

Continually bombarded by stories of corruption, maladministration, poor leadership and political expediency, it is unsurprising that we periodically find ourselves slipping into bouts of national depression. One senses that we are again headed in this direction.

The nation seems to be on a knife edge, we aren't seeing much chance of any serious political change happening at the ANC conference in Mangaung in December and there is not a lot of hope that, even if we do, a new order will deliver solutions to the issues causing our depression.

To avert a national breakdown – something that commentators and analysts are beginning to predict - we need to start looking at our nation differently. Our reality is constructed by how we choose to think of, view and approach situations hence we need to start challenging our attitude towards our country. If we are seeing the glass half full, then we are choosing to be co-architects of a bright future. If we are seeing the glass half empty, then we are choosing to be co-architects of our own demise.

I was pondering all this when a complete stranger came running up behind me and told me that the race number pinned to the back of my vest was coming off. Adding a good few precious minutes to her Comrades Marathon finishing time, she stopped and pinned it back on for me.

I thanked her and continued on my way, but as the run progressed I kept coming back to this incident in my mind. It had triggered something in me beyond the simple act of kindness that it was.

Over the long and painful hours that followed, I began to stitch together dozens of other memories that had been created since I left Pietermaritzburg early that morning. They began to form into the most exquisite tapestry of life in South Africa. Far from the reeking bile and effluent that flows liberally down the corridors of power are a people of such heart, such compassion, such pride in their land that when you find yourself in the midst of 17 000 of us - millions more when you count spectators and the television audience – any sense of negativity and depression simply evaporates.

I recalled the start outside City Hall with thousands upon thousands of people of all races and nationalities huddled next to one another for warmth, sharing last minute tips and past war stories.

As I ran next to runners of all hues and backgrounds, I thought of my friend and colleague Rama Naidu. When he was younger his Dad trained for the event and ran it unofficially, as during apartheid only whites could officially participate in the Comrades. He was not permitted to take drinks from the water tables so a young Rama ran 60km's carrying water for his Dad before having to exit the 'race' exhausted; how far we have come.

I remembered the moment when, 50km's in, I heard a veteran of 22 Comrades telling a struggling young novice how proud he was of him. They didn't know each other from Adam.

I thought of the many thousands of supporters along the route; old men and women, little children, rich and poor, black and white – braving the icy weather to cheer on a bunch of hobbling runners with no hope of winning. Why do they do it? Why do thousands of people walk for miles to come and root for a bunch of perfect strangers?

And then it dawned on me: This is who we really are. This is the real South Africa. We aren't a nation of criminals, corrupt officials and blinged up socialite tossers noshing sushi off naked women. This is the absolute minority who ruin it for the rest of us. The majority of us are passionate about this land and will express that passion by coming together year after year, getting up at the crack of dawn all of the country to cheer on a bunch of ordinary folk running a long way.

I shuffled the last few kilometers down Pine Street and into Kingsmead Stadium and there it was; a vision of the true South Africa. The deafening screams of encouragement came from throngs that saw no colour and felt nothing but pride. They would never see me again, but they were going to make sure that I crossed that finish line.

In these difficult times, we need to cling to such visions of hope. We need to remind ourselves who we really are. We need to counter the negative with the positive (because there is so much of it) and we need to stop and pin our fellow South African's race numbers back on so that we can all finish this race – together.

Written by Justin Foxtan who is founder of national awareness campaign "Stop Crime Say Hello". This article was published in The Mercury on 11 June 2012