

I am a racist. I apologise. I will do everything I can (and more) to make up for it. No conditions, no excuses – just a simple I'm sorry, please forgive me.

A year ago, I wasn't a racist – I had all the necessary credentials. My best man (and very good friend) was a black guy (he still is); I was once thrown out of a shebeen and the aforementioned best man saved my butt as I tried to tackle the owner. What other whitey can put that in his pipe and smoke it? I coach (as in chief bottle-washer and “dad”) a black high school's rugby team; I address my domestic worker and gardener by her/his Xhosa name; I know where you can buy “smileys” in Kwazakhele; Madiba and Bishop Tutu are my all-time heroes; I think Siya Kholisi rocks, and I desperately wanted Barack Obama to be *my* president. I never, ever use the “K” word, or any other substitute. I tick all the PC boxes.

Penny Sparrow and Matthew Theunnissen changed all that. Two ordinary white South Africans who – in a moment of social media (un)glory – blew my comfortable rainbow mirage apart. It wasn't the terms they used that changed me – it was their utter conviction, post-event, that they weren't racist! This gave me pause: how do you call someone a monkey, or a “K...”, and still maintain your innocence? How do you not put two and two together?

And then, in an innocent conversation with a friend recently, I referred to my garden “boy”. Argh! There's more! Just as recently, when looking at a photo of a black SAAF pilot on Facebook, my instinctive reaction (having served at Magnus Malan's pleasure in the SAAF myself) was “Nah, *this* (black) guy can't be flying *those* planes!” I could no longer put Penny and Matthew in a box separate from myself. I was – in reality – no different to them.

I'm a white, middle-aged man born into a middle class family. I'm also liberal in my views – I vacillate between blue and green (yellow?) at the ballot box. Eusebius McKaiser is unlikely to select me as his first choice with whom to share a life raft; Steve Hofmeyr would rather sink the life raft than share it with this *veraaier* (jy's mos 'n Koekemoer?).

I could mount the usual defences – everyone is racist, not just whites. Check out the president – he's using race to take the attention off his non-performance and profiteering. I could argue that the #mustfall youngsters haven't got a clue – they don't know the real world; they don't know how bad it was in the trenches way back when. I can summon up virtuous anger and claim the moral high ground – my (South African) parent's farm in Zimbabwe was donated to Uncle Bob's cause. I can tell you about the jobs I apply for that won't allow me through the door because I have to apply sun lotion in summer. I can tell you about the tax I've paid. I can counter the “black tax” issue with stories about how, at every parking space and traffic light, I pay my *umlungu* tax. I can dismiss the give-us-back-our-land claims with the impracticality thereof, and remind everyone that the Khoisan actually had first claim. But Penny and Matthew introduced me to a mirror; they opened the door on “whiteness”, and that has made all the difference.

I used to think racism was an either/or thing. I used to believe I was separate from my “tribe” – that I wasn’t tainted; that I had outfoxed my DNA. I now see racism as something of a continuum. It isn’t whether you *are* or not; it’s a case of how much. I no longer put the likes of Penny and Matthew into a box marked “other”. They are my people and it’s time I own it, which means no matter how nice a guy I think I am, I have some work to do.

Part of this work is dealing with the way things are. I’m betting that race will always be an issue in South Africa. We’re a rainbow nation, whether we like it or not – there just isn’t a pot of gold at its end. No matter where I go, I’m an African and this is my place; my heart always brings me back here. I’m undoubtedly privileged; my “whiteness” has put me ahead in the game. I’m all of these things and more.

| To me, the current conversations about race, whiteness and privilege lurch between extremes and do us no favours. It’s just same old, same old. I want to change the conversation and my starting point begins with an apology.

So here it is: I’m a straight, white, male South African and I’ve benefited from patriarchy, whiteness and sexual orientation. I’m sorry for what my ancestors have done in our name; I’m sorry for my blindness in not seeing both my privilege and my prejudice; I’m sorry that my rainbow dream has lulled me into a comfort zone. I ask that you forgive me. I ask that you allow me space to be who I am as I try to give you the same. I ask that you allow me to help build a place that celebrates our differences. I am a South African, and my real privilege would be to call this *our* home.