stumbled into the steam room at gym like a blind man. I had forgotten my contact lenses at home, and without my glasses my eyesight is as good as a bat’s. The room was dark. I saw figures that I assumed to be of white and black men and greeted them by saying: “heita gents”.

I had been wrong before, thanks to my poor eyesight. I once walked into a ladies change room in a new gym. I was about to open the door to the steam room when I noticed something that looked like a towel suddenly covering a chest…then another one and I realised where I was! You can’t panic when you have bad eyesight. It can lead to worse trouble. So I stayed calm, apologised and walked out…no bonanza for me! Still I guess I wouldn’t have been able to see anything anyway...

Talking to me

This time however, I was sure I was in the right room. The voices were men’s voices. They were talking about the 10 years of our democracy, and I could tell that like the room, the debate was hot. I decided not to join in. Instead I watched the sweat pour out of my body until I heard a voice say, “and what do you think?” There was silence. “Are you talking to me?” I asked. “Of course I am talking to you,” was the reply.

But before I could give my opinion the man ranted on, “Ten years into the new South Africa people in Khayelitsha still live in shacks. They’ve made all these promises to their people (emphasis are mine) and they can’t keep it. People still don’t have running water here? What is that?”

According to his scorecard South Africa has done badly in the last 10 years. It’s true many people in many places around the country still live in shacks and have no access to running water and other amenities.

**Rising temperatures**

As I was about to speak one of the guys poured water on the thermometer. I felt the temperature rise even higher and so did the bashing of South Africa.

The criticism would have been fine if it had been honest. However, this sounded like ‘Good for them. Pharaoh was better.’ I could no longer keep my peace.

“I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for the new South Africa,” I said. “It was unthinkable in the past for black and white men to be naked together in a dark room such as this one.”

**Key reflections**

- We are winning and should celebrate every win, no matter how small.
- Don’t forget the old adage: “If you can’t stand the heat....”
- Beware of hypocrisy.
I told them about an advertising agency where I worked years ago. A certain company had an ad campaign with babies as actors. The agency wanted a black baby to be among the white babies. After all, the company had black clients. The agency presented the idea to the client. After a long pause the client said he needed to talk to his superiors. Having a black baby among white babies was, as far they were concerned, a revolutionary idea that could lose them a lot of business. A few weeks later word came down from the top. “You can have a black baby in the same commercial with white babies, but there should be no touching among babies of different races.” Sounds prehistoric? Well, this happened in the early nineties.”

“Forget the past,” the man said to me.

“I can’t forget the past. I need it to recognise the present changes,” I replied.

**Beware of hypocrisy**

It would be hypocritical to say otherwise, because programmes such as affirmative action and black economic empowerment have improved the lot of many of my contemporaries including me. And it is hypocritical to talk about shacks and lack of running water without mentioning the more than a million RDP houses that we have seen mushrooming around the country in the last decade.

“Those programmes have only benefited a few,” someone commented. But as Robert Weick advised in his article ‘Small wins: Redefining the scale of social problems’ that appeared in the journal American Psychologist, “recast larger problems into smaller, less arousing problems.”

One small win may seem insignificant and probably unimportant especially if you are not first in the queue. However a series of small but significant wins promotes another small win and then, “the next solvable problem often becomes more visible.”

By this time the room was quiet but very hot. Some could no longer stand the heat. As the saying goes, ‘if you can’t stand the heat...’ They got out first and a minute or so later I followed.

**No rose-tinted glasses**

However, when I go back to the office and read about black people such as Za Marutlule, the deputy managing director at Herdbuoys, Mohale Ralebitso at Hunt Lascaris and Neo Makhele at Inroads, I think this time I am sure my glasses aren’t deceiving me. We are winning, and celebrate every win. No matter how small.

I must go I am running late for a Sundowns and Kaizer Chiefs match. I must try and remember the directions to Zi’s house where I am going to watch the match with the other boys. It’s up Plattekloof road and then left into Hendrik Verwoed Drive. Hendrik Verwoed Drive? Let’s leave that for another day.

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