

# 'The Color of the Skin Doesn't Matter'

A Missioner's Tale of Faith and Politics

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## Preface

When I was writing this personal memoir, families and friends of a young black men killed by the police in the United States launched the 'Black Lives Matter' campaign to draw attention to the racism prevalent among some members of the police and to demand accountability. The brutal murder – on camera – of George Floyd by a police officer on the 25 May 2020 in Minneapolis was a painful reminder to America and the wider world, of racism within the ranks of the police force.

So, I am aware that skin color not only matters but can mean the difference between life and death. Racism, and other prejudicial attitudes, divide human beings and can even lead to war, as happened in white-ruled Rhodesia where much of this memoir takes place.

Having lived more than half of my life in black-ruled Africa, I know well the privileges my white skin has afforded me. I witnessed firsthand the indignities black people suffer. I had seen this in my native United States and now I witnessed it in Rhodesia and via apartheid in South Africa. These indignities did not end with the coming of majority rule but endured in all the countries of southern Africa where I lived and they continue to do so in my home country of America. Add to this mix, crippling poverty and an internalized sense of inferiority and both are common to both parts of my world.

The title of this memoir, therefore, expresses an ideal, a dream of a society without barriers to achievement; a society where racism, sexism, classism and other forms of prejudice which divide us is abolished. Speaking of South Africa after the defeat of apartheid in 1994, Archbishop Desmond Tutu coined the expression, 'the rainbow people of God'. He was expressing

a vision of a society without racial discrimination and without privileges or punishments based on race alone.

South African freedom fighter and later chief justice Albie Sachs held a similar vision. 'Black is Beautiful, Brown is Beautiful, White is Beautiful', he declared.<sup>3</sup> He went on to explain: 'That is what we want, in South Africa, everywhere in the world. White made itself ugly by declaring that black was ugly. Now ironically, it is black that will help white discover the beauty in itself.'

These are noble sentiments. I experienced a foretaste of this when I worked with the Zimbabwe Project in Mozambique during the final years of the liberation war in Rhodesia. Every person I met in the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) party led by Robert Mugabe, from the leaders to the young men and women fighters, treated me with kindness and respect. They laughed at my American idiosyncrasies, such as my habit of saving a portion of my food to eat the following day in case there would be nothing, which was often the case: 'How will you feel when you are the only one eating?' They taught me to live in the present and appreciate the small pleasures of each day – a piece of sugarcane, a bucket of warm water for bathing, a sliver of soap. All were precious and unexpected in the camps where food and every other necessity was scarce.

Yet the color of my skin, my American nationality and my religious vocation mattered a great deal to them. 'They will listen to you,' a ZANU supporter told me when he invited me to give talks on college campuses in the United States. My race, nationality, sex and religion were also an asset to the liberation forces based in Mozambique where I readily agreed to give radio and newspaper interviews supporting the goals of the struggle. I was aware that I would be criticized by some for taking sides but I did not believe that neutrality was an option. These pages will help to explain

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3 Towards a Rainbow Nation in a United South Africa, Dept. of Law, University of Cape Town. 1991.

how I reached that decision.

I had reservations about writing this memoir. My life is no more important than any other but I happened to be there with Zimbabweans at that moment of their history. I also wondered if I would be seen as glorifying the liberation war. In a right-wing book that came out before Independence I was called 'a cheer-leader for the terrorists'. 'Terrorist' was a word used by the Rhodesians for the African people who rose against them. This memoir is a personal account of how I experienced events and must stand as such.

I may also be seen as glorifying the Catholic Church by glossing over its faults, such as male dominance and the failure to give women leadership roles as well as the handling of the scandal of sex abuse among its members. My traditional Catholic upbringing may have blinded me to these things. Although I have embraced new theologies and ways of being a Christian, I find spiritual nourishment in the ancient rituals and prayer. Scripture and especially the psalms have sustained me throughout difficult challenges.

At the approach of my 80th birthday, I look back with deep appreciation on those who formed me, especially the Maryknoll Sisters who gave me the freedom and the encouragement to be a global pilgrim. Some mentors will be mentioned in these pages while others live on in my memory and in the litany of the saints who have graced my life.



**Sister Janice McLaughlin**  
(Photo: Archive – Maryknoll Sisters)

## Introduction

‘General Tongogara would like to meet you.’ I was startled by this message having heard of the legendary figure and head of ZANU’s army, and having seen his photo in magazines and newspapers but I never expected to meet him in person. I was in the VIP lounge at the airport in Maputo, waiting for a flight to the north of Mozambique.

A giant of a man entered the lounge and gave me a hug while he regarded me with flashing golden eyes like those of a lion. His gaze was probing, as if he could see into my innermost depths. His face broke into a smile lightening up the space around us. ‘Thank you’, he said, ‘you helped us teach the comrades that the colour of the skin doesn’t matter’. I was overwhelmed and humbled by this statement, coming from the commander of ZANU’s liberation army. I had seen the division in white-ruled Rhodesia and had assumed white people would be considered enemies.

Tongogara went on to explain that the war was against the system, not against white people, and this was the message taught to freedom fighters in the camps and refugees who crossed

to Mozambique. It was also the message at the *pungwes* or all-night meetings with the rural people inside Rhodesia. 'We tell the comrades the one who points a gun at us is the enemy and in most cases, it is our black brothers and sisters. We tell them many white people support our struggle – farmers, businessmen and priests. Now we have an example', he continued, 'we can point to you, Sister Janice, and say you went to prison and were deported because you supported us'. I was later to see, in the camps for Zimbabweans in the centre and north of Mozambique, posters with the same message declaring, 'The colour of the skin is not the enemy'.

We talked for several minutes as he recounted examples of Catholic priests who supported the guerrillas. 'We are fighting to change the system', he repeated, not to kill or expel white people'. I was overwhelmed not only by Tongogara's words but by his presence. The heat, dirt and stench in the airport faded before this imposing figure who exuded confidence and a sense of power. His smile was captivating and his manner of speaking clear and straightforward. I was young, impressionable and prone to hero worship. Tongogara was my romanticized version of some of the revolutionary leaders that I had read and studied in Kenya; he was Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and Amilcar Cabral rolled into one. I could picture him standing in front of the troops, exhorting them to risk their lives for the freedom of their country, giving them courage by his words and his personality. I felt somehow bigger and more confident just standing next to him.

He took me to meet his wife and his youngest son who had come to the airport to say good-bye to him as he was returning to the front. His wife, Angeline, and their son, Bvumai, the youngest of three, shyly greeted me. Two older sons, Hondo and Tichafa, were attending school. They never knew if they would see their father again each time he returned to the frontline.

Charles Ndlovu (whose real name was Webster Shamu), ZANU's Deputy Communications Director and who was one of those who introduced me to Tongo, as the general was called, snapped photos of us that ended up on election posters in 1980.

The year was 1978 and I was working in Mozambique for Zimbabwe Project, an initiative set up by Catholic aid agencies in Europe to assist refugees who had fled the fighting in Rhodesia as well as young people who had crossed the border to join the freedom fighters. Before coming to Mozambique, I worked in post-independent Kenya in the early 1970s and in Rhodesia at the end of that decade. Although I had grown up during the civil rights era in my own country and had participated in demonstrations against racism, I hadn't personally experienced what it meant. But now I encountered the inequality and racial divisions in Africa. As a white missionary in a black world, I had a lot to learn. General Tongogara and other Zimbabwean freedom fighters were my teachers as were Kenyan journalists, authors and other missionaries.

The following chapters trace the journey where I faced my ignorance, prejudices and the privileges I enjoyed. They also explore my empathy for those who suffer. It was a journey from my insular upbringing in a working-class neighborhood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to a religious community in the midst of radical change. Later I came to East Africa at a time of newly won freedom with the attendant need for social and economic transformation. Finally, I was set down in the middle of a war of liberation for equality and majority rule in Southern Rhodesia. These pages will follow the long and winding road, I took and the lessons that I learned along the way.