one group to another; they do not change the tendency of rulers to exploit and misuse power. Affirmative Action which simply means being inducted into existing forms is not the answer and does not ensure power to the people.

Every society, organisation and family is organised on the capitalistic principle of pooling resources for the benefit of all. And it is in the administration of resources that corruption arises. What is needed for good government is a means to ensure clean

administration.

That is what revolutions should be about – not simply the transfer of power from one group to another, but the ability to establish and maintain systems that are not prone to corruption.

Go Set a Watchman is a modern novel, deep, intriguing, challenging and satisfying. It is different in style from *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, which is romantic. *Go set a Watchman* is realistic.

Harper Lee was ahead of her times.

September 5: I spent the whole morning editing. At about 3 p.m. when I was in the middle of my afternoon exercises, there was a knock on the door – the complex Security Guards, with my neighbour, Michael. They asked me to put on my shoes and come down to my parking space. They wanted to show me that my car had been broken into during the night. It had rained heavily in the night; the first rains in months. Heavy rains and blackouts, I learned, are when gangs strike. Apparently a gang got into the complex and broke into several cars – all those, like mine, without alarm systems.

From my car, they got the few coins in the ash tray. These thieves gain little but they are making glass merchants and providers of security systems rich. This is the second time in about eight months that I have had to replace a window in my car – the smash and grab last December and now the break-in.

My sense of security in this complex has, for the moment, gone with the glass of the side window. This is more confirmation of Johnson's views in his book: *How Long Will South Africa Survive: The Looming Crisis*.

September 6: The police were informed of the break-ins at about noon, yesterday. They have yet to arrive. Under apartheid the police were hyperactive; under “democracy” they are comatose.

September 9: I took the car to Rogen’s Auto-Electrical in Pretoria and had an alarm and anti-hijacking system installed.

Rogen Moodliyar is a good friend; probably the only friend I have in Laudium. He is aghast that I have had to self-publish all my books. He has a niece working for Juta Publishers and is determined to get my work formally published. I am grateful for his interest but I am quite content just to be writing and sharing with a few friends.

Still, I have accepted his invitation and will meet with his niece.

2018

ABOUT APARTHEID

Sheena, a person responding via my website to my views on apartheid, is quite right in assuming that I do not condemn apartheid outright. Looking back on my life, I can see the benefits, as well as the evils, of having lived through colonialism and apartheid.

I believe what the scientists have shown us about life and existence. They have made us aware that as we live in an expanding universe, with no knowledge of a beginning or end of existence, truth becomes relative not absolute. Consequently, human existence is enigmatic and remains so despite the rules and regulations that we develop to bring fixed order and meaning into our lives. Though we treat the rules and regulations by which we live as absolute truths – they are not absolute.

Apartheid rules and regulations attempted to impose absolute ideas about race, but revolutionaries challenged supremacist views of racial superiority and inferiority and forced us all into a wider understanding of what it means to be human. That allowed us to repudiate the idea of “race” as the determining factor of identity.

Through the struggle against apartheid, we learned that “race” was a false concept and we are now beginning to free ourselves from the prejudice that existed not only between black and white but between black and black as well. That old adage “it’s an ill wind that blows nobody any good” applies even to apartheid. Nothing that we humans do is all good or all bad.

As we cannot foresee with absolute certainty, the consequences of our actions, all our actions are karmic. By that I mean they are paradoxical – they have both beneficial as well as detrimental results. Both the positive and the negative inhere in everything human. As scientists express it: every action has an equal and opposite reaction.

Apartheid forced us to examine the concept of “race” and to acknowledge that we are all human and the word “race” simply indicates expedient variations in the human condition. It does not indicate a superior or inferior capacity to deal with life’s vicissitudes. Such an understanding was an unintended but positive consequence of apartheid and colonialism..

July 2018:

Last year, I was suddenly afflicted with pain down my right leg. The doctor prescribed meloxicam as he assumed that I had developed arthritis. It worked for a year.

At the beginning of winter this year, 2018, the pain in my leg and in the small of my back forced me to give up my half-hour morning walk and my daily morning exercises. Then, with the sudden severe cold spell towards the end of winter, the pain became unbearable. X-rays showed that the pain in my right leg was a referred pain. The problem was with my spine which was now curved and showed other signs of deterioration. The doctor, thinking in terms of surgery, informed me that no doctor would operate on someone my age.

Doctor or no doctor, I would not have agreed to surgery. Some years ago, two friends in their seventies, Susan and Rita, had submitted to surgery and had died in the process. They were people with whom I had worked closely in the Reach for Recovery programme that offers support to breast cancer patients. I had loved them dearly and believe that they would still be alive if they had not undergone surgery.

I had never experienced any kind of severe pain in all my years, so this, just three months before my eighty-third birthday, was a new experience. For the first time in my life, I learned what it meant to suffer. I had to get out of bed several

times during the night and walk about to alleviate the pain. Then Lionel brought me a pain killer that cut out most of the pain and I could sleep again. Within a week, I was functioning fairly normally once more.

August: When you are 80+ people looking at you, see behind you the grim reaper with his scythe. If you dare to present with any kind of physical problem, that scythe takes on a dreaded reality. Though you live as you have always done, now perhaps with a bit of a limp, it is like being at the movie of your life; the major conflict is over and the action is moving towards the expected end.

And I had another problem; I am not sure whether it merely coincided with the pain or was the result of it. I found I had written myself out and was without inspiration for a new book. In the 1980's and early 1990s, I had written plays, but after I retired in 1998, I took to writing biographies, poems, essays and one or two very short novels – novellas really. Having written for the last twenty years and having self-published about twenty-four little books, now, towards the end of my eighty-second year, I no longer had anything to write about, and more than the pain in my back and in my right leg, was the pain of having temporarily lost the purpose of my life.

Racism and Sexism

In June, I had completed the biography of a man of my father's generation; writing biographies has allowed me to explore the meanings that people living under oppression make of life.

After the biography, I set myself the task of examining how the idea of race had evolved. As I totally reject the concept of "race" and see it as a form of paranoia that results in racism, I

had already written a little essay about that in *Octogenarian Adventures*, so I was not sure how to proceed.

Then I received an email from Mike Stainbank informing me that his niece was studying a play in an anthology that also contained my play, *Flight from the Mahabharath*, written in 1992, twenty-six years ago. And that gave me an idea. I would examine how the consideration of “race” had led to the inclusion of my play in that anthology.

The fact that the play has achieved recognition, slight as it is, is the result of its having being placed within a racial context. And that sets me squarely within the boundary of “race” – a concept I reject. My play, strongly influenced by the ideas of Professor Mary Daly of Boston University, is about women’s liberation and is a rejection of cultural norms that keep women enslaved to housekeeping and motherhood.

As I am of “Indian” descent and have used the *Mahabharata* as the vehicle for my critique of women’s oppression, those who read the play see it in terms of Indian culture, rather than as a critique of cultural norms that keep women in subservience. And that also places me in a racial identity as Indian.

Being a South African, I am most definitely not Indian. But I am seen as “Indian,” and the play is seen as an Indian play. That is the reason it was chosen by Kathy Perkins for her collection of South African plays, titled *Black South African Women*. She was being politically correct, making sure all black ‘races’, African, Coloured and Indian, were represented in her anthology.

Though the racism of colonialism and apartheid, defined me as “Indian”, I am not Indian. True my forebears came from India; they were Indian. But I was born in South Africa, so were my parents, and my understanding of life did

not develop from an Indian consciousness, but from a colonial consciousness that promoted segregation, and would give rise to the revolutionary movement that repudiated the racism that most of us had simply, unquestioningly adopted. Without colonialism and apartheid and the revolution to which they led, I may never have discovered that “race” is a false concept.

Despite my repudiation of “race”, the reception of *Flight from the Mahabharath*, places me squarely within it. Somehow the words “Flight from” do not weigh against the title of the Indian epic. As the play is seen as part of Indian culture, it illustrates the hold that “race” has on our thinking.

We see people in terms of “race” as that gives us an immediate set of stereotypical circumstances by which to evaluate them. To see someone simply as human makes that person incomprehensible; we depend on racial trappings to be able place a person within a context. In this modern world, with people moving about freely over the globe, we are still tied to racial stereotyping even though we now encounter many people who have moved out of the culture of their forebears.

And with the opportunities available in modern times, people all over the world are adapting to new ways that come with the advanced technology that originates in Europe and America, has spread throughout the world and takes us into new cultural experiences. In South Africa, you see people of all colours walking down the street with eyes and ears focused on tablets, communicating, not with the people around them, but with acquaintances in cyber space.

“Racial” differences should now be recognized as merely the variety of ways in which people in different parts of the world have adapted to their environments, and that the word “race” simply denotes GEOGRAPHY, not essential human differences.

The women in *Flight from the Mahabharath* reject the traditions that force them to accept the limitations placed on women; that keep them enslaved to being wives and mothers. They liberate themselves from traditions that simply reduce women to their biological functions.

Elizabeth Gaskell, a great friend of Charles Dickens, is the only author, I have read, who comes close to celebrating a woman's right to remain single. Most authors treat marriage as natural and necessary; I regard it as social conditioning (brainwashing). Unmarried women are pitied and despised; terms such as spinster, old maid, witch, reflect society's disapproval.

Reference to single women as witches is indicative of the subconscious envy of the single woman's power and freedom to be and to become.

I am a happy witch.

8 August: My niece Diricilla lent me a number of continental DVDs, mainly Danish – *Nordic Noir* – which I found too *noir* and could not watch. Amongst them, was the series, *The Legacy*. As it was not about *physical* violence, I watched it but found it difficult to engage with the characters. It made me realize that I am very dependent on being able to identify “the good guy” and follow his progress through a story.

In *The Legacy*, I found no such guide and was alienated from the characters so I watched their jumble of activities quite dispassionately and found them more effective in alienating me than Bertolt Brecht's formulation of Epic Theatre.

The Legacy presents two women as lead characters; Gro Grønnegaard and Signe Larsen. Both are intelligent, creative women actively involved in building their lives. Signe, the one who overcomes great obstacles, represents, to some extent, the

typical heroine; she is creative, enterprising and very generous. She is the one who gains the legacy that allows her to engage in diverse enterprises. But in the end, she gives up the legacy and the independent, highly creative life it afforded her, to become a wife and mother. I found this stereotypical ending ghastly.

And this from a woman writer!

September

I am not a person who kowtows to the narrow-mindedness of others, but then I do not live in community so I don't feel the kind of social pressures that restrict freedom of expression. My four walls do not a prison make; but for others – living in community certainly does.

As a loner, free of the shackles of social convention, I realize that I have become quite condescending towards those who are dependent on external recognition for their self-respect. And working with people on the biography that I had recently completed, I came up against those whose self-worth is dependent on conformity to social convention. That gave me new insights into human behaviour and made me understand why I could not hate Bradley Headstone in Charles Dickens's novel *Our Mutual Friend*.

Dickens presents Bradley as a violent and obsessive man. His surname, Headstone, is an indication of Dickens's ironic, somewhat sadistic humour, and in the DVD of the novel, Bradley is shown in a graveyard proposing to the heroine of the story over a gravestone.

Dickens shows no sympathy for this character and as a young person, when I read the book some fifty years ago, I went along with Dickens. But now as an old woman, I see Bradley as a man of low self-esteem; his feelings of inferiority, having been inculcated through the class system, remind me of the effects of

apartheid. Classism and racism are the means by which we propagate self-hate – as well as prejudice. And self-hate is much more demoralising than prejudice. Without self-respect one can never be free; one is always dependent on the acclaim of others; and when there is no acclaim, only contempt and ridicule, it gives rise to hatred and violence.

10 September

This morning, I received an email of the final version of the biography. It was crudely laid out and all kinds of additions had been inserted into the text by those seeking personal acclaim. I became aware that there was a deep gulf between me and the people who had commissioned the book. As I am a twenty-first century South African and they are nineteenth century Indians, they could not understand me or my work.

19 September

At 5 a.m. I sent off this email to Mike Stainbank.

Email: Dear Mike, Here's a thought for you. You will never get justice from the system so instead of wasting all your energy and resources on criminals, why don't you use that energy to build The Apartheid Museum yourself? You can build the facility that you envisioned. You meant it as a service to the community and those who stole your vision, have not created your vision. So there is still space to build your TAM even if you have to change the name. It will mean work, but it will be better than beating your head against a wall.

I had been mulling over the trashing of the biography and had subconsciously made a connection to Mike's The Apartheid Museum (TAM). It had prompted my email.

I also found myself thrown back on an insight that the biography had given rise to that I had suppressed as I knew it would be regarded as offensive; people seeking acclaim are not able to deal with revelations of themselves as victims. But the trashing of the biography has now allowed me to explore the insight I had ignored.

And that takes me back to Marabastad in Pretoria.

When “Indian” and “Coloured” people began arriving in Pretoria in the late nineteenth century, they were settled in separate sections of the African location of Marabastad. The area between Streuben and Bloed Streets became the “Coloured” section; the “Indian” section was between Bloed and Barber Streets and the African section from Barber to Maraba Streets. As only a narrow street separated the sections, it did not prevent interaction between the groups.

Though race consciousness kept people in their separate sections, there was surreptitious social mixing, especially between “Coloured” and “Indian” people. And there was Mrs Ferguson’s school. Though established for the “Coloured” community, it admitted “Indian” and African children as well and was probably the first mixed “race” school in South Africa.

The “Indian” man, whose biography I had written, attended Mrs Ferguson’s school where he mixed freely with “Coloured” and African pupils. Later, as a talented sportsman, he played in “Indian” and “Coloured” teams and became very active in promoting non-racial sport in Marabastad.

He fell in love with a “Coloured” girl and married her. But her father disapproved of the marriage, on racial grounds, so they never set up home together. But they had a child who was brought up in the “Coloured” community.

When the Nationalist leaders of the white community came under the influence of Hitler’s racist rhetoric, they began to

see the dangers of allowing the various black groups to live in such close proximity. They could unite and challenge White authority. Places like Marabastad, presented a threat.

Out of this fear, was born Apartheid and the Group Areas Act of 1950, which would confine the different “race” groups in geographically separate areas and keep them alienated.

And to ensure black adherence to these restricted areas, the Nationalist Government employed the strategy of ‘separate and unequal’. To fuel distrust and enmity between the black groups and keep them separate, “Coloureds” and “Indians”, two tiny minorities, were placed in somewhat better conditions and circumstances than African people. And the strict separation of “racial” groups under the Group Areas Act was quite successful in alienating black groups from one another.

The “Indian” community in Marabastad was moved out of the city into an isolated area in Pretoria West, which was named Laudium, (from the *Latin laudem* meaning praise, glory; fame). And in Laudium the people, in general, became traditionally “Indian”. In lauding, praising, glorifying ancient customs and traditions, they erected cultural barriers that reinforced the physical barriers between themselves and other black groups.

And the purpose of apartheid was achieved: the separation of people through *laudem* of racial difference.

Race and Racism

23 September

As I had set myself the task of investigating the origin of the concept “race,” I had looked up academic accounts of race and racism. But I am no academic. As I do not understand scholarly language, I must explore my own ideas of the origins

of the concept.

To begin with, I see “race” as a false concept as it conveys the idea that the cultural variations of behaviour that arise out of human adaptation to different environments, are inherent human traits. But cultural differences are not essential differences; they simply indicate a variety of responses to a variety of natural surroundings. Underlying cultural differences are typical human survival responses; the setting up of families and communities, the development of work, trade and worship.

All early cultures developed forms of worship and belief in the supernatural. And the god or gods that people worshipped arose from the environments in which they lived; tree gods, river gods, mountain gods, sea gods, etc. and are personifications of the powers that humans lack. Different environments and needs determined the forms of deities and religious practices.

If we focus on the differences in practice, we blind ourselves to what is common – belief in the supernatural. And the supernatural is simply a projection of the power that humans lack. Focus on differences in practice – on cultural trappings – leads to the false idea of *inherent* human differences.

Similarly, when we focus on minor differences in the human physique, we see them as inherent – not as the result of adaptation to differing environments. Differences in skin, hair, eye colour, facial features, physical build etc. reflect life in hot or cold climates, in sandy or glacial deserts, forests, hills, etc., i.e., differences in environmental conditions that lead to *physical* differences – not to differences in human capabilities.

We are the products of evolution and our adaptation to various environments has resulted in a variety of human beings and cultures. Differences in human development result from the challenges that the environments in which they live present. And “race” simply indicates the environment in which our ancestors

evolved. We all belong to the human species, and like plants and animals, our adaptation to our different environments, has led to great variety in external features and in human behaviours. In essence, however, we are all of one race – the human race.

But as we instinctively fear that which appears different, our fear has given rise to the concept “race” as essential human differences. And racism is simply xenophobia.

As fear of difference is deeply embedded in our psyches, when we repudiate racism, we do not repudiate the false concept of “race” that sees external difference as inherent and as indications of superiority or inferiority. And those who treat other human beings as inferior, as in slavery and apartheid, do not recognise the intensity of the xenophobia that consumes them and leads to their inhumanity.

As racism is seen only in the oppressor, not the oppressed, it is treated as a top down phenomenon i.e. the prejudice of those with power.

But it is a bottom up process as well.

People who are victims of racism, do not realize that they too are racist. All those who live in a racist system imbibe the culture of racism –victims as well as perpetrators. Victims develop as much hatred for those “above” as those “above” develop contempt for them. But when we attempt to eliminate racism, we concentrate only on those “above” and simply assume that those “below” are free of prejudice as they are the victims.

But victims are not free of racial prejudice; they have spent all their lives hating the oppressor. And in South Africa, where the emphasis on “racial” differences led to a hierarchical ordering of “races”, those placed at different levels on the

ladder of racism, hated and feared all the races on the rungs above and below them.

Baden Complex

When I came to live in this housing complex in 2015, I was among people of many cultural backgrounds, mostly indigenous people, with a scattering of people of other backgrounds. As we are still very race-conscious, in this place I am seen as “Indian”. And according to the racist formula, being “Indian” means I am deeply ethnocentric and I am a person of means.

That I am well off is true; the sale of my house had made me so. And, being old, a woman, alone and “Indian”, I am also exploitable. My friendliness ensures this. And Michael and Nyarai, a Zimbabwean couple living right next door to me in this complex, saw opportunity and swindled me out of a large sum of money.

That made me vaguely aware of my vulnerability.

As I have brought too many possessions from the house in which I had lived before I moved into this small flat, I find myself constantly discarding stuff. A neighbour who saw this, wanted the items I was discarding. Whenever he saw me struggling with objects too large for me to handle comfortably, he would come over to help and to accept the items for himself. So we got into the habit of greeting and acknowledging one another.

As he lived right opposite, I became aware of his family and something of his circumstances. I saw that he was a ‘house-husband’, a somewhat quizzical term from the early days of Women’s Liberation. He stayed home, looked after the baby, ferried his daughters to and from school, and took care of the household while his wife, who had kept her maiden name, went

to work every day. I was impressed. How modern, how liberated and in a black community! I had thought only whites had the courage to disregard tradition. The man's wife appeared to be a very progressive woman. From what I could see, she was determined to give her daughters access to all that the modern world offers. They go to a very good school and are encouraged to be inventive and active.

After some months the family moved out of the complex. They had been too cramped in the flat and had found more spacious accommodation elsewhere. A few days after they had moved out, the man came back into the complex to their recently vacated flat. I assumed there was unfinished business there. Later that evening, while I was editing my work, there was a knock on the door. It was the man; I assumed he had come to say goodbye. I invited him in and we sat down to talk. He expressed interest in my work as a writer. I had once given one of his daughters a copy of *Rhulani's Dilemma*, one of only two children's books that I have written.

When he saw the jigsaw puzzle that I was working on, he seemed to want a puzzle. I had recently given away most of my puzzles as I am down-sizing; the recent problems with my back and leg had made me realize that it was necessary. As he seemed to want a puzzle, I found one that was much too easy for me and gave that to him for his daughters.

It did not occur to me that he was in his cups; my sense of smell is not as sharp as it used to be and it took some time before I realized it. It was when he began repeating himself, began fumbling with his keys and my keys, that I realised it. Then he said that he was interested in my work as a writer and asked if I would write his story. I never refuse such requests. He told me he was from Ethiopia and I thought it would be interesting to learn about Ethiopia, his reasons for leaving and

having to make a life for himself in South Africa.

Then he indicated that he was ashamed of the life he was leading; he thought of himself as a kept man. I was surprised. He was living a good life with a wife who provided him with everything including a car, tablet and pocket money. But he said that he was not on good terms with his wife; that he liked to drink and did not want his wife to know that I would be writing his story.

After he left, I decided I could not become involved in writing this biography. That it had to be a secret from his wife and that he liked to drink made me very uncomfortable. I began to wonder if this was not leading to another scam like the one Michael and Nyarai had pulled. He had established that I am comfortably off when he had asked if I had bought my flat. No, I will not write his story.

I realize I am an easy target.

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Life is a Miracle

