

Remember the invisible

MD's Word or Two – May 2008

At a corner shop that I sometimes visit, there is a very rare sight. A burn survivor. In fact, a white burn survivor. But skin colour aside, people with burn wounds, especially facial injuries are a very rare sight. At offices, in shopping malls, churches, schools etc, they are nowhere to be seen. This rarity has little to do with their numerical minoriteness, but everything to do with stigmatisation and being discriminated against. It has to do with the fact that they are made a laughing stock and called all sorts of derogatory and nasty names by other people. This is much worse at schools where they are teased by other children who call them Kentucky Fried Chicken etc. As a result of this abuse, some will forever suffer from deep depression, low-self esteem and inferiority complex.

One of the places I visited when I first joined the Paraffin Safety Association was a school for burn survivors based in Johannesburg. What I saw there was heart-wrenching and tear-inducing. One reason for this was thinking about the pain that they had and were still going through. The other was to see the inside beauty, the playfulness and burliness of so many of them. In a way that some might find strange, there was 'normalcy' about them that was calling for love, respect, recognition and acceptance. My colleague, Phumzile Nteyi visited a similar school in Khayelitsha. I have nothing against schools like that. In actual fact, I think they are doing a fabulous job of caring for the burn survivors. However, the very existence of such schools is a sad commentary on our society which prides itself on democratic values because a large part of the reason has, perhaps, to do with discrimination in the 'normal' schools. It seems as if, as a society, we parcel out those that are permanently scarred and shun them out of public view into islands of pain and invisibility.

What's even more shocking is that many of the burns survivors do not receive sufficient and concentrated trauma counseling after going through the horrible experience. On top of their injuries, some lose loved ones, lose important documentation, and languish in hospitals for months on end and thus lose their jobs. Some lose all their possessions. Many find themselves physically transfigured forever. Some are shunned even by their own families. Many find themselves unemployable, even though they have skills. Add to this the unfriendly stares and hurting words of discrimination. This drives many of them into emotional deserts, physical islands like the schools above and deep spins of depression. Surely a country as rich as ours can afford to care for the needs of the burn victims, especially the children.

Regardless of how they look, many of the burn victims are wonderful people, people of character, wonderful personalities and of boundless skills. They can contribute to the growth of our society. Employers, teachers, parents, school kids and everybody else need to embrace the burn survivors. Government needs to work on burn prevention strategies, provide during and post trauma counseling services, devise mechanisms to integrate them back into society, educate the public against their discrimination and invest in curative research and methodologies such that people can operate as close to normalcy as possible. We are all soldiers in the war of life and unfortunately they got wounded in the battle.

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