

Under the Flamboyant Tree: An Exploration of Learning

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Extracts: 2007 – 2010: South Africa

I started my doctorate, "Under the Flamboyant Tree: an exploration of learning" in 2006. My thesis was based on the experience of ten people (myself included) who visited South Africa in 2007. I wanted to find a way of presenting the authentic voice of the research participant and to enable the reader to experience what we had seen and felt. So, as part of the doctorate, I produced some short pieces of creative non-fiction. There are eleven vignettes in total.

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1.1 Under the Flamboyant Tree



I gaze out of the coach window as we pull up alongside the line of shops.

“Not more craft shops.” I hear the all-too common refrain from the seat behind me. The complainant, a man in his 50s, slumps into his seat, arms folded, look resigned.

We all troop out. Not really craft shops. There is a single line of concrete buildings with a supermarket on one end, an off licence in the middle, a restaurant over the top and a gift shop. It all seems quite dreary but the weather is warm and I am glad to stretch my legs.

On the opposite side of the road is the most magnificent tree with the brightest orangey-red blossom. It looks quite out of place on this grubby, dust-infested roadway.

I'm just aware of the family (or is it families?) nestling against its trunk. Children, women, men. Sitting quietly. I spy a wheelchair. Initially I don't see them. I see their plastic bags and clutter beneath the magnificent Flamboyant Tree and I feel slightly irritated at the neon blue flotsam and the way it detracts from the splendour of my tree.

Jon stares at the family. He starts questioning our guide. A muttering. Rumour ripples. I become aware of some uneasiness. These Swaziland families are starving. The woman beside the wheel chair has had her leg amputated. They are victims of Aids. They are homeless.

A group of us charge into the supermarket. Bread. Milk. Cake. Cheese. Crisps. Chocolate. I remember the film I saw about the concentration camps, the soldiers giving chocolate to the Jews and killing them with kindness. One by one we troop across, accompanied by our experienced and compassion-fatigued guide. We put down our gifts, smile and back off. We get back on the bus. No one speaks. Embarrassed by the ridiculous gesture. Overwhelmed by its inadequacy.

Deserving or non deserving poor? Genuine or con artists? Does it even matter?

My Flamboyant Tree is still quite magnificent. I gaze at its fiery red blossom. I would still like to see it uncluttered. I would still like to gaze at it, absorb its colours and shape, drink in the splendour, wallow in the world it transports me to, lose myself in its sparkling ruby blossom and emerald leaves. I don't want anything to intrude, to mar the sensation,

to force me to act and re-act. I am emotionally drained. I have had a hell of a year. I don't want to think. Only to marvel. I don't want to feel.

We drive on. "To another craft shop," groans the disembodied and disgruntled voice behind me.

1.2 Rachel's story: Knowing tigers definitely weren't in Africa

The minibus clatters up the red soil dirt track. In the distance I can see the last of the schools we are visiting. A single storey, horse stable arrangement. Breeze blocks surrounding a quadrangle. As we approach a sea of black excited faces crowd round and then part to let us through. You can touch the excitement in the air. We drive into the quadrangle and the bus stops. The children surge forward chattering and cheering. Our cameras, already out, clicking and whirring. 200 faces beaming up at us.

A group of adults emerge from one of the buildings. Governors, teachers, the headteacher. Mostly large ladies in colourful dresses and headscarves. They hug us and shake our hands. I am embraced at least 15 times. The warmth is overwhelming. It is difficult to know where to look or what to do next. I feel myself welling up. I glance across at my colleagues. All of us seem stunned. The children continue to run around, laughing, calling out to one another, watching us, unaware of the effect they are having. The most beautiful scenery blighted by such poverty. Aids. Orphans. No electricity. No furniture. No toilets. Desperately sad.

A wall of sound erupts. Unaccompanied and multiple harmonies. The 150-strong choir of children and adults. Such sweet, sweet sounds. All of us sway with the rhythms, caught in the moment, in the warm, windy, dust-filled square that fills this empty space where complete strangers meet for the first time. The shabbiness, the poverty of the children, the lack of electricity and running water – all is forgotten, irrelevant in the joy of the moment.

We have permission to go into the classrooms. I head towards the reception room. The paint on the walls is flaking. About 20 children are in the room. The teacher tells me there can be many more. The wind and the cold keep them away but the promise of a hot meal from the drum-like cauldrons draws them here.

It's one of the first schools I've seen with a reception class that actually practices the way I would. They have a role play corner and a maths table and a sticking area. It is the poorest .. one of the poorest schools we've seen and yet, here, in the middle of nowhere, is this oasis.. I am moved. Later, I knew, in the darkness of the safari hut I would cry .. the tears would fall for these children ... this poverty ... and for this glorious practice.

I feel embarrassment and a little shame. All week I've been thinking, 'it's not appropriate and you know we wouldn't do that in England .. because it's not led from the children'. All my philosophies of teaching. Thinking, 'you don't really quite understand it yet but it's not your fault' ... But here, now, looking at this. It's blowing me away. I stare round the room. I look at the role play area. It's just ... I don't know what .. just scraps and rags .. stones and twigs. And the paint is still peeling off the walls. But they know what needs to be done and they are doing it. Could I do this? Without the help of other adults, my big budget, my great resource base. With all these trimmings do I do better?

I can see clearly here that learning is about dreams and ideas and helping the imagination grow. It's about the quality of the questions the children ask and the way everyone pulls together here.

They are coming towards me again. Great welcoming smiles, offering me bottles of water. Some days your heart just breaks.

1.3 Hannah's story: Toby

You can tell a lot from people's eyes. You can see enthusiasm and joy. You can see that thirst for knowledge, keenness, interest. And we had seen it everywhere we went. You can also see hope and expectation. It just shines through. I would be the last to say we don't have that in England. There are children everywhere who are motivated in their education but here it was endemic. Not just in the pupils and staff but in everybody. Like catching sight of the sun after a long hard winter and feeling your soul light up. And I saw it in Toby.

I still often think about her because she was somebody who really wanted to make a career for herself. She lived in one of those shanty towns. Sorry 'informal accommodation'. I have the image before me - the corrugated iron roofs, walls festooned with newspaper and the television flickering through the half open doors.

She was determined she was going to get an education and make her life better by working as a chambermaid in our hotel. And she seemed to me to represent all those young children and their aspirations and how they hoped that through their education they would get on, get a better job, somewhere nice to live. She had dreams. Everyone I met did. Their language just sparkled with it.

It reminded me of me: how I came late to teaching and started off as a governor and then got interested in schools ... didn't have any A'levels and managed to forge my way through and did my degree and everything. Twelve years ago. Hardly seems believable. I just thought how important it is to feel the door is open and how optimistic everyone

is here and now, after apartheid. Like someone has lifted this enormous and oppressive weight. Where everything is possible if you just 'give a little whistle'.

Through Toby I understood how important it was to find my political voice and use it and that actually I can make a difference. Even if it is only a difference to one person or one school it is my job to do that and to shout out loud and long to make others hear.

And I do have an important job, not just as educator but as a line of defence against the bulldozer 'apartheid'.

Toby was such a mix of hope and naivety with her unshaken belief that things were on the up. She had this passion for books. And she gave one to me. The most wonderful thing. She gave me an Andy McDowall book. I've still got it. I haven't read it but it's kind of precious to me without reading it. She saw me reading a sequel to Peter Pan and I bought her the original. A story of hope, eternal youth, boundless energy and a capacity to carry on believing in the impossible. It seemed highly appropriate.

1.4 May's Story: Kirsty's Cake

Kirsty baked a cake to help raise money for Qinisani. It seemed strange: selling food to raise money for children that don't have anything to eat but it's a response from the heart. I expect she baked the cake with her mum in a modern kitchen. Not like the kitchen in the rural primary school. Two cauldrons and a gas cylinder.

The children all crowded round the photographs as I put them up. "What's that Mrs Mitre? That kitchen isn't like my kitchen." And straight away we made a connection through a disconnect. Pictures are very powerful. They touch you inside. I did my assembly on Tuesday. I was scared stiff but I was on a mission. Sometimes you know when the children are listening. The silence has a different quality to it: a stillness, an intensity. I took my story to the primary school yesterday and today Suzy's mum, who works here, told me how Suzy came home asking questions and telling her about my journey. That made Suzy's mum interested.

I can't do much. I don't have a class and I don't have a lesson to teach. But if I can touch 10 people it will be something. I came back so fired up. It's not difficult to feel that way when all you see is hungry children and basic facilities. But the lack of feedback is a real dampener and it's difficult to keep it going. I want to be able to say to the children 'you made this difference' but it's not that easy. Suzanne at ProjectBuild says the money will help buy uniforms for some of the orphans at the school. But the cheque I sent came back again yesterday and time is lost again.

I saw a news story last night and it brought back all the memories. I still can't get over the hunger. I wasn't prepared for that. Each school was just that little bit more shocking. Just when you thought you'd seen it all there was another level you could go down to.

At times I've felt quite irritated. It's been very difficult coming back into school and seeing all our children have got and how ungrateful some of them are.. and how they don't appreciate things and . . how they don't want the opportunity to learn and the children out there did. They were hungry to learn. The children here just don't realise how lucky they are. They don't cook round a cauldron. Their ovens aren't 50 years old with the doors hanging off.

It's not only the children who don't get it. People ask me if I had a nice holiday. There are some similarities I suppose. I've got a lot of pictures and a lot of memories. The memories are etched on my mind..... Still it was nice of Kirsty to bake that cake.

1.5 Rose's story: Bursting Bubbles

My bubble burst. It was a very pretty, comfortable bubble and I enjoyed floating around in it. It gave the world a nice tint and I felt safe and secure looking out and floating past.

I thought I'd float round South Africa. But the bubble completely burst when I visited King Shaka secondary school and saw the doors hanging off the cookers, the holes in the ground where the science lab used to be and the barbed wire all around the compound. I didn't understand the full impact of the political situation on ordinary people's lives and I just was incredibly naive I think. I'd left behind this lovely little western, almost middle class, background, cosseted from the world and I just didn't come back the same person. Knowledge and understanding can be two uncomfortable friends.

And I think what we saw has kind of opened my eyes. I think "well that was South Africa and that was the best of the African countries. What are the rest like?" How awful is it for some people? And may be it's not so awful for some people. Maybe they're still living their type of lives and some of them are not as bad as we think. But I think the vast majority of them have a fairly miserable life and it doesn't seem fair or right.

Aids was just a huge issue and I could almost see it spreading before my eyes. I couldn't get my head round how the children were orphaned in such huge numbers. I mean how that happened and how we as human beings have got to do something to stop it spreading. Just have to do it.

In terms of what we set out to do: to look at how teachers and adults work together we brought nothing back. But I think we came home with something much deeper and richer for our school. Something it didn't have before. We've been able to communicate to the children our first hand experience, the difficulties that some other children face and they've been able to take that on board and show sympathy and want to do something positive about it. And I've seen some children taking that outside school - fundraising and telling their parents 'this happens and this happens'. I think the children sensed my passion. We had so much to share.

Somehow all this has made me more tolerant, less quick to judge, more willing to accept that other people have different priorities and standards. It's just a greater understanding that people live their lives in different ways and they have different things to contend with and their personalities are, well, very different and that's OK because diversity's great. And I think I've probably said those words before but I don't know that I really meant them. But now I mean them.

So now my bubble has burst but the upside of that is I feel more connected with the rest of the world. It's more messy but it's more real.

1.6 Diane's Story: Mrs T

"Aids is a massive problem. I would say 200 of our children were affected by aids last year – someone in the family dying and often the parents. We send home some 50 food parcels a week. Last year 9 of our 10 cleaners died of aids-related illnesses. Why do I stay? Why did I come? Because I want to cultivate the seeds and not just cut the flowers." The headteacher Mrs T beamed at us. The golden, chunky necklaces and bracelets jangling and sparkling in the afternoon sun. Her staff nodding wisely as she held court. One minute shocking us with tales of poverty and starvation, the next inspiring us with stories of fortitude and children who had overcome the odds and won a scholarship to a better school and a better life.

No shrinking violet. This lady was one tough cookie. Unashamedly pressing every emotional button she could find.

There was a dissonance: the drab room, the understated dress of her colleagues and the flamboyance of a woman dressed for a garden party at Buckingham Palace.

When I think back even 15 months later that scene always pops into my head. How many children they had in each class and how everyone was trying really hard. And there was the headteacher bedecked in gold. All those bracelets. Well fair enough if you've got it ... but to be wearing that with all those poor children. I mean it just seemed such a clash to me. Almost decadent amongst such poverty. It didn't feel quite right.

Mind you this was a land of extremes. I think someone told us it was 15 years since Nelson Mandela had been freed and it was completely over. I've since reflected on that and thought about England and changes that have taken place since women got the vote or, for that matter, any kind of significant change in social history - well it takes 10s of years. Things just don't change overnight.

For all the good intentions nothing had really changed. Things had just shuffled up a bit. I suppose for years one group of people in South Africa had blanked the need or felt that they were nothing to do with the needs of another group. I guess it will take a long time before they all feel like one nation.

I always thought I was fairly up to speed with that sort of thing. As a student I was quite politically aware - went on marches and so on. But it's not until you actually witness something you start to grasp its meaning.

So what we brought back was a little piece of the world wasn't it? To help the children and the adults, everybody, in their understanding of global issues. And that feels like a big deal. It was a whole person experience. It made us see the world was such a wonderful place with the animals and the culture. And that's rather bizarre when we were immersed in such poverty. How can you have a consistent response to such a world? So it's probably highly fitting that Mrs T rattled her gold chains as she talked about the human suffering

1.7 Olive's story: It's not just a pencil

Patience was singing and bouncing up and down, waving her arms around. Her wooden leg lifted lightly and then sunk back down on to the wheelchair. The song involved playing different instruments. Patience and her friends had banged drums, whistled through piccolos and were now fiddling imaginary violins. Very little of it was either in tune or in time but the sun was shining and everyone was very enthusiastic.

If there's one thing I don't get it's disability. It was the one time I really cried. I don't think it was particularly because it was South Africa – it would have got to me anywhere. I just haven't had much experience of it. It's just that here it was full on. But if someone like Patience ... seeing like these kids in wheelchairs, like kids that couldn't see, kids with legs missing and they were having fun and enjoying themselves and not even thinking about their disability. It's just ... one story .. one thing .. but I went into the music room when they were singing and jumping up .. and even the ones in the wheel chair were trying to jump up. How could they be like that?

I just had such a hard time understanding why God would do this. But there was so much love in that school I guess he had to have been there. It took some time to work it through. At the time It seemed so unfair. After we left and got back, instead of writing my journal - it lay on my lap unopened - I just sat and thought. These kids are not feeling the same as me. They're not even sad. They still feel able .. the singing .. the dancing .. they're not letting it wear them down, they're not moaning. It was just beautiful with these kids.

I hate the idea of any kind of waste now. Wasting resources, wasting time, wasting life. When these children who had so little could make so much of it. The kids here in England think I've gone mad. 'Don't just tell me you've lost your pencil. You need to find it before you get another one. It's not just a pencil 'You don't know how lucky you are .. not to have to pay for an exercise book. Not to have to pay for your pen or your pencils, you know' I'm totally converted. Even with like .. tinned tomatoes. I hate having to put them in the washing up. I'm like .. 'it's dirty .. it's not going to be recycled' ..but now I go through the stress of washing it up and think 'what am I doing?' So now I even wash out the tins of tomatoes.

I've still no patience – I can't sit still for more than 10 seconds. But Patience was a bit of a catalyst in helping me better to understand who I am and what I believe.

1.8 Ann's story: Not black and white

I was working in a bar in London and we used to get a lot of white South African travellers. I always had to work hard to give them a fair hearing. When apartheid stopped and they kept streaming out of the country I always felt like shouting from the roof tops. 'You should be part of the solution not running from the problems.' I felt very indignant on behalf of those left behind. White flight. And the great white storks flapped into London, into my bar and away from the land that had nurtured them.

It was Patience who put me straight. Patience – the black teacher in a township secondary school where the doors hung off the ovens and the science laboratory was a broken cupboard and a hole in the floor. Where the 50 students, many without pens or books, sat on broken benches and sang out the answers to the teacher's questions like a gospel choir. Question and answer, board and chalk, on hot, airless, dusty days drowning out the relentless and invasive noise of the traffic.

Patience pointed out that white people were also oppressed and had to cope with censorship. Yes they did live in opulence and surely they could see what was going on. But in fairness there wasn't much they could do. The internal security levels were quite harsh and people were frightened by the black township system.

I had a very good conversation with her and it's constantly before me now. I know it was a huge thing that's changed about me. I thought I knew what was just and what was not. Now I'm more tolerant. There's a disappointment really - a realisation that I've been a bit unfair. I can still have my political views and I can still kind of like challenge people

but I shouldn't forget that there is another side. Now I can think, "Well, you know, it's dangerous out there." That little boy we met . I'll never forget him. He was like, "We've been robbed loads and my mum and dad can't cope with it any more and we've got to leave".

Bitter-sweet just about sums it up. Those libraries with their empty shelves still haunt me. The guilt because we didn't take anything with us to the schools while they wanted to share the little they had with us. How weird it was to go on the luxury of a safari after the poverty of that final school and then more guilt because I enjoyed it so much.

I'm making it sound bad and it wasn't. It was a wonderful experience. There were beautiful human beings, beautiful landscape but there was this deficit. And it wasn't, I think, a deficit that we were imposing on them like, 'Oh you poor souls you don't have enough paper' . It wasn't a need that they had identified and I don't think it was a need that I was giving to them. It was just there. A fact that, in a certain world, they would have more to educate their children with. And being blown away by their generosity. This poverty-stricken (but never impoverished) community that wanted to feed us. Perhaps it isn't guilt. Perhaps I just felt overwhelmed by so many people who had so much to complain about and yet ... didn't.

1.9 Tina's Story: Seeing Terry

I can still see Terry, the little blind boy sitting at that desk tapping away at the keys on his computer, headphones clamped securely to his ears. Just such a happy, happy little boy.

Of all the places we went the Open Air school made the biggest impression on me. The mix and level of disability was so much greater than anything we have in our school but the way they encourage independence is just the same. Watching the little blind girl with her white stick all by herself taking her work down to the braille room. It sounds silly to say it, given the circumstances, but these children were so lucky. This was such an oasis. It was just a very sunny, special place.

Everything I saw in South Africa had an impact but I think this place meant the most to me because SEN is my professional home and I was constantly comparing it to where I work in England. The stories that went with it too like how they told us that in the early days these open air schools were built because it was thought that children with disabilities did better outside in the fresh air. Beds were pushed out underneath trees. Old diaries say how the monkeys came out of the trees and took the children's fruit and you could just imagine it.

My heart went out to those dear albino children with their poor eyesight and sensitive skin. Learning how they are regarded even by their own families. Seen as - I hate using the word but that's what we were told - freaks. These children born to be black, perfectly formed as black children with tight curly hair and facial features that boasted their genetic

inheritance and yet, by some trick of nature, white. To think how their families more or less treat them as outcasts. And the lifeline offered by this school. Practical help with the provision of sun lotions to protect their skin and positive affirmation of their worth, refusing to let their poor eyesight limit their possibilities. There was just smiles and laughter everywhere. To see all these children together: some blind; some without limbs; some lying completely flat with neurological conditions and back injuries. And then to hear that some of them won't be returning after the long summer holidays because the families just can't cope with them the way they can in the school. So they develop bedsores and worse and then they don't make it through the neglect back to school.

In such a world the Open Air school stood out like a beacon. It was just wonderful. I mean it was a real inspiration. So many of the schools we visited left us feeling depressed at what we'd seen and I suppose in a way the Open Air school might have seemed to some just as depressing given the state - the case of the children there. But for me it was uplifting. It offered such hope.

1.10 Dinah's story: Waste

I hate waste in any form – wasted talent, wasted time, wasted energy and wasted opportunity. When I saw the extent of the poverty and the sheer need I felt overwhelmed by it and cross with my ignorance. I was cross with everyone: with the programme organizers; with myself - at my naivety in thinking everything would be OK; with the fact we were taking from these people, these schools, these children when we should have brought chalks, pens, stickers – anything to show we cared. Instead of giving we came to philosophise about the deployment of additional adults in a classroom. Something that was the luxury of a first world country and had no place here.

The frustration I felt in South Africa has changed into an uneasiness at how little I feel I have done since I came back: how circumstances and other demands have taken over leaving a niggling guilt that constantly chides me.

The sheer enormity of it all is part of the problem. The school, the children, me. We need something concrete – something tangible we can get our teeth into, to say 'we made a difference'. Otherwise it feels too big, too impossible, too unreal. At the moment I am full of good intentions and without focus – just drifting. This inertia saps my energies and diverts me to unimportant but pressing problems that absorb my attention and distract me.

Whatever else, South Africa has been life changing. Whether that's because it's going to push me into a different path, not now but sometime in the future, or whether it's because it was such a moving

week I don't know. Whatever it is I feel I've got to use that experience and those feelings. I don't know what or when but it will happen.

I like to be doing. If I see a need I like to meet it. I was so excited that first few weeks when we came back. We did our assembly, we spoke to the students, we laid out our plans for the exchange. 'Just tell us what you need. We can get everyone behind us .. and then ... nothing... an empty void ... a black hole, a silent reproach.

I wanted to open the eyes of our students to another world. Living on the coast we're a bit out on a limb. You know we had some 6th formers who went on a drama trip down to London. It was the first time they had been to London. Sixth formers. That felt quite shocking. They'd never been on the underground. So I think to open their eyes to this new culture is like offering a key to a magic box. I wanted to share with them. I wanted to say 'look at what these children have and look at what they do and what they need'. So yes I do feel disappointed because I haven't done what I set out to do, because it's hanging there, because it's such an opportunity and if we waste it then I will feel eternally guilty.

1.11 Fiona's Story: Blending Time

JogJog.....Jog

The owl has moved to a different tree today. It is 5.30 am, a beautiful, calm, still, July morning. The sun hurls her first rays across the golden corn on one side of me and the remnants of the early morning mist hang over the distant fields on the other.

I haven't seen the owl here before. He stares down at me. Those big round eyes fixed steadily on mine. He flies off to the next telegraph pole and the eyes fix on me again. Just as I reach him he flies to the next and the game continues for a while until he gets bored and takes off over the sun flooded wheat into the distance.

Something familiar in a different place.

Jog ...Jog.... Jog

I'm getting to the point of the run that always reminds me of the reserve in South Africa where we stayed before visiting the Anglo-Zulu battle fields. The empty road, the slight inclines and slopes, the absence of people or any sign of the usual flotsam and jetsam that hints of human life. The landscape green and cool, sparsely populated with trees.

Jog.... Jog....Jog.

Turning the corner and running past a group of giraffes.

Jog ... Jog ... Jog

Round another corner, a herd of impala wander across the road.

Jog... Jog ... Jog

A wildebeest emerges stage left.

There are no giraffes, impalas or wildebeest here, possibly the odd hare. But still... Every time I turn the corner the landscape takes me back and I feel the old excitement and nervous anticipation. Memory plays funny tricks. Blending the past with the present, drawing out feelings and images that distort and re-form over time.

Jog.... Jog... Jog

This scenery is so familiar to me now, and yet constantly changes its colour and climate with the seasons and the time of day.

Something familiar in a different landscape.

Over the last few years I've gradually increased the distance I run. And I've got bolder and more confident in my capacity to handle what life throws at me.

The running has been the one constant in the tragedy and joy of my life. It has been the necklace onto which the incidents that mark out my existence, like beads, have been threaded. Each bead is different, bringing new patterns and texture so that the whole changes constantly,

a kaleidoscope of shimmering colours. The polyvocal harmonies make it hard to distinguish one note from another and yet each bead has its own form, its own beauty.

South Africa wove a magic spell that captivated me. I forgot to stand back and look at its place in my life as a whole. My South African bead became, for a while, an obsession, a source of guilt, a complete focus. I have weighed myself against the difference I have made to the lives of the people I left behind there and, in my own eyes, I have been found wanting. A teaspoon of salt in the Indian Ocean.

Jog ...Jog... Jog

Over 4 years I am fitter but each day feels hard. Only when I step back can I see the progress I have made. Only when I look at the beaded necklace and not at the individual beads do I see the blends, the nuances, the shapes of other possibilities – do I realise that I have made a difference. Not out there in South Africa but in me and in the relationships and the possibilities I have carved out here. Another pattern has emerged, silent, unannounced, seen initially only obliquely. But once seen - so obvious that I marvel at my own blindness.

The next time I run the owl has moved on.

Like me.

Jog.... Jog.... Jog.