

Fly Me to the Moon

Albie Sachs*

I am always highly amused when people introduce me at meetings and so on, and they tell the story of my being thrown into prison, sleep deprivation, exile, and being blown up by bomb, losing my right arm, back to South Africa, helping to write the constitution, getting on to the constitutional court and writing the judgement about same-sex marriage; but the two points that people remember and say wow and have nothing to do with any of that; the first is I started legal practice at the age of 21; the second I have an asteroid named after me. I said wow about these two little things.

Academia Sinica had nothing to do with when I started legal practice, but it had everything to do with an asteroid being named after me. This is a story about eight or nine years ago I am invited to give a lecture in Taiwan. I am intrigued. Because the theme is to speak about same-sex marriages. I am very attracted by the invitation, and I am very surprised that it is coming from Taiwan. Taiwan was not a happy place in my mind for many, many years.

I became politically active in the 1950s. And my generation far away in South Africa, far away from China, applauded the Chinese revolution and supported it. One of our enemies, I wouldn't say the number one, but very high up on the list of our enemies on the side of imperialism was Chiang Kai-Shek, from Taiwan. That was a kind of distant memory. But far more recently, in the days of the struggle against Apartheid, with Pretoria seeking friends from

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Online: <http://publication.ias.sinica.edu.tw/61418012.pdf>;

<http://publication.ias.sinica.edu.tw/81618012.pdf> (Chinese version).



anywhere, being called the polecat of the world, please stand by our side. I remember there was a big naval review. The South African navy was not huge. The only ships they got to joining the review were from Pinochet, the navy of his dictatorship, and Taiwan. So there was an alliance of Pretoria, Santiago, and Taipei.

And now I am invited to go to that part of the world that was associated with so many negative concepts. But I am not invited there to speak about two Chinas or three Chinas or whatever it might be. I am invited there to speak about same-sex marriages, and I am attracted by the theme and I go. It is one of those high moments for me, deeply memorable, in a life that has had many high moments. Being in the dance studio in Taipei, there was the wonderful, magisterial, extremely eloquent Japanese-American Kenji Yoshino on the little platform in the dance studio, people sitting on the floor, speaking. He is a gay man, I am a straight South African man who supports gay rights. And I am feeling the emotions of not just of the issue, but also of the place, of the space — the dance studio had been a center of opposition to the extreme authoritarian times and regime in Taiwan. And it was something about the informality of the setting that seems to direct the connection between the speakers and the audience. It was so different from the ordinary scholarly seminar setting. My heart was like beating, my ears open. I was thrilled by the eloquence and refinement of Kenji's presentation.

It didn't stop there, because I was taken on a visit to other spaces in Taipei connected with the struggle against the autocratic, at times extremely ruthlessly brutal, regime of the early period. So now I am seeing a different Taiwan, a Taiwan associated not with authoritarianism and reaction and supporting Apartheid, a Taiwan of people fighting for their liberty, for their dignity, for their humanity, and I can identify very comfortably with that.

Some time passes. I get lots of invitations from many parts of the world. This experience goes down into my kind of, if you like, personal Facebook of interesting occasions. I am now in faraway part of the world, San Diego, I plan

to give a lecture to raise funds to pay off my mortgage. My wife Vanessa September became an architect and designed the most fabulous house by the beach, and now we have to find money to pay for it; I did not know how we gonna do so. I am far way, giving a lecture in San Diego, quite well paid in dollars. I am saving, I remember, on many things, taking two apples that I got free, some free water, buying some nuts to save money for lunch, and I open my computer and I see a very strange message: ‘Congratulations, we would like to announced that you have won a prize, the Tang Prize, for the Rule of Law. A million dollars.’ ‘Ha, hahahaha’ I laughed. I was getting these messages all the time. But as I am looking for the statement ‘please give us your bank account’, it is not there. And I read it and reread it; being an advocate and a judge, I looked for the mistake to prove it’s a scam. I can’t find it. And it’s signed by Professor Cheng-Yi Huang, that rings a bell, but I am not all that familiar with Chinese names; I read it again and again; eventually I decide it’s true. I tried to tell my wife what is happening, but she didn’t pick up the phone; I phoned again and again; eventually I decided ‘okay’, and I remember going out to buy a hamburger.

I tell the story dramatically, because it was very dramatic for me. I give away half that money; I don’t like the idea of having too much money. Also included was a research grant. That became transformatory of my life, because with that funding Vanessa and I were able to set up a foundation for promoting constitutionalism and the rule of law in South Africa, and she is now the CEO of the Constitution Hill Trust that works precisely on promoting the idea of constitutionalism in South Africa.

In South Africa today things are very dramatic with the Rule of Law being articulated and expressed in its most poignant and powerful form by our Acting Chief Justice Sisi Khampepe ordering the arrest and imprisonment of our former President Jacob Zuma for contempt of the Constitutional Court. Sure, these are very dramatic connections to have. It was Taiwan and Academia Sinica that made the connections, playing a very important role in

my biography as it turned out.

This is followed by many future visits to Taiwan. It was wonderful receiving the Prize, which was done graciously; the elegant ceremony; I met lots of other people; I met winners of the other Prizes. I feel part of a very wonderful elite.... I have spent my whole life fighting elitism, and now I am joining the elite in a rather spectacular way! Well, if you gonna do it, lie back and enjoy it. And I enjoyed it.

But the part that reached me most profoundly was not the ceremonial part. It is being invited to come back to participate in the simulated constitutional court hearing on capital punishment. A big theme. A profound theme. What I admire so much about Academia Sinica is the way it involves itself in engaged scholarship. The engagement is important. It's people who fought for their freedom, who feel it in their hearts. They are not just lawyers picking up a good cause to help somebody, and having a decent vocation. It is existential for them. That sense of connection with the history of the community, of the people. But it is not simply engagement; it's scholarship, and it's rigorous scholarship, scientific scholarship, evidence-based scholarship; it's based on logic and thought, rationality and ideas; that makes for a profoundly significant combination. It produces ideas of particular, extra richness, because it isn't just the beauty of ideas. I like the beauty of ideas. It is the beauty of ideas that connect up with the heart and soul, the innermost dignity of human beings. So I am very happy to be invited to say congratulations on your tenth birthday.

I mustn't forget to mention: the asteroid. It was the National Central University of Taiwan invited me to make a presentation there; they greeted me warmly, photographed me on a bench. And later on they announced, let an asteroid be named the Albie Sachs Asteroid. It's not like a planet. I think that it was the twenty fifth thousand and something asteroid to be named. It was spectacular for me. I have been a dreamer my whole life, and now I was literally reaching out to the cosmos, to the stars.