

## Being Human

### René de Monchy, Masvingo, Zimbabwe

The concrete slab table at which he was sitting was rounded off on one side to make it parallel with the rounding of the low concrete wall of his veranda. At least that had been the intention when he had asked the local builder to make it for him. The result had become a table vaguely reminiscent of this intention if one had known it.

Looking at this table on this, the first day of spring made him wonder about the nature of the human being; the difficulties with which the rural African people, among whom he had been living now for some time, had to grapple. Concepts like parallel lines, straight corners and straightness in general appeared as difficult to grasp as perspective and proportions in their drawings. It reminded him of the many paths through the bush. The impossibility of such a path being straight seemed similar to the inability of water to flow straight without being forced. Human nature wasn't straight. Its laws, unlike those of gravity, and the vectors of forces, seemed to apply as little to straightness as the river meandering through the valley.

While he was contemplating this he heard, through the speakers of his CD player inside the house, the tenor voice of José Carreras in Verdi's *La Traviata*. He could often sit and immerse himself in the music and writings of his European cultural background. This he did now, while musing on the above observation. His gaze went to the people walking from the hospital grounds towards him; the people who had become his neighbours and friends. He watched these people who he had come to love and respect. His mind was engaging in these two very different activities at the same time.

He wondered how the human being can manage this refining and enlarging of his potential in diverse directions simultaneously. Was it because he, unlike the beings in the animal world, was not totally engrossed in the instinctive life of nature? Was it that somehow he could lift himself or at least part of him on to a certain platform in his soul, from which he could choose to pursue various activities at the same time? If this is true, then, due to the necessity of distancing oneself for the sake of possible freedom of choice, there follows inherently the loss of direct communication, direct contact, with the world and behaviour of 'natural' instinct. He wondered if the degree to which human beings can distance themselves also imply the same quantifiable degree of loss of connection with the earth and the world of nature.

Following this thought through, he concluded that peoples with a high degree of intimacy and instinctive contact with the rhythms and realms of nature would not be able to be 'educated' to this distancing without losing these qualities of intimacy. His thoughts went to the books about the life and finesse of the Bushman written by Laurens van der Post. There is described an intimacy with life which makes the human being interrelate with every being in nature as on the same vibration. He recognized glimpses of this in some of the people he was living with. It reminded him how a few days ago he had stood, close to the small mortuary building, watching two gray donkeys harnessed to a primitive type of 'scotch-cart'. The endless patience of the animals, with their innocent eyes; seemed to form part of the picture that was evolving before his gaze.

An old man, probably in his sixties, wearing an old, patched but clean dark suit, was gently lifting the body of his deceased wife into a rough and simple casket with the aid of his son.

The coffin itself, manufactured locally, was made of hardboard. The man and his son let the body slide into it very carefully. After that his fingers closed his wife's eyes slowly, gently, and with a gesture of the utmost tenderness.

The journey was over. The man's face was solemn, accepting, wise. Each of the many wrinkles on his forehead seemed to speak its own story of hard years of African rural living. He went to look for a stone to hammer home the nails of the coffin, nails that had obviously been flattened and re-used. His wife had died the previous day. She had arrived at the hospital a few days earlier in a state for which no physical help other than comfort could be given.

This picture of the gesture of love and tenderness with which the old man had closed his wife's eyes seemed one with the patience of the waiting donkeys, the old cart, the few respectful people around and the round thatched huts nearby. At that very moment the first cry of a newborn baby could be heard from the hospital's labour ward...

It had become evening, the evening of the first day of spring, 21 September 1997.

He had lit the kerosene lamp on its concrete table. Around him were the sounds of the African night and the inaudible sounds of the brilliant stars in the dark sky reminding him of the mysteries of life and death, so inextricably connected here, where space and time still had their value of relativity. The lamp threw long shadows on his writing paper. The music of the opera, reminding him of his own cultural background, had long since fallen silent.

He was alone, but felt more connected than ever with his life, with an overwhelming feeling of gratitude for being human. Being human, with its incredible greatness and smallness at one and the same time. Being the only conscious connection between heaven and earth, life and death.

He could identify with being the centre of his universe simultaneously as being the most infinitesimal particle at its periphery; capable of embodying nature, culture and spirituality.

He felt alive, he felt grateful, he felt human.