

Chapter 1

The Capsule

Experience is not what happens to you. It's what you do with what happens to you. — Aldous Huxley

*I*n May 1979, I accepted an invitation received quite unexpectedly from Professor Shehu Galadanci, foundation vice-chancellor of the University of Sokoto in northern Nigeria, to join the foundation faculty of this fledgling university located in the heart of Islamic West Africa. Around that time the community of Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Canada, was in the throes of selecting a new president to take over from Dr. Owen Carrigan in July 1979. As circumstances would have it, Dr. Kenneth Ozmon came to my office in the Burke Building to ask me to reconsider and stay on at Saint Mary's. In the ensuing discussion he understood I had made a moral commitment from which I could not disengage.

Ten years later our paths crossed again when, as executive director of the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission, I was privileged to nominate him for the position of chair of the Commission. In July of 2000, Ken Ozmon retired in the twenty-first year of his distinguished service as president of Saint Mary's University, and much more, which the nation recognized in appointing him an Officer of the Order of Canada in 1998. As continuing opportunities go, on May 27, 2000, the director of the Saint Mary's Alumni Association, Barry Gallant, asked me to be one of the speakers at its alumni dinner, signposted as "Celebrating the Ozmon Years." Part of what I said recounted my association with Dr. Ozmon as we traversed social-justice paths in the city, province and country in pursuit of opportunities to discharge and fulfill our respective duties, obligations, undertakings and commitments. Individuals in all our lives help to make things happen.

Any Third World environment, so fertile for the growth of hunger, poverty, disease and ignorance, is a good starting point also for those who have lived it to look ahead. From the bottom, there is only the upward level to behold, the upward journeys to strive for. In the post-Second World War society in the South Africa of my birth and in Canada, my adopted home since 1975, there were countless who lived and toiled in what can

be understood as Third-World situations: nationals living as colonial subjects; democracy defined in practice as the preserve of dominant political parties who made sure that their supporters were well served in the distribution and maintenance of power, privilege and perks. As Benjamin Disraeli, British prime minister in 1868 and again from 1874 to 1880 said:

Patronage is the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, and that is power.

The powerless, for whom another prime minister, this time of the British colony of Southern Rhodesia, Godfrey Huggins, advocated a separate existence, were likened to a horse. The dominant power was likened to the rider. Thus, whether in Disraeli's description of his country made up of two nations, the rich and the poor, or Huggins' description of his country made up of two pyramids, one for the horse and the other for the rider, it was all a matter of a relationship between those who had, and why, and those who did not have, and why.

In the South Africa of the period 1945–1975, the rigours of apartheid were tested and re-tested, then extended and consolidated. In the bulk of the rest of Africa, decolonization, independence, post-independence diatribes and dictatorships also created pockets of privilege and power under other names, fictions and ideologies. In the Canada of 1945–1975, a new nationhood was in the making, slowly, waywardly, increasingly differently from the old nation, whose parts seemed more defined than its whole; where English-French duality was indeed locked in a duel; where Aboriginals and founding Blacks were still on the periphery and where non-traditional immigrants of both older and younger vintage groping for a place in the sun were offered the tantalizing rainbow called multiculturalism, yet to be worked out, and on which I give my considered views in the Postscript.

The legacy of this period cast its shadow in varying degrees on the quarter century following and on the opportunities that crossed my path, unplanned, unforeseen, accidental, as I served and worked from many desks: history at Dalhousie University; multiculturalism and Third World development at the International Education Centre at Saint Mary's University; history at the University of Sokoto; programs and management to promote Black pride and place at the Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia; social justice and human rights issues at the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission; fair employment policies and practices at Nova Scotia Power.

Volunteerism, visiting professorships and international travels were extensions, very welcome ones, of the legacy and the quarter century of experiences on the ground and benedictions from above. What can one say of this vast reservoir of life-long learning except that it was very enriching in its diversity. To be a small part of the action of nation building within the borders and the serenity of Canada and to look at the contrasts in so much of the rest of the world also engaged in nation building was a further enrichment in the lessons of history.

Thus, when I got down to writing about this quarter century of experiences, I realized increasingly how the two parts in them loomed large in my perspective: the African part and the Canadian part. Once it was “My Africa, My Canada.” Now the mind’s eye was seeing another caption, “My Canada, My Africa.” They were both a part of me, my dreams and my prayers. Happily, the two sides were never in competition. Whenever I have drawn upon experience from the one side, the other was never really absent, overlooked or irrelevant. The same applied to the many visits to the two parts, as I use interchangeably; to the selected speeches in the text or the occasions and functions which I highlight.

When my wife Leela and I visited New Zealand in the early months of 2004, I was invited to speak to the Rotary Club of Terrace End in Palmerston North. My talk began with recalling my first speech to Rotary in my birthplace in South Africa, on November 1960. The topic, “Building Bridges of Understanding,” was quite apt in apartheid South Africa, where all Rotarians at the time were white and the speaker was not. I recalled that a few yards from the venue, the Royal Hotel in Ladysmith, I stopped my car to allow the light to change in my favour. My windows were down and a few raucous white high school students spat in my face — which was the face of a high school teacher of the wrong colour.

On January 30, 2004, I received a letter from the program convenor, the second paragraph of which read:

Our members really enjoyed your comprehensive talk about human rights. We appreciated hearing of your own extensive experiences with respect to human rights and the interesting way in which you gave the talk within the broader historical context. It is good for us to be periodically reminded that our actions speak louder than words and that we must always test our deeds against the benchmark of the Rotary 4-Way Test.

The connections between the two parts continue. They are there to be lived, to be shared and to be advanced.

On Commonwealth Day, March 14, 2005, I was asked to speak to The Royal Commonwealth Society, Nova Scotia Branch, in Halifax,

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on the topic, “Education in Africa: Creating Opportunity, Realizing Potential,” with particular emphasis on South Africa. A day later, the president of the branch wrote the following to me: “Most of us have not been to South Africa and, while we know the word ‘apartheid,’ it did not have the meaning for us that it did for you and others who lived under it. Your words were interesting and telling, and we are grateful to you for sharing them with us.”

It is this “sharing” that is the pivotal part of the remaining pages of this book, whether in the accounts of accidental opportunities that came my way or in the excerpts of the speeches I gave in the context of such opportunities.