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# Time ripe to find common ground

**W**HILE we celebrated Nelson Mandela with nostalgia, one must reflect that it doesn't feel like Madiba's South Africa at the moment.

In the 1990s our conversations focused much more than today on our common ground and common good. People on different sides of the country's many divides exemplified a willingness to listen, to negotiate and win together.

There was indeed something of Mandela's philosophy woven into this when he said "If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner".

Isn't this what we miss at the moment when we listen to the noise in the political marketplace and observe the ideological hard lining that undermines the possibility of solution seeking conversations across the boundaries of difference?

Instead of becoming better partners, in the Mandela sense of the word, we seem to be moving in the opposite direction.

In the early 1980s, South Africa was a rough place in which political power met with civil resistance. While the ruling party was fighting for survival and the white community was deeply divided and pervaded with distrust, the rest of the nation was suffering the consequences.

Under these circumstances Prof Robert Tusenius, a former director of the University of Stellenbosch Business School, started a new conversation, called the Youth Leadership Forum simply to bring young leaders from opposite sides of the historical, political and racial spectrum together to talk about what was important for them and for the country.

And so, between black and white from different sides of apartheid's dividing lines, we discovered that what we have in common was far more precious than anything that divided us.

I will never forget an input made by one of the UWC participants. He pointed out to the whites that our sentiments towards the Golden Acre shopping centre in Cape Town would more likely be informed by the intellectual and capital investments embedded in the structure and beauty of the building while blacks associated the building with the sweat and blood of their fathers, uncles and brothers to build it.

In later years, it was my privilege to facilitate story telling in communities and organisations made up of different groups of people. In Lichtenburg, in the local Methodist Church, white congregants asked black ones to explain the 1976 student protests to them. The black were astonished by the question; and the whites by the answer. But afterwards there was a sense of shared meaning which they never had in common before.

On another occasion, I worked with white and black ministers in KZN. Once again there was a pivotal moment when the black participants asked the white ones whether they view the assassination of Chris Hani in the same light as that of Hendrik Verwoerd. Again we stood on the sacred ground of history, again worlds were brought together, and again there was an opportunity to unlock mutuality and meaning.

A good friend, with whom I have co-facilitated many such story-telling processes, always reminds me to allow the question to be our teacher. Why? A good question creates an invitation to reflect, to probe for understanding and to make room for multiple perspectives on common issues.

A sincere and inviting question has the potential to open access to information we otherwise wouldn't have had. As a result adversaries may turn into partners and move them from opposition to collaboration.

The South Africa of the moment is again in need of convening spaces where we can have the conversations that really matter. The ultimate question of the moment is not about whether or not the president should step down. The answer to that is too obvious. The ultimate question is about the South Africa on the other side of the disillusionment; empty clamour of political speak; self-serving power games and ideological solutions.

We now need to start talking about the possibility of re-imagining our country. The problem is that the house that should be our ultimate convener of meaningful making conversations, namely Parliament, has lost the right to be that place. For now there is no Madiba to personify our ideals. We now face ourselves and one another and need to engage with the questions that matter – and open ourselves for the perspectives and experiences of others.

The time has come for ordinary South Africans, once again painfully aware of our differences and divisions, to entertain questions around our common future and the ideals and values we are willing to work and live for. We need to do this in communities, churches, schools universities and businesses. We need to suspend judgment, step into the shoes of the other, talk through the tough questions and allow distrust and enmity to make place for partnership and collaboration. If we do not, the next generation will have to pay the price.

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