

## **Building the South Africa of Nelson Mandela's Dreams**

**Keynote Speech at the Nelson Mandela Colloquium 30 March 2016**

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### **Introduction**

I was asked to speak on “Memory, Reconciliation and Human Rights – building the Nation that Nelson Mandela dreamed off, twenty years after we have accepted the final Constitution, the founding document of our democracy.

In 2003 an American colleague, Jim Gibson, and I published a book, titled “Overcoming Intolerance, In South Africa: Experiments in Democratic Persuasion” that we dedicated to Nelson Mandela (read the dedication and part of the preface). Using the experimental method to test for tolerance our findings showed that we were at that point a very intolerant nation and instead of persuading people to be tolerant we made them more intolerant! This was a consequence of the larger political context.

Jim Gibson's second book was titled “Overcoming Apartheid: Can Truth Reconcile a Divided Nation” (2004 ). In this book he concerned himself with finding out if the TRC has actually contributed to reconciliation and whether we have created a collective memory of apartheid. He argues that the truth promulgated by the TRC is the truth of discrete events – an awareness of specific incidents and events. But this does not get us very far. So, he focused on the lessons learned from the revelations of the TRC.

He conceptualized reconciliation as:

- Interracial reconciliation – a decrease of racism and greater racial contact
- Political tolerance
- Support for the principles of human rights
- Legitimacy

Once more the findings were not cause for optimism. We lacked support for all dimensions of reconciliation. It seemed that the work of the TRC did not visit reconciliation on the broader population.

But what was for me missing from this concept was “reciprocity” that in my opinion should be part of the concept of reconciliation. Reconciliation cannot be something that operates on an abstract level. It should be something that exists in a relationship between people, and specifically between White and Black South Africans.

Twelve years after this book appeared we have a serious problem with political tolerance, support for human rights principles, legitimacy of the government and most of all racism. Last year a colleague and I did a study on trust in the South African government (this included the Presidency, the President, parliament, political parties, the police and the

Constitutional Court. It was at an all time low, except for the Constitutional Court and the Public Protector).

This is not the South Africa that Nelson Mandela dreamed of.

So, what went wrong?

I want to talk about three things tonight:

- (1) The indictment of liberalism
- (2) The treatment of women as citizens
- (3) Precarious lives and the importance of memory

### **The indictment of liberalism**

The parties that negotiated the final Constitution and the form of our democracy between 1991 and 1994 made democratic pacts or compromises that constituted a liberal democracy with many civil liberties and human rights embodied in the Constitution. It, for example, includes 17 grounds for no discrimination of which race, gender and sexual orientation are three, making it one of the most progressive constitutions in the world.

There is a new generation of young people – the born frees – who never lived under apartheid who now view these pacts as selling out to the apartheid government and entrenching white privilege. Even Nelson Mandela comes under scrutiny and there are some who think that he has failed the majority of South Africans and the Constitution is viewed as an obstacle to transformation.

What we as South Africans were trying to build then was, in the words of Benedict Anderson, “an imagined community” – a society of the dreams of Nelson Mandela. But this community is yet to be born and this is what this generation of youths remind us of - the promises we did not keep and the community we did not create.

The problem with liberalism is that it focuses on the individual, rarely on community. Individuals have rights. And if your rights are violated you have to claim them – often with the help of the courts. - a daunting and expensive task for most. Liberalism also embodies the Cartesian dualism – the distinction between mind and body. We are all citizens because we reasonable human beings – what our bodies look like – whether they are black or white, male or female, or disabled does not matter in the exercise of our citizenship. We all have equal opportunities. Thus, in 1994 we were all at the same starting line.

What the new generation tells us with their #campaigns is that the body matters very much. And the body matters because it is the embodiment of people’s experience. If your body is black you have a very different experience of the world than when your body is white. If your body is that of a woman you have a very different experience of the world than when your body is that of a man. This generation has put “lived experience” central in their engagement with the world. “Black pain” is real. This is an existential pain caused by

feelings of exclusion, not being taken seriously and feelings of alienation in institutional cultures that are places that treat them as “other”. In this regard we need a process of the “decolonization” of the mind.

Students oppose liberalism with black consciousness and the legacy of Steve Biko, also drawing on the work of Franz Fanon, the Algerian psychiatrist who wrote about the consequences of brutal French colonialism in Algeria.

In his book *Fanonian Practices in South Africa* (2011) Nigel Gibson talks about the importance of “space”. He argues that under settler colonialism the expropriation of space was very important and that colonial administrative left spaces and urban areas intact after decolonization (this would include universities). The location where people live plays an important role in determining identity and class. Colonial rule was built on spatial exclusion and repression. Historically white universities in South Africa are spaces that could not be inhabited by black students and the way in which they are managed now and the contents of the curricula remind students of their spatial exclusion and past dislocation. To the extent that there was no “decolonization of the mind” the post-colonial project in South Africa has failed a younger generation.

The racism that students refer to is not only attitudinal (how we view each other and the prejudices we hold about each other) but located in what Philomena Essed (2001) calls everyday racisms, or what the students call “micro aggression” .(See “Multi-identifications and Transformations: Reaching Beyond Racial and Ethnic Reductionisms”, *Social Identities*, 7:4). As she argues “racism does not refer to any personality characteristics, but to cultural patterns, societal structures, recurring practices, behaviors, ideologically informed attitudes, and discourses, through which racial and ethnic minorities are excluded, problematised and inferiorised”. Very often small incidents contribute to anger because people feel powerless to speak out against belittlement and exclusion. When we personalize racism (attributing it to a person) we reduce a complex social issue to a matter of subjective belief, which we can dismiss “as your opinion and I have mine”.

In their book *Race Trouble* (2011) Durrheim, Mtose and Brown argue that racism is not the right concept to apply to post-apartheid South Africa because it merely refers to a psychological stance and not to the deeply structural issues of the political, social and economic as they relate to race. They use the concept “race trouble” to argue that we are all troubled by race, regardless whether we are black or white or any other race group. In their book they refer to how discourse (the way we talk about racial issues), practices (what we do) and the creation of subjects (how we form identity through privilege or marginalization) all contribute to race trouble. Blacks often feel victimized while whites often feel that they should justify their attitudes or account for their beliefs to show that they are not racist.

What we forgot to do after 1994 was to talk about the elephant in the room: the problem of racism. As Oyeronke Oyewumi, an African feminist argues “What needs to be transcended is not race, but racism. The would involve first and foremost the recognition of whiteness as

a racialized category not an unraced, neutral, objective, bodyless position from which whites are privileged to invent blackness as the other”.

The #campaigns have put the long overdue issue of racism centre stage and all of us will have to deal with it. If Nelson Mandela were still alive he might have differed with the strategies and tactics of the #campaigns, but he would not have disagreed that we need to engage racism in order to transcend the legacy of apartheid.

## **(2) The Treatment of Women**

The preamble of the Constitution states that South Africa is a non-racial, non-sexist democracy that values human dignity. We are neither non-racial, nor non-sexist. Putting the body and experience central is actually a feminist strategy. Feminists were some people of the first to argue that the “personal is political”.

The #campaigns have also put the notion of intersectional feminism centre stage, where intersectionality means the dynamic relationship of interlocking oppressions of gender, race, class and other markers of identity. Young women, the majority of them black are at the forefront to say that second class citizenship is not acceptable. In a country with one of the highest statistics for gender based violence, universities do not escape this violence either. Women students have said they will no longer tolerate a “rape culture”. This is a culture in which women are objectified, sexually harassed and disrespected. This is a culture where this type of treatment becomes so normalized that sexual assault and violence do not seem out of the norm. It is a culture in which women do not feel safe. This is also an indication that we still carry our violent past with us and struggles are fought on the bodies of women.

Women students were prepared to use their bodies to bring the point across that we as women should be able to walk the streets, even when we are topless without being harassed. They embody the struggles against sexism, homophobia, the harassment of members of the lgbtiq community and gender based violence.

For Nelson Mandela the gender struggle was not necessarily a priority but he surrounded himself with trusted women comrades to do the work to change conditions for women and to create a level playing field. When we elected members of parliament in the first election in 1994 many competent feminist activists went into parliament. In the first five years we created many laws that could contribute to gender equality, if they were correctly implemented and funded.

Mandela’s vision included freedom and equality for all, women included. We have one of the highest numbers of women in a parliament in the world, yet we are failed by these same women, who should be guardians of our equality and demand accountability when the very progressive laws we have are not implemented. We cannot imagine a more spectacular failure as a women’s league that has a march to the Union Buildings to protect a morally bankrupt president, rather than showing solidarity with abused and marginalized women.

### **(3) Precarious Lives and the Importance of Memory**

We live in what can be called precarious times. The world is an unstable place with thousands migrating from the Middle East to Europe, where urban terror has increased. The global economy wreaks havoc with the lives of people living in developing countries and xenophobic violence is on the increase everywhere. In the USA Donald Trump is an example of a racist, sexist bigot who may just become the next President of the USA.

Judith Butler, the American feminist theorist, talks about precarious lives where conditions of uncertainty mean that through violence, uncertain or no income and inequality many are never sure that they may survive another day. Apartheid South Africa was the cause of precarious lives for most black South Africans. The operation of law was precarious and more often than not did not result in justice. Patriarchy and religion conspired to create a hierarchy of inequality that created privilege for some and misery for others. For many their lives did not change after 1994. So, the question becomes how are we going to remember the promise of the Constitution in these precarious times we live in, when violence seems to have become a solution for dealing with unfreedom.

Mandela was a man of integrity and a one term president who was not seduced by power. Conditions of precariousness in South Africa are fuelled by the lack of moral authority in our political leadership. It is hard to believe that it took only twenty years to hollow out the state and the constitution by our political leaders through a total disregard for those very values embodied in the constitution. Did Mandela spend 27 years in jail and many lost their lives in the struggle for freedom, only to see it squandered by corruption and state capture at the highest levels of government?

We will have to reimagine the possibility of community if we want to live together peacefully in this country. We have to start in a sense where Butler says we have to start – with the question: Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? What makes for a liveable and a grievable life? As Butler argues: “Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure”. Mandela understood this because he lived the precarious life of a prisoner. Who is more vulnerable and exposed to the whims of others than a prisoner.

In a tribute to Mandela after his death by Kgalema Motlante, started with a Swahili proverb: “Life can be understood backwards but we live it forwards”. We need to think back and remember that point of embracing the constitution 20 years ago. We have to continue to understand the impetus of reconciliation that is embodied in the Constitution. We cannot afford to forget this.

But remembering and forgetting goes hand in hand. As Louise du Toit wrote in a festschrift for Lourens du Plessis, one of the drafters of the constitution – “all strategies of remembrance sabotage their own intentions – that of forgetting that lies at the heart of every

attempt at remembrance”. The making of the constitution is as much about the politics of memory as it is about the future. When we think of the constitution as a “memorial” it invokes the mourning of victims and an obligation to say “never again”. Mandela articulated this obligation when he said “never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another” as can be read at Strydom van der Merwe’s sculpture of Mandela in front of the Stellenbosch townhall. This type of memorial states that suffering is ultimately unjustifiable.

Ehrardt Thiel has created a different type of memorial right next to this museum (and if you have not visited it yet – please do so). Ehrardt (whose photograph “Luister” is on the invitation for tonight’s seminar) has built a replica of Mandela’s cell that he calls the iMadiba project. This project embodies the values of Madiba. The walls are quite low so that we can sit on them and the idea is that we should talk to each other – hear each other’s stories. The four corners of this installation can be called law, religion, privilege and patriarchy. Law can be used to create interlocking systems of oppression or it can be used to create systems of fairness and justice. Religion can be used to justify oppression or it can be used to bolster human dignity and to embrace diversity. Privilege can make us blind to the needs of others or it can make us understand that without the other there would have been no privilege. Patriarchy in the true sense of the word enforces the will of the fathers on us. When we dismantle patriarchy we will also dismantle the hierarchies that separate men from women, the powerful from the powerless.

Mandela understood that without the “unfreedom” that many suffered there would have been no understanding of freedom. Mandela understood this in relation to his own humanity, but also in terms of his people and ultimately the South African nation.

## **Conclusion**

So where does this leave us in these precarious times we live in:

I want to return to where I started: the value of political tolerance. A democracy cannot survive without tolerance. Tolerance is premised on a free market of ideas. It is a difficult value because we have to put up with ideas and beliefs we may reject, but this is the only value that guarantees that we will hear each other’s stories.

We have to listen to each other. We have to go and sit on the walls of Mandela’s cell here next to the museum and talk to each other. We may not like what we hear but we cannot let racial polarization continue because we do not want to hear each other. Intolerance and violence go hand in hand and racial polarization is a breeding ground for violence. Mandela’s dream was not one of racial polarization but one of a non-racial society. We will, however, have to transcend racism in order to get to non-racialism. This is the hard task that now awaits us. It cannot be business as usual. The comfort zones of many of us have already been destabilized, but we need to see this as the first step to getting a different comfort zone where racial hierarchies have no place.

We owe it Nelson Mandela.

