

## CREATING MOMENTS, SUSTAINING MOMENTUM

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I

We South Africans are a wonderful people, but we also are a really strange bunch. One moment we make the world hold its breath in fearful anticipation of tragedy; the next moment we stun the world by confounding all predictions of tragedy. One moment we are blindly staring from the bottom of the well; the next moment we are sharing life-giving water with the world. One moment we are in despair of whether real leaders are ever to be found; the next moment we produce a Nelson Mandela.

Even while we served as the world's worst example of a race-obsessed pigmentocracy, we create South African history's best-known non-racial movement called the United Democratic Front, and blacks and whites, Christians, Muslims, Jews and Hindus, believers and non-believers, privileged and non-privileged, youth, workers and professionals learn how to learn together, walk together, march together, and struggle together for justice. In the midst of one of the darkest moments in our history, we had the courage to imagine a different country.

We create amazing moments.

The world predicts a blood bath; we respond with Codesa, an event which - as Prof. Mahmood Mamdani just a few weeks ago explained to us in this very room - we South Africans have not yet begun to "theorise". I understand that to mean that we have not begun to fully appreciate the

enormity of that event in the context of world history, and neither have we embraced for ourselves the vital lessons and invaluable opportunities Codesa has offered us and the world. Allow me to make it as plain as I can.

First, that it is possible, after decades of oppression, resistance and conflict, to move beyond criminalisation as rationale for punishment to humanisation as rationale for political reform and political justice. Second, how vitally important it is to discern the moment to turn one's enemy into one's political adversary. Third, that it is far more important to change political rules and systems and turn them to political justice than to seek revenge on individuals. Fourth, that it is vastly better to seek justice for the living, than revenge for the dead. And finally, we must remember that, whatever decisions we make, South Africans are destined to live in this country together. That is a historic paradigm shift, and we were responsible for it.

Then Chris Hani is murdered. I rush from Washington D.C., fearing that I will find our streets in flames and our people once again at war with each other. Instead I end up in the *Studentekerk* in Stellenbosch, packed with whites and blacks, speaking about sharing righteous anger, gut-wrenching pain and life-giving hope.

We create moments.

There are our Rugby World Cup moments, and to my utter surprise I see those Aunties and Mamas from the townships waiting and singing at the airport – they cannot contain their pride and joy.

We now have our Soccer World Cup moments. The same world media that only a few months before painted us as a joke, quagmired in real problems of political confusion and unreal debates about polygamy, now sang our praises in unrestrained tones. Our biggest asset, we all seem to agree, are not our stadiums and the network of roads, but our

togetherness during this event, the way South Africans welcomed not only the world but each other. We were awash with goodwill and expressions of the nationhood that seemed to have eluded us for too long.

We create amazing moments. The question is: can we sustain the momentum?

South Africans truly are a perplexing people. One moment we drown ourselves in doom and gloom, the next we create what the world calls a "miracle". To others it might seem that we are either eternally optimistic or devilishly opportunistic. Either we are genuine never-give-uppers, or fiendishly clever con-artists; or even, as someone has said of our display of shared patriotism and affection during the World Cup, South Africans are "just so desperate for nationhood". They will cling to anything to believe that we are actually achieving that ideal - even a Bulls match in Orlando will do. But I do not wish to share that somewhat cynical outlook. Perhaps it's not a matter of trying to con the world by creating wonderful, but temporary theatre, or conning ourselves by denying that we are indeed just creating theatre - it's just sheer desperation for something good to happen, and for that moment to last; at least long enough for our children to believe that it was once real. And that is not a bad thing.

We can create amazing moments. Can we also sustain hope-filled momentum?

## II

Tonight I would like to suggest three - there are probably more - major reasons why we find it so difficult to sustain those moments of greatness and live up to the challenges facing us as a nation. One is because of our chronic failure to live up to our democratic ideals and possibilities. Second is our deliberate denial of what the Bible calls "the things that make for

peace". Third is our pernicious and persistent refusal to believe in ourselves.

We were still basking in the glory of our World Cup achievements when ugliness was already rearing its restless head. The media were telling us that provincial governments, government departments, parastatals and municipalities were spending obscene amounts of money on World Cup related entertainment – mostly on themselves, family and relations. R22 million right here in the Free State by the provincial government and one or two municipalities, R12 million by Transnet, another R12 million or so by Eskom. If that were all, one might have listened more readily to the justifications that came when this was revealed. But these were the same parastatals who then went on to refuse to concede to their workers' demands for a living wage. In light of the lavish spending on entertainment, the wrangling seemed all the more unseemly.

We created the moment, but we have difficulty in sustaining the momentum.

A few months ago, just before the World Cup, there was much criticism from some quarters about the wage demands of the Unions. The Unions should not do this, some, notably those in executive positions, were saying then. It is embarrassing to our country in the face of the world's attention and the good vibe the promise of the World Cup was creating. But the truth is: it is not the workers and the Unions who were creating embarrassment by demanding decent wages. The embarrassment was caused by the parastatals who paid their executives millions in bonuses, on top of spending all that World Cup money, and then turning around aghast that the workers should dare ask for more pay, more appropriate housing allowances and better medical aid. *That* was the embarrassment. Just as the embarrassment does not lie in Black Economic Empowerment itself, but in the total, shameless perversion it is increasingly becoming.

Untrammelled greed, crass materialism and unconstrained instant gratification are paralysing even our very intentions to live up to our democratic ideals.

The gap between rich and poor is now larger than it has ever been. We have, as all of us know, now officially surpassed Brazil: South Africa is now the country with the largest inequalities in the world. In 2008, economists tell us, the richest 20% - that is, the new non-racial elite - received 74% of the total income of the country, while the poorest, no less than 53% of the population, had access to only 6 to 8%. According to other major studies, control of the economy and economic resources is in the hands of 10% of the population; the poorest of the poor receive only 40% of the educational resources. The economic and human development status of South Africa has seriously declined over the last years, from 85<sup>th</sup> place in 1990 to 129<sup>th</sup> out of 182 countries in 2007. That means it is now at the same level as it was in the 1960s.

Millions are still living in informal settlements, and the Ministry of Human settlements is now having to spend hundreds of millions of Rands in order to redo RDP houses built since 1994 but now falling apart because of the poor quality of material and building. It is immensely encouraging that Minister Tokyo Sexwale is being so serious at exposing and pursuing the corruption in this process. Too many children are not attending school, 38% of our children suffer from stunted growth, at least 23% from malnutrition. Scientists are estimating that despite the evident success of ARVs preventing the virus from causing AIDS, only 12% living with the disease in sub-Saharan Africa receive the drugs. We do not have time to speak of human trafficking, including children; prostitution and sexual exploitation of especially poor women and girl children but also boys, all of whom are easy targets precisely because they are poor.

The statistics go on and they are utterly grim. But poverty is more than statistics. It means unemployment, or the vulnerability of gratuitous employment; lack of access, education and skills; poor health, deprivation of knowledge and communication and an inability to exercise one's basic political and human rights despite our rightfully hailed Constitution. In all sorts of ways, the poor become the victims of slaveries of all kinds.

Poverty means the absence of dignity, confidence and self-respect; of security and the safety of parenthood and family life. These are persons who remain excluded, and their exclusion ranges from basic needs to justice in the courts. For them, the difference between apartheid South Africa and post-apartheid South Africa does not exist.

Behind these realities, the 1997 UNDP *Report on Human Development* reminds us, "Lies the grim reality of desperate lives without choices". That is, I think, the final humiliation of the poor: to be without choices, options or opinions, which in effect make of poverty a state of effective slavery in a democracy that came into being on the blood, sweat and tears of the poor.

In 1994 we created a moment for genuine justice for the poor, to respond to our African ancestor Augustine of Hippo, who asked the question, "What is government if justice is lacking? It is none other than a gang of robbers!" We created a moment to respond also to the reformer John Calvin who maintained that *the* measure for just government is its response "to the rights of the poor and afflicted". Not charity or social damage control such as social grants, or "trickle-down" theories, but rights and justice.

### III

For millions of our compatriots, it is as clear as daylight: we have failed to live up to our democratic ideals.

But we have also failed through our deliberate denial of the things that make for peace. Most obvious is the inversion of priorities as can be seen in the arms deal scandal that refuses to go away, and the even greater scandal of our continuing arms production. The hideously expensive fighter jets, and submarines for which South Africa paid billions of Rands will, for the foreseeable future, stay on the ground and in the harbour because there is no money to put them to use. Right at the start, church groups and peace activists have called the arms deal “economic nonsense” and they have since been proven right. But economics aside, we should ask a deeper question, or even two. First, how can we spend these amounts on arms when there is no discernable military threat to the country and when we ought to know that the greatest threat to our security is in fact poverty, inequality and our lack of social cohesion?

But further, how can South Africa set an example of, and take credit for a transitional miracle, (and I am not cynical about those words), speak of reconciliation as a model for others, while our weapons, which we have sold to dismal dictatorships, fuel wars in other poor countries and blow other peoples’ hopes of reconciliation to smithereens?

As for the argument that arms sales bring in foreign exchange – how can we be instrumental in killing the poor elsewhere with the intention of feeding our poor, and then our ill-gained profits feed only the already well-fed? Can we see the hopeless contradiction, the total impossibility of being both the apostle of peace and a merchant of death?

But our denial of the things that make for peace is revealed in some others things else as well. The public servants’ strike was not unexpected nor is it completely unjustifiable. Most of us have understanding for the frustration of teachers and health workers. Their demands resonate with most of us, and I think that it is scandalous for SACP fat cats to tell workers to “stop crying like babies”. But suddenly the strike has become more than

just a test of wills, and more than a demand for rightful remuneration. Turning hospitals into battle grounds? Blocking entry to emergency rooms? Threatening medical personnel? Letting a baby die? A SADTU leader giving instructions to: "Inflict pain... hurt somebody... take those fire extinguishers, use them on those principals, spray them... blind them for life!", and the cheers rolling in waves? The strike has become a measure of dignity, of humanity, of compassion, and suddenly it is not government who is on trial. Government might have been the adversary, but it is the poor and vulnerable who have become the target. This is morally wrong, politically unjustifiable and utterly sad. The anger at what the *Sunday Independent* calls "the fat cats' insane perks" is understandable, but the violence and the choice of target is an assault upon the dignity and nobility of the trade union movement.

Not completely unrelated is another aspect as well. Over the last few months much attention was drawn to conspicuous spending by government officials on lavish trips and parties and all sorts of entertainment; on the voraciousness of tenderpreneurs and the abuse of public trust, and on the shamelessly blatant multi-million BEE deals for those connected to the political aristocracy. I mention this not just because of the huge public outcry but also, (and this is my point), because it displays such an open disdain for the plight of the poor our public representatives are honour-bound to serve. It couples with the unashamed, in-your-face display of wealth by the privileged elite in this country, the crass materialism of the so-called "bling generation", and the casual carelessness with which promises to the poor are given and treated. It is only the public symptom of the deep-seated scorn our political elites feel for the poor. This is the real embodiment of the inexcusable inequalities the statistics reflect.



This is the root of the evil. It is the politicized, concretized opposite of the compassion God has for the poor and the vulnerable. Our concern should begin, not with the allocations in the Minister's budget speech, with the debate whether the decisions of Polokwane are translated into policy or not, or even with who wins the current battle for the hearts and minds of the poor. It begins with the disdain for the poor, the contempt for the humanbeingness of the poor, the denial of the rights of the poor not to be hungry, poor, excluded, cast aside; the right not to be poor.

More and more, South Africans are beginning to realize that poverty is much more than just a problem. It is, as Archbishop Ndungane has said, a national emergency. Over the last five years we have repeatedly seen what is called "protests over service delivery". Increasingly too, we have noticed, these have become more and more violent because the belief seems to be growing that this is the only language government understands and will respond to. The anger of people on the ground can no longer be denied or ignored, and little by little, the leadership articulating and directing this anger is being estranged from politically elected leadership, and even more disturbing, from our democratic processes.

This is not too hard to understand. In reality, people are not simply "protesting bad service delivery". They are protesting inequality, poverty, powerlessness. They are protesting against the disdain they have to endure. Increasingly their anger will become political. Almost in tandem, the violence will become less an expression of social frustration than of alienated political intent.

Our levels of inequality are not sustainable, our shallow understanding of reconciliation is catching up with us, our failure to address the legacy of apartheid in terms of justice and human dignity can no longer be hidden, our wrong choices in economic decision-making to please the wealthy

and powerful are turning against us, and above all our disdain for the poor is setting fire to our future.

“Just as (English liberal) segregation has been replaced by (Afrikaner) apartheid, apartheid has been replaced by nonracial elitism”, says economist Sampie Terreblanche. He fears an “atmosphere conducive to a second struggle”. Is it time to fear the coming of a postponed revolution? How far must one travel along this road to get from the privileged and entitled “us” to the non-deserving “them”? Not far at all.

#### IV

But we need to speak of something else as well. It is not just our levels of inequality that should disturb and concern us. Our reconciliation process is under threat also because our social cohesion is under strain. One of the reasons for that is our difficulty to deal with race and racism. It is the thing we most vehemently deny, but it is the thing that seems to define us most. Colonialism, slavery and apartheid were not just a matter of attitudes, they were solidified in political, social, economic and religious structures of oppression and exploitation; in legal systems and were clothed in civilisational pretence. Racism was at the heart of it, for over 350 years. Its onslaught on society and the lives of South Africa’s people was as pernicious as it was relentless.

In thinking about why racism is still such a controlling category in South African life, it is perhaps useful to remember at least three things about it:

- The way, as a system of oppression, it creates both victims and beneficiaries;
- Its enormity and its all-encompassing reality;
- The fact that its effects are trans-generational.

It is for these reasons that it is so urgent and necessary for us to deal honestly, systematically and effectively with racism and its effects, and why it is so wrong and delusional to suggest that its best for us "to move on", or more sophisticated but just as wrong, to argue, in yet another fateful imitation of the United States, that we now live in a "post racial" world. Not even "post apartheid" mind you, but "post racial".

Racism plagues us still. In our failure to realise the goal of a non-racial society that honours, cherishes, and respects our differences and celebrates our diversity; in the distortions of the discourse on race and non-racialism; in the return of racial categories not just in our political discourse but in our official administrative applications; in the political perversion of crucial aspects of our transformation process.

But racism is more in our face than even that, and it may be helpful for us to ponder this a bit. Ten years or so ago, the racial crimes that grabbed the headlines involved older people. Recently, however, they involved mostly the younger generation: the homeless man attacked in the doorway of a church in Cape Town's northern suburbs; the Skierlik shooting, the Waterkloof Four, and closer to home and therefore all the more painful, the Reitz Four.

What I have found equally disturbing, almost morbidly compelling, is not just the crimes themselves, but the haste and vehemence of the justifications that followed, which always begin with the trivialisation of the act inflicted upon the other, and always end with the trivialisation of the humanity of the other.

In subtle and not so subtle ways, there is in our country the real danger of a hardening of attitudes, a withdrawal into racial and ethnic enclaves, an obsession with ethnic identity issues, a mobilisation of people based on narrow, ethnic interests, a palpable resistance to non-racialism in civil society, in churches, in cultural activism. We must resist this.

We have created wonderful moments – can we sustain the momentum?

## V

For some, by now our question probably assumes a haunting, almost despairing quality. I hope that is not so – for we are better than this. And that is the final reason why I think we do not always sustain the momentum of the very moments we create: We fail to believe in ourselves, in the possibilities God has implanted in us, in the flourishing of our longings for justice, in the stirrings of our sincerest humanity, in the blossoming of our deepest desire to do what we know is right.

Just the other day, after the congress of the Democratic Alliance in Cape Town, a young woman sent an sms to the Afrikaans daily newspaper saying, “The election of a black DA Youth leader is an insult to us white young people”. One sms. But the next day I counted four or five responses in that same paper saying, “She does not speak for us. We support that decision”. Setting the record straight, restoring faith and hope, giving leadership. It is not just possible, it is happening.

None of what I have mentioned is unique to South Africa and none of it is insurmountable. None of our mistakes are irreversible. I sometimes think, and I speak as a believer, that God has more faith in us than we have in ourselves. Why else would God have given South Africa and South Africans such immense, historic opportunities to teach the world that something different is possible? Why did we have such shining moments when everyone thought that all we had was darkness? Why did we not drown in rivers of blood as the pundits had foretold? How come it is possible, amidst, and despite all the problems of political failings, corruption, racism, poverty and civil strife, to yet create such contagious togetherness as we did once again during this World Cup, to display so openly our deep longing for nationhood?

We should have more faith in ourselves, more trust in our ability to make it work in this country, more faith in God who is willing us on.

There are millions of South Africans from all walks of life who love this country dearly and who want nothing better than to make it work, to realise those ideals which have spurred us on, to turn our possibilities into reality, as our own history has shown that we can.

I sometimes think, and here I speak as a sceptical observer, that we wake up every morning convincing ourselves of the other shoe that must still drop, as if catastrophe is inevitable, as if we were but the helpless victims of some historically determined disaster. But that is the shoe we are holding in our hand, refusing to put it on our foot so that we can rise up and walk without limping. We denigrate ourselves into meaninglessness, and we do it so well that it becomes an excuse for our own unwillingness to dare to do what we know we can achieve together.

We have not always learnt our own lessons well. But in those same lessons that shame and teach us, we continue to learn that there are things we, in discovering the great Source of our being and our future, have to offer ourselves, our children and the world. But we must begin to rediscover them in ourselves first, in teaching and practicing them in our lives and communities, and live by example so that we can share them with the world.

I am speaking of those deep-seated values that I know most South Africans share, that resonate with the vibrant spirituality of our people, those beliefs that tell us that there is more that bring us together than that which is keeping us apart.

The belief in the ultimate value, dignity and worth of human beings because they are created in the image of God. The belief that people and civilisations survive and prosper not by strength, might or power, but by how they respond to the plight of the weak, the vulnerable and

marginalised; not by greed, wealth and exclusion but by compassion, justice and inclusion.

The belief that the diversity of cultures and people reflects the glory of God and that we are called to honour, treasure, uphold and defend the dignity that is in that diversity. That it is better to share than to hoard; that our equality comes from our being equal before God in our sinfulness *and* in our immense capacity for doing what is right.

The belief that hope is redemptive: it inspires us to look for the sources of action that lie within ourselves and beyond ourselves, in so doing saving us from the paralysis of helpless powerlessness. Hope is the knowledge that we can choose, that we can learn from our mistakes and act differently next time. The belief that history is not a "trash bag of random coincidences blown open by the wind, but a long, slow journey to redemption", (Joseph Heller) leaning upon God and on the shoulder of the other in whose suffering, restoration and dignified life my own humanity is reflected and without whom, as with the rest of creation, my life is not humane nor fulfilled. These are some of the things we should once again make our own.

Faith tells us that God is not unmindful of our aspirations, that dreams of humanity, justice, a fulfilled and dignified life, a shared and sharing community are the dreams in the very heart of God; that God, as Jonathan Sacks has reminded us, gives us the wisdom and power and the means to save us from ourselves, and that we are not wrong to dream, wish and work for a better world.

That faith is in God, but also in ourselves, the faith that trusts and responds to our deepest longing for humanity and justice and togetherness.

Is South Africa more than just a country with a dark and fragmented past? Yes it is. Is government more than just a bunch of corrupt gangsters? Yes it is. Are our media just sensationalist bloodsuckers? No, they are not. Is

Bloemfontein more than just Reitz? Yes it is. Are we, as a people, more than just the sum total of our fears, errors and bewilderments? Yes, we are. Did we only produce apartheid? No, we also produced amazingly brave young people whose contagious courage changed the course of history. We also gave birth to Mandela, and years ago he reminded us of who we are in words that since have been echoing around the world, and that should at last find a resting place in our hearts:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We are born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us, it's in everyone. And as we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear our presence automatically liberates others.”

Mandela's words are now claimed by the world, but remember that it is to us whom he addressed them first.

We can create moments. Let us come together to sustain the momentum.  
Thank you.

