

On Sabbatical in South Africa

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February, 2016

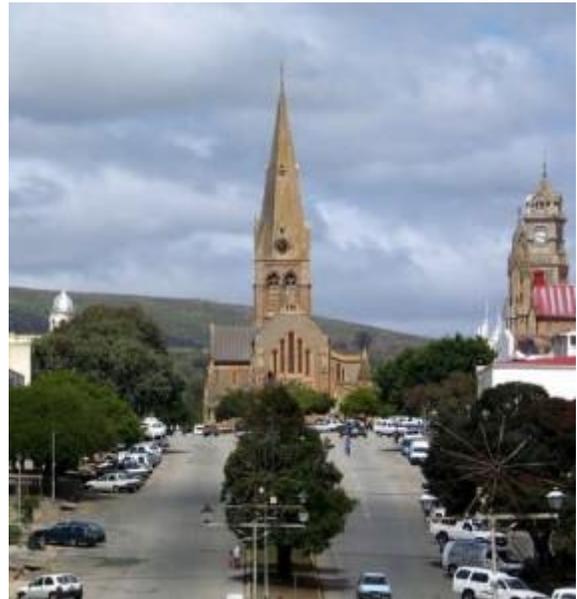
I've been taking part of my sabbatical here at [Mariya uMama weThemba Monastery](#) in Grahamstown, South Africa (one of the houses of the Episcopal Order of the Holy Cross, USA). I've stayed here on pilgrimage many years ago, but I had forgotten how time goes by very slowly in a Benedictine community. The pace is definitely unlike my charged up life back home! I begin the day praying in the chapel with the brothers at 6:00 am Vigils, and throughout the day for Lauds, Eucharist, Midday Prayers, Evening Prayer and Compline. In between joining the community at prayer at set times, I am able to read, write, meditate, take long walks and receive spiritual direction. I commend to everyone taking an annual retreat with a religious community to rest, clear the mind, and get spiritually recharged and refreshed. I also encourage young men and women to consider a religious vocation in monastic life in the Episcopal Church, as monks and nuns who dedicate their lives to prayer and service are very much needed today.

The monastery is beautifully tucked away in the hills surrounding and overlooking the town. The silence of the hills is pervasive, and all seems to be at rest, at any time of day or night. Everything is slowed down here – yes, in the monastery, but also in the small, quaint city of Grahamstown itself.

Clocks are everywhere on various towers and steeples in this town, including the one on the soaring spire of the Anglican Cathedral of St. Michael and St. George – the tallest steeple in South Africa – hovering over this smallest of the country's twenty three secondary cities. Some of the clocks are still ticking along nicely, but others do so erratically, and a few are stopped dead in their tracks. You have to be a local to know which ones are more or less accurate – but nobody seems to mind.

For many years in the 19th century when time was not standard, the local time in Grahamstown was calculated by the military, and announced everyday by the firing of a gun at 9:00 am from Fort Selwyn on Gunfire Hill just outside of town. Obviously, this had considerable drawbacks. Even though it was a loud blast, apparently some still failed to set their various timepieces to it, resulting in a generally confused sense of time. Also, the elderly artillery man whose job it was to serve as Old Father Time would occasionally subtract or add a half-hour or so depending on when he'd get around to doing the task.

The absence of a public clock to set to Grahamstown Mean Time made the establishment of an orderly communal life extremely difficult. In 1853 the idea of paying for a public clock by raising



taxes was raised. You can figure out how that went over. Finally, 20 years later in 1873, the first clock was installed at the Cathedral, and others soon followed.

But here is where it gets interesting. In 1884, one Henry Carter Galpin installed a magnificently-designed Meridian Room in the local court of justice, with a north/south line on the floor to accurately ascertain Grahamstown time – which is exactly 14 minutes behind South Africa Standard Time! Thus noon in Grahamstown occurs at 12:14 elsewhere in the nation. Time marches on, yes, but apparently at a slower pace here than anywhere else in this part of the world.

Of course, I realize that all of this is a moot point now with the ever-present wristwatches, cell phones, computers and other modern chronographs govern over our schedules. Nobody really pays attention anymore to 19th century Meridian rooms, artillery guns and old steeple clocks. But somehow I like the fact that Grahamstown – this charming little town of 52 churches (one for each week of the year) and venerable schools and colleges – hasn't found the need to change the public clocks.

Some might say that Grahamstown is still behind the times, by considerably more than a quarter of an hour. There is a palpable sense here of a bygone era, a genteel life of a time long ago, enjoyed by a relative few. No obvious sense here of 200 years of wars between European settlers and native tribes, of epic battles between the Xhosa, the Dutch Boers, and the British Army, and of the strife of the racial hatred and apartheid that marked most of the 20th century. Now, white students and black students populate the streets quite freely, and you might get the sense that change was painless here. But just as time moved slowly here, so did social change, with customs and attitudes of the past still haunting the present. The future is still uncertain in this place that still holds on to the past with a loosening but unmistakable grip.

Time will tell what the future may hold for this town and for this country: this beautiful rainbow mix of ethnic groups that make up South Africa. We can all be impressed with their progress only 20 years after the fall of apartheid and Nelson Mandela becoming the first black president of the “New South Africa”. After over 200 years in our American democracy, are we any further along in our own struggles for racial and economic justice? Yes, South Africa needs more time to perfect its multiracial, democratic experiment. But I have a feeling that this small city of Grahamstown, with its old clocks, churches, colleges, seminaries and monasteries, will find the time to model for the rest of the world how diverse peoples under God can live together in harmony.

I've found that you really can take your time here...all the time that you need. Perhaps we in America can learn to do the same – and not just on sabbaticals.

*“Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.”*
-from Four Quartets, T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)

+Eugene

