

Students must come together, empathise

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COMMENT

IT WAS a tumultuous week at Stellenbosch University, leaving students, lecturers and staff trying to make sense of events.

Social media is buzzing. The *Luister* video, as well as footage of Elsenburg students being whipped by another student – who earlier featured in the video – have been watched by thousands.

The pressure-cooker events of this past week, with emotions reaching boiling point, beg interpretation as we contemplate a way forward.

When white people see students carrying signs reading “One Settler, One Bullet”, or hear that the protest songs speak of violence and guns, they inadvertently get afraid.

And fear leads to boundary-creating actions.

Individuals retreat into gated communities or the proverbial Afrikaner laager, resorting to physical or virtual emigration. And God forbid, also to violence.

So how do we overcome fear, and disrupt the disgust that is often rooted in stereotypical constructions of the other that are creating further divisions and boundaries between white, black and coloured people?

In her book, *The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age*, Martha Nussbaum

offers three principles that may be helpful to us as we are contemplating a way forward.

First, she argues that to overcome intolerance one must hold to the basic assumption that all human beings are equal bearers of human dignity that cannot be lost or forfeited.

Luister spoke of persons on our campus who feel that their dignity has been assaulted, something to which the management of the university – rightly – has responded by saying that they will not defend the indefensible.

All human beings, no matter what colour, gender, class, sexual orientation, or physical and mental capability, deserve to be treated with respect.

In light of this, I cannot help but being concerned about the numerous instances of aggression that have accompanied some of the recent protests on our campus, treating those whom the protesters are resisting with disrespect, contempt and even violence.

Second, Nussbaum argues that people often tend to make decisions in an uncritical way without much self-reflection.

We at Stellenbosch University should critically reflect on the myriad ways in which we are casting as other everyone that does not fit into the white,

male, heteronormative, able-bodied mould.

As a woman, I can speak from experience that even when others are allowed into this white male heteronormative world, we still have to play the game with rules made by the dominant paradigm.

I believe that what is asked from us is that we, together in humbleness, come up with new rules of engagement and perhaps even with a new game to play together?

But with regard to those struggle songs which, as my black colleagues have told me, are so deeply rooted in violence: Is it responsible in this day and age to talk about bringing my machete or my machine gun and reserving one bullet for one settler?

I was glad to hear that Open Stellenbosch condemned the use of the “One Settler” posters.

Metaphors can hurt, metaphors can kill. If not by the protesters singing the songs, by some mad man who takes a gun and literalises the metaphor to terrifying effect.

This is where Martha Nussbaum’s third point is so important – the importance of cultivating an empathetic imagination, in which one is able to consider how the world looks from the point of view of a person of a different religious or cultural tradition.

This happens through encounter, through dialogue,

through really seeing the vulnerable face of the other.

For white students and staff, this means to truly listen to *Luister*. To feel the pain of the students and to say as the rector of Stellenbosch University has said, that it is not acceptable for any of our students to experience this.

But for Open Stellenbosch students, it would also mean to understand that people are scared and confused, and that we ought to rather take one another’s hands as we walk together on the way forward.

As the acting vice-rector of social impact and transformation is so fond of ending his e-mails: “In Verbondenheid.” In Togetherness. In holding on to one another and never letting go.

As a white Afrikaner female lecturer at Stellenbosch University who is committed to all forms of justice and who actively seeks for ways of collaboration and solidarity across our various struggles for justice, I believe that the way forward is to vulnerably, humbly walk together.

My hope is that my classroom will be a space where we can come together, cross boundaries, learn from one another and also challenge one another.

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