

Lessons from Canada

By Wayne Visser

My dream has always been to go to Canada ever since studying it in Geography classes in primary school. What a land of promise it seemed to me! And now, who would believe, I was actually going there. What would it really be like? How would I be accepted as a South African? So many questions spinning through my head as I heard the news that I had been matched to the Royal Bank in Kingston, Ontario. Time would provide all the answers.

My childhood dream was coming true! But what if nobody was there to meet me at the Toronto airport? Had they received my arrival details in time? Yikes!

Relief! As I enter the Arrivals Lounge I spot a jolly looking fellow holding a piece of cardboard with a rather poor artist's impression of my name on it. But he doesn't look Canadian! How silly of me, what had I expected Canadians to look like?

Greg's greeting is warm and hearty and after a rainy tour of Toronto, I'm off to Kingston. The train journey from Toronto to Kingston is two hours long. How stark the landscape seems. It has a bleak, naked beauty all of its own. And so much space! As far as the eye can see - openness, freedom. I wonder how many of my people from South Africa have sought freedom in exile in Canada over the years - forced to leave the country of their birth because they were denied their basic right to be human? Will I face rejection because I live in a country with evil policies which I feel powerless to influence? Will people understand that it's not my fault?

The acceptance in Kingston is overwhelming! I am made to feel welcome, at home in a foreign land. The people are warm and fun-loving. Admittedly, they do have a few strange habits like getting extremely excited about wacking a disc around on a stretch of ice; or never missing out on a good beef pattie barbecue; or parading up and down main streets in bizarre looking red and white costumes to celebrate their country's founding. To my naive amazement, however, they are much like my people back home.

Work is intimidating at first. After all, I had graduated with honours in Marketing and here I was serving customers on the front line in a bank! In no time at all, I have made friends and found my niche as a computer based assistant to the Regional Manager. Most importantly, I find that I am learning new skills, as well as gaining insights into Canadian business practices (notably, in modern banking where Canada is a world leader in many respects).

The traineeship is over and I reflect on what Canada has taught me...

Canada's gift to me has been the light of understanding. After all, I had come from a country locked into a tragic mindset. Belief that it is the victim of a cruel fate, facing problems so unique and insurmountable that all hope is in vain: a belief that the rest of the world doesn't understand what we are going through; a perception that criticism is rife but help scarce. How encouraging it has been for me to discover that Canada and South Africa are in many ways alike, facing similar problems and similar challenges.

For instance, like South Africa, Canada's history is stained by cruel and unjust treatment of their native people by "conquerors" from abroad - confining them to "reserves" of land, and encouraging (more like forcing) them to give up their language and to sacrifice pride in their culture; a culture which they were brainwashed into believing was "barbaric" and "primitive".

So too, like South Africa, modern Canada is a land of diverse heritage and ethnic origin which faces the difficulty of establishing unity without forfeiting its diversity. And, like South Africa, Canada is a young people faced with the challenge of building a proud, new nation. And yet I find that we have approached our problems so differently.

In Canada, I listened to a young man speak of the work his organisation was doing to restore Red Indian culture. They were re-teaching neglected Indian languages, recalling their customs, sharing their stories and myths, singing once more their songs and dancing once more their dances. I attended a "Pow Wow" in Ottawa where Indians from all around Canada and the United States were sharing in a glorious celebration of their people's traditions.

There was a festival touring the country. Its theme was "Building the Nation", and all its activities were designed to emphasise the strength and beauty of Canada's diversity. And I recall various publications sponsored by the Royal Bank which dealt with a similar theme of tracing the historical development and achievements of Canadians throughout its known history (citing Alexander Graham Bell's invention of the telephone as something which all Canadians could be proud of, for example). Surely South Africa can learn something from this kind of approach - this constructive spirit which I have perceived in Canada? Surely these are lessons which I can carry home with me and share with my people.

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