

In 2002, my partner Dawna and I were lucky enough to travel to South Africa and Zimbabwe with our friends Ron and Michael. It was an exciting three weeks...we stayed in four different private reserves, saw every wild animal imaginable and ate traditional Afrikaan bush food.

I was excited to go on safari but I was not sure what I would find in regards to the people of South Africa. Of course I had heard of apartheid and Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. But did I know what apartheid was...what it meant...and what it meant to the people who lived through it.

Did apartheid still exist? Did it still exist in the big cities? What about in villages? What about in the private safari camps that we were going to be staying at?

Surprisingly, it was a little insect, called a dung beetle, that taught me about the people of South Africa.

What is a dung beetle? How many have never even heard of a dung beetle? Well, by the time I am done, you will know everything there is to know about this beetle and the world of poop.

When we arrived at Johannesburg airport, we were immediately met by our driver who helped us through customs, and whisked us off to the hotel. He warned us not to leave the hotel, that dinner in the restaurant was included and he would be back in the morning to bring us back to the airport.

We were surprised at the warning not to leave the hotel because it was located in a modern, progressive area with name brand stores and restaurants. But we heeded his advice and didn't venture out.

Why couldn't we go out, walk around, eat and shop? Nelson Mandela had been President from 1994-1999. We were there three years later. Was it because we were white in the new black South Africa? So our introduction to the country was "stay in your hotel."

The next morning we were at the airport getting on a small prop plane heading to Ngala Private Game Reserve located in South Africa's Kruger Park.

Now, there are no fences in Kruger national park, or the private game reserves in and around the country. So the animals move freely across these great expanses. They move freely, but it doesn't mean you can. We were tracking a lion that was covered in blood. It had just drunk at a water hole and we wanted to follow it to the kill site.

We followed the lion for an hour, when it came to the boundary of Kruger National Park. The lion crossed the "boundary line" but we couldn't. So we never got to see what he had killed.

But it reminded me of what I had heard about apartheid. How different classes of people were kept in "neighborhoods". There were no physical boundaries, but written ones.

On the prop plane, was a young man named Mohlong. He welcomed us to South Africa.

Mohlong seemed to be a one man visitor convention center. He was so happy we were in his country. He told us stories and what we might see...he laughed, we laughed, he was so enjoyable. He got off the plane and waited with us for our jeep to arrive from the camp.

Four days later, when we went to the grass airfield for the prop plane to come and take us to a different safari camp, who do you think stepped off the plane....Mohlong. We asked why he was there. He said "I had so much fun with you. When I heard the plane coming to get you, I had to come to see my friends."

And friends we quickly became. Every time a prop plane came to get us, there was Mohlong. Until just a few years ago, we were still emailing him. He was what I envisioned the people of South Africa to be like.

At Ngala camp, our driver and guide was Derrick. He was Shangaan. His tracker was John. If you know history, missionaries were everywhere. And in Africa, they were converting the tribes. So many tribe people took white names, or Christian names, giving up their native names.

Bishop Desmond Tutu said it best, "white missionaries came. They had the bibles and we had the land. Then we had the bibles and they had our land."

Derrick's grandmother was a witch doctor. She had cures and medicines from plants, barks, you name it. She would cure villagers by calling out the spirits in the trees, in the bushes, in the fire. He was so proud of her and his eyes lit up as he talked of her.

Now on the other hand, John, our tracker was totally different. He didn't speak much English. Derrick and he communicated in their native tongue.

While Derrick sat comfortably in the jeep with a loaded rifle, John sat straddling a plank hanging off the hood of the jeep. Picture a diving board. It was a 2x6 board bolted to the hood of the jeep and extend about two feet over the road. John straddled that, looking for tracks.

Sometimes he would yell to Derrick to stop, jump off the board, look at the dirt or at a broken twig, point in a direction, hop back on and we would go crashing through the bush with John hanging on for his life. Or he would look up into the sky, point to ox peckers, and we would follow the birds, knocking down shrubs and little trees; our arms and faces being scraped if we didn't duck in time.

It was like being at Disney world, but it was real life, not imagination. We would emerge from the bush to a clearing with over two hundred Cape buffalo that John had tracked. Hundreds of ox peckers would be on them, eating the mites from their hides.

Or we would follow vultures and come across a buffalo carcass with four hyenas crunching on the bones, laughing insidiously, in that scary, harmful way. What a lovely lot they were. Laughing, cackling, crunching, pulling. YUK!

But I loved it and couldn't stop filming.

One day while out on safari, we came across a very tall termite mound. One thing I wanted to do that I had seen on tv, was to put a stick down a termite hole, get a live termite and eat it. Derrick and John thought I was crazy. I grabbed a twig, put it down a hole, and pulled it out. But there was nothing on it.

Derek was laughing. He told me that you thought it was July, here it was their winter and the termites were deep underground. He knew that but wanted to watch me anyway.

I wanted to show Derrick how he could enhance his guide skills and get better tips at the end of his services.

Before getting back in the jeep, I bent over and grabbed a big hunk of elephant poop. And I mean BIG. I put on a show, talking about the poop, gesturing and really acting it up. He, John, Dawna, Ron and Michael were all laughing as I am spinning the poop, pointing at it, describing it....

When all of a sudden I screamed and dropped the poop patty. This grass filled hunk of elephant excrement was pulsating... It was moving. It was filled with dozens of beetles....dung beetles!

Some were metallic green, others were solid black. They were about 5 millimeters in length. That is .19 inches....that is less than a 1/4 inch. Smaller than a pea. A pea with arms and back legs.

They fly too. They can fly for miles in search of the perfect poo and with specialized antenna they can catch a whiff of dung in the air.

And they have a horn like a rhinoceros horn between their eyes....and a hard skeleton.

These beetles are quite ugly, even though a Moroccan proverb says, "In the eyes of its mother, every dung beetle is like a gazelle."

A dung beetle. I had never heard of one, nor had I ever seen one. They are the world's keeper of the poop.....cleaning up about 90% of the poop in the summer. No wonder these guys only live three years.

So what does a dung beetle do? It goes around and finds the perfect pile of fresh dung. Then with its front legs it forms a ball of poop. And keeps forming it, making it bigger and bigger until it's the size he wants.

The balls can be the size of a marble or as big as a tennis ball. They are one of the strongest animals for its size and the ball he creates and pushes can be 250 times heavier than himself. That's like one of us trying to push six double decker buses.

When the ball is of suitable size, he climbs on top of it and releases pheromones to attract a female. Now in the world of the dung beetle, the better your ball, the better chance you have at getting a mate. There are hundreds of dung beetles building balls at the same time, so yours better be good.

After getting a mate, he helps her get on top of the ball. She then rides atop the moving ball of dung.

Dung beetles orient themselves using the Milky Way, the sun and the moon. The male rolls the ball in a straight line using these celestial markers....up steep embankments, down gullies, and over sticks and stones until he finds a suitable spot.

How does the dung beetle move his ball, you ask? Well, he does a hand stand. Using his arms to push across the ground and uses his hinds legs to push the ball. When he gets tired and he is hot, he stops, climbs atop the ball and buries his hands and feet in the poop to cool them off.

Dung beetles are divided into three classes or tribes: the rollers, the tunnelers and the Dwellers.

The Rollers, remove some dung from the pile, forms a ball, then both the male and female roll their ball away from the manure pile, and find a soft surface to bury it. They mate and lay the eggs in the manure. Their larvae then feed on the dung.

Beetles do not need to hunt for food or water, everything they need to live is in that moist dung.

Tunnelers grab some dung, roll it into a ball and tunnel deep into the ground beneath the pile of manure and bury the dung.

The Dwellers actually live in the dung. They make a ball and put it under the pile of manure on the surface of the ground. They actually dwell within the manure pile itself.

I tell you, nothing is cooler then watching a dung beetle push a pile of poop.

By cleaning up the world's poop and burying it, the dung beetles are known as purifiers....they help with disease control, help keep pesty flies in control, help with odor control.

And most importantly they help with agriculture and ecology....by burying the poop they provide nutrients, aeration and structure to the soil.

On the negative side of dung beetles, they are bullies and fighters. As a matter of fact this animal is known as the worst bully imaginable.

They will pester and tease one another until one gives up his dung ball in frustration.

They even fight others with their horns and steal each other's balls.

So that's the world of dung beetles.

Now back to our guide and tracker. We asked Derrick and John to join us for dinner that night so we could get to know them better. Derrick said he could join us, but that John could not. John was just a lowly tracker and hence could not dine with us.

What? Wasn't apartheid about segregation and different classes not being able to mingle, or eat in the same places or live in the same neighborhoods. I thought this racism had ended. But apparently not. Because here was our driver putting himself above a fellow villager, a fellow tribesman, a friend and worker.

In my mind, it was like apartheid and segregation all over again. But instead of in towns and cities, it was happening here..... in the bush.

The dung beetles were divided into separate tribes.... the rollers, the tunnelers and the dwellers.

During Apartheid, the people were divided into separate classifications: white, black, coloured and Indian.

Here we were in the bush, and these people were divided too: guides, trackers, cooks, laundry people, etc.

Every morning about 5am, a man came to our hut with a rifle. He asked how long it would be before we would be ready to go to our jeep. We answered 10 mins. Ten minutes later he was back at our hut to escort us to the jeep.

Remember there are no fences, so predators are everywhere. He was the guard, who with his rifle, would keep us safe.

Hmmmm, Derrick and the guards had the guns. They were in control. Poor John that sat alone hanging off the jeep could easily have been jumped by a lion. He had no protection but had the most dangerous job.

The fighting and bullying that I had just witnessed with the dung beetles was being mirrored by these humans.

Watching the dung beetles and these humans, I remembered a quote, though I don't recall who said it, "there are forces in nature we may never truly begin to understand. But now, having traveled there, one must feel closer to this knowledge."

I had heard of apartheid....I didn't understand it....but now in Africa, I began to understand.

At another game preserve called Mala Mala, the guides were all white, the trackers were all black. Every morning at breakfast our guide Peter ate with us. The black female cooks stood behind us, like at attention.

If my coffee cup was low, Peter would berate the woman nearest me for not keeping it filled. If Dawna had eaten her bacon, Peter would tell them to ask if she wanted more.

I was perfectly able to politely say, "excuse me, may have a little bit more coffee?" Or Dawna to ask if there was more bacon.

This camp was British owned and all the white people had British accents. Though this camp is the highest rated game reserve in the world, it was the one we were most uncomfortable at. We didn't like how the white people treated the black workers.

At most times we were embarrassed by the voices and actions of the white people.

When these guides went on safari and saw the bullying the dung beetles did with each other, could they not see themselves?

Desmond tutu once said, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality."

How could we say something. We were strangers in a strange country. We didn't know their customs. Yes, we felt it was an injustice the way people were being treated at some camps, but we were guests and we didn't dare speak what we were thinking.

I guess our silence, our neutrality, said we were on the side of the oppressor. Maybe the black workers, "the mice under the foot of the elephant" didn't appreciate our silence.

In the bush, a cheetah killed an impala. Then we saw a leopard come and steal it from him. Then a lion stole it from the leopard. This was a perfect example of the hierarchy of power and strength in the bush.

And it reflected what we saw with the humans in the camps. What we saw in nature was imitated in life.

In Londolozi Reserve, the camp was near a Shenagaal village. A black teenager from the village who worked as a "butler" in the camp brought us to his village. His name was Tandani. His village was surrounded by an electrified fence to keep the children and villagers safe from the predators.

Since Dawna was a teacher, he brought us to the school. The teacher welcomed us enthusiastically. She had the children sing for us and dance. They lined up and said their name and what their mother or father did in the camp. My name is Jamal, my mother is a cook, my name is Sarah, my father is a tracker, and so on.

These kids were so proud of their parents, proud of singing and dancing for us. It didn't seem that they were influenced by a class system.

Tandani brought us to a building where women were weaving floor cloths and baskets. The colors were so vivid, their work so intricate. We asked if we could buy something from them and they agreed we could.

After our purchase, Tandani insisted that he carry our bag. We could have easily carried the paper bag.....but what did it mean for HIM to carry it for us?

Was it because that was his job and he took great pride in it? Was it because he was being respectful cause we were women? Was it because we were white and he was black and that was the class system in the camp?

Scientists have studied the characteristics of the dung beetle. They say that dung beetles are patient and uncomplaining.

We saw that in the black people of South Africa. They were patient with their employers no matter how they were treated. They did their jobs and didn't complain. Probably very happy to have jobs in the bush where they lived. Thankful for the tourists that allow them to be employed.

The dung beetle takes pride in making his home out of manure and doesn't complain. He is optimistic that if he does it just right, he will be successful in getting a mate and creating offspring and continuing the circle of life.

He follows the signs in the sky to get where he wants to go. It reminded me of slaves here in America where they followed the drinking gourd in the sky to freedom.

If the dung beetle's path is disrupted or obstacles are in his way, he will readjust and continue on.

His life is a tireless journey. And so it seems are the lives of the native people of South Africa.

If the dung beetle can make a perfect sphere, why can't we make a perfect world. If he can take crap and make it into life, why can't we take problems and turn them into successes?

The dung beetle is the lowest form of life, but what he does in this world, makes him one of the most important.

His job is to purify, clean and enrich the soil from which new life emerges.

Elise Icten wrote a story about Billy the dung beetle....

One day Billy the dung beetle, prayed and asked God 'Why oh why did you create me this way?'

A lion looked at Billy and answered,
"First, you must love yourself. Be proud of yourself and know you are just as perfect as me."

A giraffe said, "Do not climb over others to reach your height. The more gentle you are, the more others will lift you up."

The elephant told the dung beetle, "You are as big and as strong as me. Your job in the dung is not easy. You have your own unique skills. Be in service and help others."

Billy thanked the animals for their words of wisdom.

I can imagine Billy, as he sat on his dung ball, thinking about his life and the life of the people around him.

Thinking about the mighty guides, the lowly trackers; about the teachers and the lowly laundry people.

It was hard for him to believe that the same God who created the beautiful butterflies also created the dung beetle. Then he realized, maybe there are multiple gods after all.

And we all need to just get along.