



POTENTIAL: Children from the Zip Zap circus school prepare backstage beneath an image of Nelson Mandela. The current generation of children has much to offer, but would benefit from the guidance of their elders, says the writer.

PICTURE: EPA

Youth Day a good time for inter-generational talks

We need an honesty and openness to engage, if we are to move forward

EVERY year we celebrate Youth Day to commemorate and acknowledge the important and pivotal role generations of young people have been playing in taking us forward to our dream.

The dream of the common vision for a shared future as described by participants in Sharlene Swartz's study *Another Country* (2016).

A South Africa where race no longer dominates; where there is equal access to opportunities; where we have social and geographical integration, knowing people different from us and having them for neighbours; and a country where poverty and inequality are a dim memory.

There is a school of thought that says we are still too close to the current wave of student protests to really understand what is actually going on. Be it as it may, let me share some of my own thoughts on the matter, as a former student but lifelong activist.

My generation fought against apartheid, oppression, discrimination, sexism and capitalist exploitation. This generation says: let us include that, but let us go deeper and further back. Let us talk decolonisation to get to the root causes of inequality, poverty, continued suppression.

My generation thought avoiding a bloody revolution by opting for a negotiated settlement would bring about the realisation of a non-racial, non-sexist, free and democratic socialist South Africa that will care for the poor and vulnerable.

This generation says: our parents were sold dreams in 1994, and we are just here for the refund. My generation strongly felt that we were robbed of our youth, the privilege and right to be young and free. We were hoping that our children

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would be more free in a normalising post-apartheid society. And so we started calling this generation the "Born-frees", the so-called Y-generation who were seemingly care-free, almost apathetically self-absorbed.

This generation shocked us to the core with their protests as they rejected the notion and token of "Born-frees", showing intellectual and political depth, a burning passion for true justice and freedom.

My generation knew what the word "solidarity" meant in our time as we joined our parents and workers in their struggles against oppression and exploitation, through strikes and consumer boycotts. But we forgot it along the way as we became more self-centred and focused on our personal needs and dreams.

This generation has rekindled the lost sense of solidarity and took up the fights and struggles of poorer students and exploited workers.

My generation was prepared to make the country ungovernable in their struggle against an undemocratic regime, but has been settling for sub-standard and poor service-delivery; has become tolerant of inequality as the rich became richer, and previously advantaged remains comfortably advantaged.

This generation refuses to accept that Struggle credentials are an excuse for not honouring the social contract between the government and its citizens. This generation is not afraid to disrupt continued white privilege and arrogance.

The natural tension between generations should always be the point and space of engagement and conversation.

No one generation has all the answers and solutions. We stand on the shoulders of our mothers and fathers.

My generation is worried when it seems and sounds as if any reference to the past Struggle is rejected; when it feels that the proverbial baby is thrown out with the bath water.

In this regard, I am a firm believer of inter-generational conversations. These will necessarily be courageous conversations and difficult dialogues that will hopefully lead to lasting solutions to many of our complex challenges.

The pastoral theologian Edward Wimberley cautions us, however, that not all conversations are equal. Some conversations carry more weight than others; some carry more social reinforcement.

Conversations can also never be completely separated from the power dynamics that transpire between people as we often experience between older and younger people.

Inter-generational conversations will help both generations to sharpen their analytic tools and develop the multi-focal lenses needed to navigate the complexities of our age. Sharlene Swartz's reference to four ways of seeing is relevant here.

Across the generations there are indeed those who see clearly, some who are coming to see through engagement, still others who do not care to see or refuse to see and the last group who see through a distorted lens.

We need an honesty and openness to engage, if we are to really move forward. In the words of well-known theologian John de Gruchy: "One of the painful effects of apartheid was the fact that South Africans did not 'see' in the same way... the new South Africa needs new South Africans, people who can see."

Last year it almost felt as if my generation and this one were on completely different tracks or levels. The #LUISTER is very appropriate for both generations as it focuses on listening to understand, not listening to respond.

Another theologian, Denise Ackermann, reminds us that our listening is in service of communal relationships.

We are talking about listening with new eyes, of listening into speech those who cannot even tell their own stories.

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