

Hamba kahle, my teacher

THERE are few teachers who make a real difference to a child's life. Alastair Weakley was one who helped shape mine. As a part-time teacher at St Andrew's College in Grahamstown, he began the school's first Xhosa class in those all-white days of 1975.

I remember so well the first day he walked into our classroom. He was a powerful young man in his early 20s whose fashionably long brown hair and sideburns looked slightly incongruous with his black teaching gown.

"Ally", as we called him when he was out of earshot, was a hero to us 14-year-olds. He was a brilliant rugby player, he was funny, he seemed to know all about things like women.

In that faraway South Africa, he was outwardly all that we white boys thought we wanted to be. But inwardly, Ally had one thing that made him different from so many of our role models. He spoke fluent Xhosa and he had zero tolerance for the racism so common in our world then.

Well, I began to think, if Ally doesn't like it then it must be wrong.

Sadly, despite Ally's best efforts, my Xhosa today is not fluent, but what has remained with me is the fascination and respect for Xhosa culture that he communicated to us through his understanding of the language.

I'll never forget him turning to the blackboard and chalking up the word

ithanga in vigorous, confident strokes. "Xhosa," he told us, "is a very subtle language. Take this one word — depending on the way you say it, on the context, it can mean a gatepost, or a pumpkin, or a thigh."

A thigh. Giggles broke out across the class. We hardly thought of anything else then, and Ally had, through his humour, begun to teach us the wonderful nuances of Xhosa.

Ally challenged the prejudices of our white world, and got us to question them. He opened a door and sent me on a journey into the world and, ultimately, into my own heart.

I never saw him again after I left school, but when I heard the news of his killing in 1993, only three days after the murder of Chris Hani, it brought the bleakness of those days closer to me than I had expected. That a man who had set me on the road to believing in a non-racial future for South Africa should have been one of those killed in revenge for Chris Hani's death — the irony of it was bitter.

I thought of him a few days later as I stood covering Chris Hani's funeral, watching the smoke from the fires of rage billow into the sky. I have covered 10 wars as a journalist but I have never been as terrified as I was that day. It is one thing to report on another's chaos and suffering, but watching my own country teeter on

the brink of civil war drove me the closest I have been to cracking up.

The memory of Ally Weakley and what he had taught me was one reason I was able to look beyond my despair, and to believe that we would overcome those days that had brought us to the edge of horror.

Ally has been dead for more than five years. I wish he was alive but, because he is not, I will honour his memory for the rest of my life.

I want his killers to know what kind of a man he was. I am angry, very angry, that they killed him but I do forgive them. I say that in the full humility of knowing that it is easy for me to do so, and I do not wish to intrude on the grief of his family.

Still, his murder did affect me and the society I live in. In the end, I want to forgive them because I have learnt from other people's wars that hatred is a choice, but so is forgiveness, and it is one I wish to make.

Above all, I want South Africa to know what kind of a man we lost. I want somehow to keep the lessons he taught me alive, because we have a long way to go before we can truly say that, as black and white, we understand and trust each other. *Hamba kahle, mfundisi wami.* — **HAMILTON WENDE, Johannesburg**

● *The amnesty application by Weakley's killers was heard this week*