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It's a Black-White Thing

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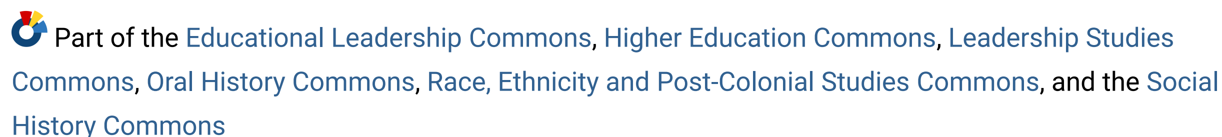

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Introduction

I first encountered the story that would become my book as news. When I arrived in South Africa in 2008 for my second assignment there with The Associated Press (the first, from 1993 to 1996, had been as a correspondent; the second, which would last until 2012, was as chief of bureau), a lot had already been written about a racist video produced by a group of white students at the University of the Free State (UFS). The video makers were Afrikaners—descendants of early Dutch settlers—and opposed to sharing their dorm with black students. Their video would be seen around the world, thanks to YouTube.

In 2009, Jonathan Jansen, a black educator, took over as rector, or president of the University of the Free State, which has its main campus in Bloemfontein, in central South Africa. Jansen delivered an inaugural address that was published in several national South African newspapers. In that speech, he forgave the anti-integration students, who had been expelled because of their video and the social media storm surrounding it. He said it was useless to make scapegoats of young men for a problem all South Africans needed to confront. Jansen's speech also outlined an approach to fostering unity in a country that remained, and still remains, deeply divided because of apartheid.

The residual effects of apartheid will not disappear without work and time. As part of that work, Jansen said in his address that he would be sending Free State students to study abroad to build the skills they would need to be leaders on a multiracial campus and in a multiracial world. Jansen's experiment became known as the F1 Program. Jansen sent his youngest first-year students, whom we would call freshman. My book, *It's a Black-White Thing* (Tafelberg, 2014), is about the experiences of one of those groups of students, who went to Texas A&M, and it further discusses Jansen, who had made a remarkable personal journey of his own over his lifetime.

The following are slightly edited excerpts from the book.

> Jansen grew up in an evangelical Christian family in Cape Town, and came to Bloemfontein knowing the power of starting a staff meeting with a prayer in this conservative and religious part of central South Africa. And he speaks Afrikaans, the Dutch-derived language of Afrikaners that is often a first or second language for South Africans who are coloured, or mixed-race in the South African parlance.
>
> Although he was born in a coloured community, Jansen identifies himself simply as black. He was born in 1956, a busy year for apartheid's architects. Laws stripping coloured South Africans of the right to vote went into effect that year. Also enacted then were laws making it easier to reserve certain jobs for whites, ensuring they wouldn't have to compete with black workers and that they would earn higher wages. Under another law passed that year, blacks could be banished from their homes to isolated rural areas.
>
> The year 1956 also saw a march on Pretoria that united thousands of women of all races against the extension to women of the pass laws, which restricted the movement of black South Africans. Women marched under the slogan, "You strike a woman, you strike a rock."
>
> A year earlier, South Africans of all races had gathered in a muddy field in Kliptown, Soweto, to adopt the Freedom Charter, which proclaimed the then-radical idea that "South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white."
>
> Jansen and his family experienced the brutality and injustice of apartheid. "I think my grandfather went blind because they took his land away to give it to white people," he tells me. According to family lore, the man simply refused to see his house being handed over.

As a teenager, Jansen would visit his grandparents in the small town of Montagu, 100 or so miles from the metropolis of Cape Town. On one occasion, as he walked to the shop to buy a loaf of bread, he was hit on the heel by a brick a white boy had thrown at him. A big city boy lacking the submissiveness usually displayed by the rural black community, Jansen rushed at the stone-thrower. The white boy's father, an off-duty police officer, happened to be at home. Jansen remembers being forced into a car and beaten on the way to the police station. Only when an aunt came to plead for his release was he freed.

Jansen studied at the University of the Western Cape, which had been created in 1959 as a separate institution for coloured people. By the 1970s, it was known as a bastion of anti-apartheid activism. Jansen was the first person in his family to acquire a university degree. He became a high-school teacher and taught biology in the Cape Flats, home to families forcibly removed from Cape Town to make way for whites and an area notorious for its gang violence.

Jansen has written about how his own activism developed when he travelled to the US to pursue his postgraduate studies in the 1980s. There he met fellow South Africans who were leaders of student groups allied with the then-banned African National Congress, as well as American students who were pressing their universities to disinvest from companies doing business in apartheid South Africa.

As a young man, Jansen says, he was angered to hear Mandela talk of reconciliation between blacks and whites. The man who would later extend his own reconciliation and forgiveness to the young white men who had made the racist video once told friends that he would never teach at a white institution.

Jansen did his master's at Cornell University and his doctorate at Stanford before returning in the early 1990s to a South Africa that was changing fast. He took up a post at the University of Durban-Westville, which had been founded for South Africans of Indian descent, but was open to black people as well when Jansen arrived. The once angry young man was now a scholar specializing in education. Jansen had begun to worry that the black majority, who had been denied so much under apartheid, would grow impatient with democracy if it did not deliver economic opportunity. He saw education as key, but at Durban-Westville and other institutions, Jansen saw racial resentment derailing attempts to give an impoverished majority the tools it needed to succeed. For Jansen, the Mandela-style reconciliation at which he had once scoffed began to look like part of the solution.

In 2000 he found himself working at one of those white institutions that he had once held in contempt. He became the first black educator at the University of Pretoria, another historically Afrikaans institution, as dean of students. At Pretoria, he began to develop some of the theories he would later test at UFS.

In addition to his administrative duties at UFS, Jansen took time to teach a class on understanding the violence and divisions of South Africa's past. The students bring their parents' fears to the class, he tells me. They have heard during dinner-table conversations of how affirmative action for black South Africans will end opportunities for white South Africans, and of the habit among certain militant black groups of singing apartheid-era protest songs about killing white farmers. White South Africans have read Afrikaans newspaper stories about black farm workers seizing land from white farmers, and have heard the relentless chorus by Afrikaner media and lobbying groups about crime and corruption, which has clear, if coded, racial overtones.

"There's a vulnerability," Jansen says. "Any talk about the past gets them so uptight. The mere fact that we're talking history is enough to drive some kids over the edge."

Students say they want to put the past behind them. Jansen counters to the effect that that has been tried, and it failed. “Even though we tried to get out of the past, it keeps coming up. So let’s learn emotional, psychological skills to cope,” he tells me, describing his lectures. “Some of them catch it. A lot of them don’t.”

One text that Jansen asks students to read is a letter that Martin Luther King Jr. wrote from a jail in Birmingham, Alabama. The son, grandson and great grandson of the family of preachers had been detained for taking part in a civil-rights march in Birmingham in 1963. In his cell, King responded to an open letter in which fellow clergymen had advised him to abandon his campaign of non-violent resistance. He expresses disappointment at the white church leaders, but adds, “I am thankful to God that some noble souls from the ranks of organized religion have broken loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom.”

Jansen calls that letter “a beautiful testament of Martin Luther King’s understanding of the white clergy, for example, as brothers as opposed to enemies, and yet having to speak to those issues of togetherness in a very direct way.”

Jansen tells me of a certain Afrikaner who had held the top university post long before his arrival. He visited shortly after Jansen’s appointment to ask the younger man to hold off on racial integration. “I listened respectfully, and saw him out of my office,” Jansen says.