

Can you also feel it?



It was a cold and rainy day in the Cape and we ran together from the office to my car parked outside in the freezing and wet street. We both took a minute to get back our breaths after the frantic sprint for cover, wiping the cold rain from our faces, and then, just before I could turn the

key to start the car, she said in her distinct Namaqualand Afrikaans voice *“Ek wonder wat Bafana môre gaan maak teen Frankryk. Ek hoop darem hulle wen, maar die Franse is ’n goeie span.”* (I wonder what the South African soccer team will do tomorrow against France. I hope they win, but France is a strong team). She is the cleaner in my office, a small and quiet Nama woman. I am her boss, a white Afrikaans male. She did not finish high school and I completed many years of tertiary education. I am almost twice her age and probably earning at least ten times her salary. There is a cultural, gender, ethnic, age and socio-economic gap as wide as the Fish River Canyon between us.

She had never before initiated a conversation with me, I always had to be first, for what reason I still don’t fully understand. She had me completely floored for a moment, and then I regained my composure and answered, hesitantly at first, and then things started to flow. As we drove back to her small and simple home in Morningstar township, which she shares with her two children and at least five other people (I think), we talked about the FIFA World Cup tournament and the chances of our national team “Bafana Bafana”. I was amazed at her soccer knowledge and that she watches all the games she can after work every day. We shared our love for sport and our pride in our national team and country for hosting the tournament. We laughed and joked about the soccer players very often faking injury to draw the attention of the referee to gain an advantage for their team, and questioned the decisions of some of the referees. We finally concluded that we probably both enjoy rugby more than soccer, but that the tournament is great to follow and experience.

On my way back home I thought about what had happened in the car a couple of minutes earlier. It reminded me about the SABC slogan for the tournament: “Feel it, it is here”. We made many jokes before the tournament about that slogan and often discussed the “disaster in the making” around our braaivleis fires. We were pessimistic about the crime, that the infrastructure would not be finished in time and that the tourists would not come. We are now half-way through the tournament and the soccer-stadiums were ready and have been full with every game, exceeding the attendance figures of all previous tournaments. More than 500 000 tourists have already entered the country (those that could be counted!), and there were no serious incidents during any of the games (even though the security guards tried to make a quick buck by striking for higher wages). And yes, I have to admit that I, for one, was proven wrong. We all became excited, flying our flags, donning our yellow and green, and horror upon horror, watching soccer and cheering for Bafana Bafana! And our team responded by playing probably far above their ability and skills, drawing with and beating far better teams. And then, best of all, it gave all South Africans something to share, breaking down all kinds of barriers, rekindling the spirit of Mandela felt in 1995 when he put on that Springbok rugby jersey. It took a small and humble woman in my office to finally open my eyes.

It does not matter that our national team did not qualify. This tournament has brought us closer together, created jobs, brought skills to many of our people, created a lot of new and much needed infrastructure, and brought many friends to this country. We hosted the best FIFA World Cup tournament ever! We also showed as a nation that we can tackle and finish complex tasks, so let us use this new found experience and these skills to tackle and finish off crime and HIV/AIDS. Can you also feel it?

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