

Activism for Social Change

Conversations with South Africa's Youth: Towards 2014

**Desmond Tutu Peace Centre
District Six Homecoming Centre, 15 Buitenkant Street, Cape Town**

22 March 2013

Brief for Session:

Inspire youth through own experiences and contributions to build peace and sustainable development in South Africa.

Create awareness among young people about their role in shaping the country's future and how they can become responsible and active citizens

For this occasion, I have reminisced on the defining actors and moments in my life. I don't consider myself to be in any way exceptional. Instead, it is the privilege of various opportunities and the intersection of historical circumstances and biography that have made me who I am and have led me to Rhodes University.

My parents, despite having only ten years of formal education between them, instilled in me a love for reading and were models of integrity and humility. My family and friends have enriched my life and supported me in countless ways over the years.

All my jobs have been opportunities to give expression to my values and social commitments. Counsel be true to yourself and don't sacrifice family and children in trying to change the world.

I acquired my abiding interest in philosophy and the history and geography, sociology, and economics and politics of South Africa as a child of the 1976 Soweto uprising and then as a national student leader in the late 1970s and early 1980s, working alongside some remarkable individuals who today are leaders in many fields.

Throughout the 1980s I had the great privilege of a marvellous schooling in ethics, discipline, politics, social commitment and strategy and tactics through interaction with many extraordinary people, who either fell in struggle or today occupy key positions in government, civil society and business.

From the workers in the emerging radical trade union movement I learnt the vital and rewarding culture of democratic practice. It was through these workers, and poor Xhosa and Afrikaans-speaking township men and women, youth and students, that I developed a passion for educating, and

that I learnt about teaching and learning, pedagogy and curriculum, as I grappled with the exciting challenge of engaging with them on economic and political theory, South African history and political economy, and the experiences and lessons of freedom struggles around the world.

My late mentor, friend, and comrade, Harold Wolpe, contributed powerfully to my intellectual and scholarly development, and to my uncompromising view that we must never sacrifice research and science to politics, and that we must fiercely guard the autonomy of intellectual work against any attempts to harness it to narrow political ends. I continue to look to him for wise counsel, guidance and inspiration.

Between 1999 and 2006, as the First Chief Executive Officer of the Council on Higher Education, I had the great privilege of contributing to the shaping of national higher education policy alongside tremendous intellectuals, and of being guided by some dynamic, sage, farsighted and outstanding South Africans – Wiseman Nkuhlu, Mamphela Ramphele, Saki Macozoma, Khotso Mokhele and others.

I must also acknowledge the University of Western Cape (UWC), and in particular the late Prof Jakes Gerwel who persuaded me to join UWC. For a decade, UWC was an exhilarating environment that afforded me opportunities for teaching, research, intellectual development, and leadership of a nature that few other institutions would have offered a young Black scholar.

I am a proud South African and African. Through the acquisition of knowledge and discovery, in which I have been assisted by remarkable South Africans, black and white, men and women, intellectuals, scholars and workers, I have come to develop a passionate love for my birth-place, my country and the African continent.

I take immense pride in the intellectual creativity, imagination, ingenuity, strategic acumen, and stolid courage and purpose that we displayed to rid ourselves of tyranny and to fashion our new democracy.

I take especial pride in our *Constitution* and *Bill of Rights* which have been spawned by our democratic struggle. Our *Constitution* is the fundamental bedrock that informs my responsibilities, guides my conduct, and animates my social relationships and existence.

I am deeply committed to the assertion of the values of human dignity, the achievement of equality, and the advancement of non-sexism and non-racialism and the human rights and freedoms that the *Bill of Rights* proclaims. I consider it my responsibility to 'respect, protect, promote and fulfil the rights' embodied in the *Bill of Rights*.

My commitment to non-racialism is as much ethical as it is rooted in personal experience. Twenty three years ago while I was in political detention, I was dragged in the very early hours of a bitter cold Boland morning into the Robertson police station, clothing in tatters, manacled, bloodied, battered and bruised, the result of torture by a team of security policemen at a deserted railway siding between Worcester and Robertson. Yet in the most unlikely of places, human compassion, decency and courage came shining through to lift my spirit and faith in humanity.

A grandfatherly, white, station commander summoned medical assistance, and set into train a chain of events that prevented further assaults, provided compelling evidence for a lawsuit against the security police, and for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to be able to later confirm the violation of my human rights.

Were it not for the intervention under repressive conditions of this decent and courageous man, my life could have taken a very different turn. This incident confirmed to me that human goodness knows no colour and can be found in surprising places, and instilled in me an indomitable commitment to non-racialism.

I am also deeply committed to non-sexism. Patriarchy and sexism stifle the realization of the talents of girls and women and the contribution they can make to the development of our society. The rape and abuse of women is a pervasive, morbid ill that wreaks havoc in our country.

It is my deep conviction that none of us can be truly free unless all South Africans, and especially the urban and rural poor, the impoverished and unemployed, possess not just political rights, but also the social, economic and human rights that are fundamental to living full, decent, productive, rich and rewarding lives; unless 'those who were (and continue to be) disadvantaged can assume their place in society as equals with their fellow human beings without regard to colour, race, gender, age or geographic dispersal' (Mbeki, TM,1996).

Our task is to cultivate what Harvey Kaye calls a 'prophetic memory' (Kaye, 1996) - *remembrance* of our traumatic past; *critique* of the injustices that continue to blight our democracy; *consciousness* that our history teaches that nothing is gained without creativity, boldness and determined endeavour; *imagination* to conceive of new ways of being and acting; and the *desire* to shape our destiny and remake our country.

Mampela Ramphela has commented that I have fire in my heart and ice in my head. I take this as a compliment. Too much of what I see around me fills me with shame, affronts my sensibilities, and means that there will always be fire in my heart. But equally, my conviction that the path we

navigate must not only be bold and resolute but always also deliberate and sober means that there will always also be ice in my head.

President Mbeki has noted that 'effectively to give birth to the new, we must be angry at our past'. He, however, recalls the wonderful Sotho proverb that says: 'No matter how hot your anger may be, it cannot cook', and challenges us that we 'should make the real fire that cooks' (2004).

Hdhdfgf

Injustice

There are many kinds of injustice – political, social, economic - and injustice takes many different forms.

1. First, there is the readily recognisable injustice that is rooted in beliefs, prejudice, stereotypes, chauvinism, intolerance and fear of the 'other' – whether the 'other' are people of different 'races', social classes, sex, gender, sexual orientation, cultures, religions, languages, nationalities or live in different geographical areas.

As South Africans we ought to be all too familiar with racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia and similar kinds of injustice. These and other pernicious ideologies and practices create patterns of unjust social inclusion and exclusion, privilege and disadvantage, and domination and subordination in our society and have caused and continue to cause tremendous pain and suffering for individuals and particular social groups.

2. Second, and fundamentally important, there is the often ignored and largely unrecognised injustice that is deeply woven into the social and economic structures and relations of our society. These social and economic structures and relations have the appearance of being natural, pre-ordained and god-given. Over time they have become so ingrained that we forget that they are produced and reproduced by our own thinking and through our own actions.

These structures and relations underpin the coexistence of unbridled accumulation of wealth and desperate and grinding poverty, great privileges for a small minority of rich and huge deprivation for a large majority of poor, unbound economic and social opportunities for some and the denial of such opportunities for many others.

Before his tragic murder deprived the world of an outstanding humanitarian and fighter for justice, Archbishop Romero of El Salvador observed that 'when the church hears the cry of the oppressed it cannot but denounce the social structures that give rise to and perpetuate the misery from which the cry arises'.

The late Archbishop Dom Helder Camara who worked among the poor of Brazil was another who questioned the structures, systems and policies that produced great inequalities in Brazil. He once observed that 'When I feed the poor, they call me a saint; when I ask WHY they are poor, they call me a communist'.

Jody Kollapen, the Chairperson of our Human Rights Commission, eloquently observes that:

...the reality remains that for millions of people the promise of human rights and the vision of a just and caring world remains an illusion. Intolerance, war and impunity; starvation and greed; power and powerlessness all combine in a conspiracy of the powerful against the weak that invariably deepens the faultlines that exist in the world and within nations.

(T)hese millions... see a world where disparities in wealth, resources and opportunities have grown, where human rights norms and values seem invariably to yield to the dictates of the rich and powerful; which expresses shock and outrage at arbitrary killing but at the same time is complicit in the killing of many more thorough hunger and disease – which could have been avoided (Kollapen, 2003:26).

Romero, Camara and Kollapen all draw attention to the injustice that is a consequence of how our societies are economically and socially structured and conduct their affairs; that it is not accidental that are wealthy and poor, well-fed and starving, privileged and disadvantaged, and powerful and powerless.

Take our own country, South Africa. During the past thirteen years of democracy there have been some important economic and social improvements. Yet the reality is that South Africa continues to be one of the most unequal and unjust societies on earth in terms of disparities in wealth, income, living conditions, and access and opportunities to education, social services and health care.

The Presidency's *Development Indicators Mid-Term Review* released in late June 2007 reveals that the Gini coefficient, which is a measure of income inequality, increased from 0.665 in 1994 to 0.685 in 2006 (2007:22). This indicates that the social grants that are provided to 12 million people and new jobs that have been created have been insufficient 'to overcome widening income inequality' (ibid.).

The percentage of income of the poorest 20% of our society has fallen since 1994 from 2.0% to 1.7%; conversely, the percentage of income of the richest 20% of our society has risen since 1994 from 72.0% to 72.5%. At the same time, the per capita income of the richest 20% has risen much faster than that of the poorest 20% (Presidency, 2007:21). 43% of our fellow citizens continue to live on an annual income of less than R 3 000 per year (Presidency, 2007:23).

The cleavages of 'race', class, gender and geography are still all too evident. Hunger and disease, poverty and unemployment continue to blight our democracy. Millions of citizens are mired in desperate daily routines of survival while, alongside, flaunted wealth, crass materialism, unbridled individualism, and a vulgar mentality of "greed is cool" runs rampant in our society.

Patriarchy and sexism continue to stifle the realization of the talents of girls and women and the contribution they can make to development. The rape and abuse of women is a pervasive, morbid ill that destroys innumerable lives and wreaks havoc in our country. HIV/AIDS exacerbates the fault-lines of our society, intensifies our social challenges and has over the past decade reduced life-expectancy from almost 60 years to about 47 years.

3. We can highlight a third form of injustice, which is rooted in the abuse and irresponsible exercise of power, or the ethical failure on the part of those who wield economic and political power to appreciate the immense responsibilities that are associated with their powers, and especially in so far as governing and functioning in a 'democratic and open society' in which 'everyone has...the right to have their dignity respected and protected' is concerned.

We must be concerned whether some who are entrusted with governing, leading, managing, providing key public services in education, health care and social development fully grasp the profound moral, political, social and organisational responsibilities that are associated with the freedom for which

Aggett and countless other black and white and men and women South Africans gave their lives. We must also be concerned whether there is an appreciation of what is at stake and what the implications of particular choices, decisions and actions (and non-actions) are for our society and future generations.

Any number of examples can be provided here. Three will suffice to illustrate the injustices that can arise when those in power fail to act or act irresponsibly.

- One is the response of the state to the HIV/AIDS pandemic that afflicts our society. The fruitless debate on the cause of HIV/AIDS resulted in a stultifying absence of leadership in dealing with the crisis while the initially myopic and tardy responses created unnecessary delays in the provision of treatment and tragic loss of lives.
- Another example is that the government has committed itself to building an innovative, effective and efficient 'Public Service that will provide an excellent quality of service'; a Public Service that would be the 'servant of the people (and would be) 'accessible, transparent, accountable, efficient and free of corruption' (Reconstruction and Development Programme). The watchword of the Public Service was to be *Batho Pele* (People First).

It has become clear that not all of our public service is imbued with these laudable ideals. Instead, there is widespread unprofessional and disdainful conduct and service, and sheer indifference to ensuring that the basic needs of people are met. Instead of *Batho Pele* we have among some a culture of *Batho Morago* (People Last).

The poor of our society hugely depend on the effective provision of public services to enable them to meet their basic needs and improve their lives and those of their children. Shortcomings and weaknesses in the provision of public services undermines their dignity, compromises the development of the potential and talent of their children, thwarts the realization of constitutionally and legally enshrined social imperatives and goals, and violates their human and social rights. In short, it perpetrates grave injustices on the poor.

- Yet another example is the injustice that we, but especially those who make political and economic decisions and control

huge resources, do to our environment and our natural world through our unrelenting pursuit of what we call 'progress' and 'development'.

Indian Americans have a saying that we inherit the earth in safe-keeping for future generations. We may wish to reflect on what indeed are we leaving for future generations given our reckless degradation of our environment and the climate change that we are causing globally in the names of 'progress' and 'development'.

4. I wish to note a final form of injustice that is very pertinent to our society. This is the injustice that stems from the refusal of institutions and individuals to openly and truthfully declare the perpetration of heinous crimes and wrongdoings, to apologise to survivors, and to show sincere remorse for the tragic consequences that these visited on their fellow humans.

Conclusion

The Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore has written that 'We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy'. The Jewish sage Hillel says: 'If I am not for myself, who will be? But if I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?'

Neil Aggett appears to have fully embraced the wise counsel of Tagore and Hillel, and I hope that you too will think about these wise words. Your knowledge, expertise and skills make you precious and vital people with the potential to make a huge contribution to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, economic and social development, and social justice.

I hope too that you will pursue the truth that derives from knowledge, understanding and reason; that you will embrace the virtues of respect for human dignity, compassion, and tolerance, and that you will possess the courage and boldness to fight injustice of all kinds and forms wherever you find it. Above all, I trust you will always remember that only when *all* people possess the political, social, economic and human rights that are fundamental to living full, decent, productive, rich and rewarding lives, can we claim to live in a just and humane society and can we all be truly free.

That, I believe, was the 'Neil Aggett choice', and it is a choice that we must honour and remember as part of the 'struggle of memory against forgetting', and it is a choice that should inspire us all.

Leadership

Last year, Reuel Khoza of Nedbank remarked on the 'emergence of a strange breed of leaders' whose 'moral quotient is degenerating.'

He raised the concern whether we have an 'accountable democracy,' and said that 'we have a duty to call to book leaders who cannot lead.'

Too many in positions of power and entrusted with leadership of key institutions are sorely wanting in values and conduct in tune with ethical, responsible and accountable leadership.

Witness the flagrant abuse of power for self-enrichment, as shown in corruption, fraud and dubious tenderpreneurial activities, in anti-democratic practices, and women's oppression in the name of culture.

Witness, too, the failures on the part of those entrusted with leading to grasp fully their profound constitutional, moral and social responsibilities in a society that proclaims a commitment to human dignity, social equity and justice.

Recall how a futile debate on the cause of AIDS led prevented leadership to deal with the pandemic, and how the tardy response resulted in unnecessary delays in treatment and the tragic loss of lives.

Recall, too, that we were promised an innovative 'Public Service that will provide an excellent quality of service,' be the 'servant of the people (and be) 'accessible, transparent, accountable, efficient and free of corruption.' *Batho Pele* was to be the watchword of our Public Service.

Instead, in many areas, there is a culture of disdainful conduct and service, sheer indifference to the needs of people, and a sore lack of ethical and accountable leadership.

The elites have recourse to private and Model C schools, private hospitals and private cars. The poor, on the other hand, depend hugely on public services for their basic needs and for improving their lives.

The lack of leadership and poor public services undermine the dignity of the poor, retard the educational development of millions of children and youth, thwart the realization of constitutionally goals and violate human and social rights.

Our schools cry out for courageous and effective educational leadership from state departments and school heads. A key distinguishing feature between well-performing and poorly performing schools is effective *leadership*.

Caroline Southey writes that 'a depressing realization is setting in that we are in danger not only from those in civilian clothes – there is an increasing trend for our criminals to sport police uniforms.'

She contends that the tremendous increase in assault investigations and murder cases involving the police is 'symptomatic of a police force that is sans leadership, devoid of a moral compass and feels accountable to no one.'

Our fragile environment, too, continues to suffer because of timid leadership. We pursue relentlessly, without effective regulation 'progress' and 'development,' irrespective of the massive degradation of the environment and the hazards of global climate change.

The shenanigans of various businesspersons, politicians and bureaucrats make for riveting, if depressing, reading. Regularly, we are shocked and awed by the brazen sense of entitlement, the glib emphasis on the legal instead of the ethical, and by the impunity with which so-called leaders redeploy resources for private gain.

Perhaps we have been numbed us into silence. Perhaps we think that our citizen duty is limited to voting every five years. Or perhaps, shocked and awed, or thoroughly discouraged, we cannot conceive how we can become agents of change.

Silence is not an option. It leaves the door wide open for irresponsible and unaccountable leadership, and a culture of impunity, greed and crass materialism in which self-interest, material wealth, profits, and performance bonuses become the new gods.

We have to also avoid cynicism and despair. Madiba writes that 'there were many dark moments when my faith in humanity was sorely tested, but I would not and could not give myself up to despair. That way lays defeat and death.' Instead, we must remain optimistic, keep our 'head pointed toward the sun, (our) feet moving forward.'

The task of the *Allan Gray Centre for Leadership Ethics* is to understand what constitutes ethical and responsible leadership, to promote such leadership in diverse contexts, and to educate towards such leadership.

There is no off-the-shelf or 'customised, shrink-wrapped, perfect leadership model.' Leadership cannot also be simply taught, and theory alone or building skills is not enough.

Leadership is pioneering in thought and action, being willing 'to take action to address the challenges' we see around us, and using wisdom to 'change society for the better' wherever we find ourselves.

To build leadership we must take history, culture and context seriously. We need a situated leadership appropriate to our conditions; and we need to forge leadership that is distributed institutionally, rather than centred on the 'big man'— and, usually, it is the big man!

Given our various challenges, our task is to cultivate, grow and institutionalise ethical, responsible and accountable leadership across our society.

We can draw inspiration from wonderful people who provided selfless leadership and paved the path to our democracy – Luthuli, Mandela, Tutu, Hani, Lillian Ngoyi, Amina Cachalia, Helen Joseph, Oom Beyers Naude and many others.

Down to earth, fallible people with good values and *isthunzi*; mindful of people's aspirations and anguish; with the courage to challenge the status quo and the passion to pursue change; committed to service and perseverance to overcome obstacles; knowing that leading means doing what is right rather than what may be popular among followers.

We can also take inspiration from the youth of our country – not the pompous, verbose, self-aggrandizing lot who regularly bemuse us - but those who use their imagination and time to advance social justice for all, deepen our democracy, and protect our planet.

Paul Maylam's new book, *Enlightened Rule: Portraits of Six Exceptional Twentieth Century Leaders*, says that respected leaders cherish 'some key fundamental values.'

They believe in the 'innate worth and dignity of all human beings' and that leaders 'bear the responsibility to create conditions in which all humans can realise their potential.'

They have 'an unwavering commitment to democracy and human rights,' including 'popular participation' and 'proper access of all to education, health care, personal security' and 'social and economic justice.' They also have a 'generosity of spirit,' an 'egalitarian spirit,' and 'a sense of obligation to further the common good.'

Ethical leaders also possess certain key qualities. They take learning, education and knowledge seriously. They know that these are vital for understanding our world, for insight into our problems and challenges, and for finding solutions.

They have an unwavering commitment to non-racialism, non-sexism and great respect for difference and diversity: whether related to race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, language or culture.

They refuse to be paralysed by our history, legacy and contemporary problems. Instead, they remind us of our ingenuity and courage in fashioning a fabulous Constitution and winning our democracy; they call on us to draw on these to confront our challenges.

At the heart of leadership is *integrity* and *honesty*. Ethical leaders 'tell no lies. Expose lies whenever they are told. Mask no difficulties, mistakes, failures. Claim no easy victories.'

Without integrity, there can be no principled conduct; no prospect of winning trust and inspiring and uniting people around a vision; no effective communication, no ethical and responsible leadership.

But leaders look beyond themselves. They see potential all around them, seek to build new generations of leaders who will be better than them, create opportunities for developing people, provide experiences and space to learn lessons, and teach by *living* the core values associated with leadership.

*The leader is best
When people are hardly aware of his existence
When his work is done, his aim fulfilled
The people say, 'We did it ourselves.'*

So writes the Taoist philosopher, Lao Tzu.

Of course, leaders need committed but critical supporters, who also act as agents of change, strong institutions and a strong civil society. Leadership, then, becomes everyone's task and responsibility.

This is the *real* meaning of the slogan, 'Power to the People.' If not this, we will continue to suffocate under the yoke of the big men brand of leadership, with all its problems.