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Out of Africa: One man's evolution



Dale McKinley's life has not followed a traditional path.

Having grown up in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) as the son of Southern Baptist missionaries, he came to Furman in the early 1980s to escape the country's civil and racial unrest. While at Furman, he began an intellectual transformation that eventually led him back to South Africa, where he became active in the country's Communist Party.

Last year, however, the party expelled him for his criticism of its policies and actions. He is currently back in the States, where he is teaching at the University of North Carolina.

McKinley, a 1984 Furman graduate, returned to campus fall term to present a series of lectures. During his visit, senior history majors Felice Ferguson and Joey Johnsen interviewed him about his experiences. Their report:

Born in 1962, Dale McKinley says that most of his early playmates were African children. His first language was the native Shona, and his English remained underdeveloped until he attended public elementary school.

At the time, Rhodesia was ruled by a minority white regime that had broken away from Great Britain in an effort to preserve white supremacy. In 1972 civil war broke out between the government and two black liberation armies, and by the late 1970s conditions in the country had deteriorated severely. When McKinley received a letter of conscription into military service at the age of 18, he decided to come to the United States and enroll at Furman.

He describes Furman as "a welcome respite" from the brutalities of civil war. He joined ROTC, eventually earning the rank of commander, and traveled to Africa through Furman's study abroad program.

In addition, he began to develop a passion for understanding the causes of injustice and inequality. The more he studied, the more he came to believe that inequality, social hierarchy and lack of opportunity are structural components of

capitalism — thus perpetuating an exploitative political and economic system. As he says, "Nothing happens in a vacuum, there is a reaction to every action, and in this system someone's gain occurs at someone else's expense."

Despite his Baptist heritage, he began to gravitate toward a Marxist political philosophy. Today, in a nod to his family background, he equates his commitment to social justice with the core values of Christianity. Even though his philosophical shift initially confused his parents, he says that over time they have to come to recognize the common ground between his beliefs and theirs, and he points out that the gap separating the two "is not as wide as you might think. Marx was, first and foremost, a humanist."

When McKinley graduated from Furman, he received a deferment on his ROTC military obligation and headed to graduate school at the University of North Carolina. While there, he worked to oppose U.S. policies in Central America and university investments in companies that did business with the racist regime in South Africa. In addition, he soon realized that his evolving political and world views were incompatible with U.S. military service. He applied for and eventually was granted Conscientious Objector status.

In 1990, McKinley went to South Africa to conduct research for his dissertation on the history of the African National Congress and its opposition to Apartheid. Once there, he became involved in anti-Apartheid activities.

Seeking to wed his intellectual interests with political activism, McKinley opened a bookshop in Johannesburg that specialized in selling both political texts and classics of Western literature that the insular white regime had previously deemed too subversive. The bookshop soon became a kind of political salon, where activists and politicians, including some of the country's current leaders, came to buy books, share ideas and hear lectures. His experiences

led McKinley to join the South African Communist Party (SACP) in 1993.

Although Communism's impact throughout the world had begun to wane, McKinley says the SACP remained strong in South Africa because of its well-established reputation as a proponent of social justice. The party was also an unrelenting critic of Apartheid and played a key role in organizing people at the grassroots level. As Nelson Mandela said upon his release from prison in 1990, "I salute the South African Communist Party for its sterling contribution to the struggle for democracy. You have survived 40 years of unrelenting persecution."

The SACP eventually joined South Africa's main trade union, COSATU, in an alliance with the African National Congress (ANC), the liberation movement led by Mandela. With the ANC's electoral victory in 1994, the SACP earned a voice in the new government. McKinley became deeply involved in party activities; his responsibilities included editing the party newspaper, serving as head of information services and technology, and working in the areas of international relations and political education.

As time passed, however, he began to question the party's support for justice and equality. He believes that SACP leaders, in particular, have softened their commitment to the party's core values. In his view, they have become passive observers while the ANC-led government follows a strictly free market economic program that emphasizes development from the top down rather than the bottom up. After he criticized SACP leaders for turning their backs on their impoverished constituents in the townships, he was expelled from the party.

Regardless of what one might think of McKinley's political affiliation, it is clear that he lives what he believes. He insists that it is the moral obligation of caring people to stand against injustice, and he applies this philosophy to his daily life.