

# EDUCATING THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY CITIZEN

## Inaugural Dr Mamphela Ramphele Lecture

25<sup>th</sup> October 2012

### University of the Free State

#### Introduction

One of the defining characteristics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the vast number of choices that confront us every day at the personal, professional and political level. We have to make daily choices in an ever changing environment offering technology; fashion designs; reading, music and entertainment; travel modes and destinations; food and beverages; friends, even virtual ones! We have abundance in the way of choices. The question is what frame of reference guides our choices?

As 21<sup>st</sup> century citizens of a constitutional democracy what frame of reference should guide our choices at the personal, professional and political levels? How well do we stand up to peer-pressure in making life choices on a daily basis? How do we make peace with making choices that others frown upon or worse may punish you for? How comfortable are we with leaving “the herd” and taking a stand on issues we feel strongly about?

Jerome Taylor, the author of In Search of Self, quotes the philosopher, Kierkegaard’s injunction to choose: “One must choose if one is to be. It is this act which literally constitutes the beginning of selfhood.<sup>1</sup>” He goes on to assert that the one thing by which one’s life can be restored from the “death” of immediacy is to make personal choice an indispensable element of living one’s life.

In this lecture I would like to explore with you the following themes:

- If personal choice is an indispensable element of a life well lived, how well does education prepare young people for it?
- What needs to change in our educational system to prepare citizens for the choices they have to make in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

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<sup>1</sup> Jerome Taylor, In Search of Self, Cowley Publications, 1986 p83

- What should individual citizens do to rise to the challenges of leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

## **Educating for Personal Choice**

Jonathan Sacks, the philosopher and theologian reminds us in The Dignity of Difference, that *“Education – the ability not merely to read and write but to master and apply information and have open access to knowledge – is essential to human dignity....it is the basis of a free society. Because knowledge is power, equal access to knowledge is a precondition of equal access to power. It is also the key to creativity and creativity is itself one of the most important gifts with which any socio-economic group is endowed. More than that, it has become the key to flourishing in the twenty first century.”*<sup>2</sup>

Our public education is anything but what Rabbi Sacks would expect of an education system in a constitutional democracy that purports to be founded on the principle of respect for human dignity. Despite the constitutional imperative of the right to education and compulsory education for children up to 15 years, we have succeeded in generating an environment of failure for millions of children since 1994. The failure of the ANC government to transform the apartheid education system into one that offers equity and excellence for all children constitutes a crime against humanity. Investment in education is the most important way in which a society offers its children a future.

The irony of our situation is that the freedom we enjoy today was fought for by young people: university, high school and civil society groups with quality education as the rallying cry. How did we lose the plot? How have we become so tolerant of mediocrity in our education system that we can have people defining themselves as education specialists and former activists, saying that in 30% is good enough as a pass mark for matriculating students? Would they get into a car being driven by a person with 30% knowledge of the rules of the road? Would they tolerate this low level of ambition if their relatives' children

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Sacks, The Dignity of Difference, Continuum, 2007, p 137

were being subjected to an education process that fails to teach them 70% of what they need to know?

Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese leader and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, captures for me the missing link in our transition to democracy. We did not factor in the mind-set change that should have accompanied our journey from subjects to citizens. She says:

*“The quintessential revolution is that of the spirit...To live the full life one must have the courage to bear responsibility of the needs of others.....one must want to bear this responsibility<sup>3</sup>.”*

It is vital to underline the need “to want to bear the responsibility for the needs of others.” What makes human beings and a number of other animal species different from the rest, is the imperative to be connected to others. Human beings simply cannot sustain their humanity without human contact and interaction. It is not an accident that African wisdom has coined the concept of “*Ubuntu/Botho*.” *Ubuntu/Botho* is captured by the saying: “*umtu uguntu nga banye abantu*” or in Sesotho “*motho ke motho ka babangwe batho*.” This expression simply put reminds us that “I am because you are” or that there cannot be a “we” without a “me” and vice versa. This is wisdom of an ancient continent which is the cradle of humanity.

The question you and I need to answer today is how we live this injunction in our everyday lives? How is our consciousness as connected beings shaping the nature of the choices we make every day? Do we model behaviour that attests to our “wanting” to bear responsibility for others? Or are we part of the culture of “me, myself and I?” Our country’s failure to transform our socio-economic lived reality of an unequal society with failed education, health care, safety and security, human settlement and job creation systems reflects the lack of that impetus to “want to bear responsibility for others.” Our public, private and other leaders, with notable exceptions, have failed to lead us to recognize the importance of the “revolution of the spirit”.

What can you say about the education you have received and are receiving today? Does it enable you to focus on this aspect of your development as a

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Popham, *The Lady and the Peacock: The Life of Aung San Suu Kyi*, Random House, 2011, p301

human being? It is fair to say that the performance of both the school and higher education sectors has short-changed you in significant ways. The failure to transform our apartheid education into one characterized by equity and excellence is producing graduates who lack the self-confidence to “give birth to themselves as individuals who choose consciously to become actors in human history” to paraphrase the words of Kierkegaard.

There is an apparent contradiction in speaking of Ubuntu/Botho with its focus on human connectedness and the imperative of choice as an indispensable element of self-hood. But if one bears in mind that there cannot be a “we” without a “me” then you would agree with Kierkegaard that “something new is born into the world when a person chooses to act on his own.” Put simply, masses do not change the course of history. The dependence on leaders and the support of others in a group leads to diminished responsibility and makes individuals vulnerable to mass action that may hurt others or damage public property. Individuals change the course of history through considered responsible acts, as Anthropologist, Margaret Mead, reminds us: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Our country is desperately in need of change agents who are confident in the “me” that makes the “we” possible.

You are blessed to be receiving positive impulses to prepare you for your role as change agents through the education at the University of Free State, under the leadership your inspirational and energetic Vice Chancellor. He exemplifies leadership forged out of undergoing a revolution of the spirit that makes him want to take responsibility for making this a university that enables all of you to give birth to yourselves as individuals who are ready to make responsible choices in life. The question for you is how are you responding to the impulses that come from your teachers, fellow students and others in the wider society who are asking you to respond to the inner voice within you that urges you to undergo the revolution of the spirit? I have no doubt that you are often held back from responding to that inner voice, and that you silence it in others so you can have a crowd to affirm your own passive dependency and a focus on the immediate.

## What Needs to Change to Educate for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?

Let's return to Jonathan Sacks' wisdom. He reminds us that: *"Throughout the centuries, when the vast majority of Europe was illiterate, Jews maintained an educational infrastructure as their highest priority. It is no exaggeration to say that this lay at the heart of the Jewish ability to survive catastrophe, negotiate change and flourish in difficult circumstances."*<sup>4</sup> Universal literacy is a relatively recent idea in Western countries such as Britain which only instituted it in 1870, whereas Jewish people had high levels of literacy in 1000 BC and a complete school system by the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

We in South Africa are 20 centuries behind Jewish people's understanding of education as key to human dignity and sustainable development. What are we to do to radically change our government and fellow citizens' view of the critical importance of excellent and equitable education? We are devoting close to 6.7% of GDP, which is close on 1/6<sup>th</sup> of government expenditure to education, more than any African country, but our outcomes are shocking. According to international statistics we are now 140<sup>th</sup> out of 144 countries in school performance, 143 out of 144 countries in the quality of mathematics and science. We cannot grow in an economy that has 800 000 vacancies for skilled jobs, including nursing, teaching and other technical sectors, whilst 600 000 graduates are struggling to find jobs.

The higher education system has been inaudible in sounding the alarm bells about the monumental failures in education that are robbing children of their future. Why do leaders of higher education choose to become ambulance drivers picking up severely traumatized high school graduates who are ill-prepared for higher education, rather than tackle the root cause of the carnage in talent at source? Why are leaders of higher education not challenging the government to transform its way of governing and managing education, which is wasteful and corrupt? Take the textbook saga. Why should schools rely on middlemen to order books when ICT makes it possible to do so from each Principal's desk and receive the 30% discount that publishers give to large purchasers? Why is *Edusolutions* which was at the centre of the saga being promoted by Education Officials in Gauteng as a service provider? Who stand

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *ibid*, p139

to benefit from the profits of these middlemen? Why are pre-school children in Libode District in the Eastern Cape sitting on bricks, sack cloth and beer crates because they have no desks in their school for years on end?

A culture of corruption and impunity is at the heart of our failure to leverage the huge resources that you and I as taxpayers devote to education. Why does every child in our school system not have a 'tablet' to learn at their own pace and browse information that is there freely? Given the shocking lack of subject content most of teachers and the shortage of teachers in most schools in poor areas of our country why is this not an option? Why do we continue to tolerate a school system that fails to prepare our children for life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

A major part of the problem is that we do not "want to take responsibility" for the future of the majority of children who are poor and marginalized. We are quite content with our own children attending private or elite public schools. We are quite content to read about the so-called NEETs (young people not in education, employment nor training). We treat them as numbers. They are subjects of research, but their humanity is not recognized. They do not form our frame of reference when we speak of "I am because you are." We are too engrossed with our own success and that of our own family, institution, research project or business.

Our education and training systems have become engines that generate poverty and inequality on a massive scale. We produce one graduate after 12 years per 100 pupils who constitute a cohort starting school every year. We fail to prepare even those who graduate for the world of work and life thus leaving 600 000 plus graduates unemployed. We spend 1% of payroll (R5-6bn) per year to produce less than 10 000 artisans per year, much fewer than the 30 000 per year the apartheid system produced amongst the minority sectors of the population. The growing inequality we are generating is driving crime, insecurity, social instability including violent protests and strikes. Inequality is bad for everyone – rich and poor.

## **Citizens' Leadership for the Challenges of Educating for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

There can be no doubt that South Africa is failing to educate the majority of its children for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The evidence of failure is overwhelming. Evidence of the government's lack of political will and capacity to turn education around is also overwhelming. Post-Polokwane promises of the Ten Point Plan to turnaround the system has come to naught. Even the most basic management to get teachers to class on time, prepared for their responsibilities, teaching using available aids, and spending the requisite time on task has failed to be executed by this government.

At the heart of the failures of governance that go wider than just education is the failure of the ANC to recognize the imperative of "a revolution of the spirit." This spiritual revolution is an imperative if they are to turn away from the trajectory of all post-colonial liberation parties that fail to transform themselves into effective, efficient democratic governing parties. Democratic governance is not possible without the impulse to "want to bear responsibility for others." Evidence offered over the last 18 years is that of a party driven by an imperative to remain in power and of leaders who focus on battles for control of the levers of power. Both pre-Polokwane and Pre-Mangaung have diverted attention away from the business of governance to the business of party politics at huge cost to the taxpayer. One shudders to think of how little time on task many of the top leadership in government really devote to "bearing responsibility for others" beyond the party.

Citizens of South Africa will be well-advised to note that "we are on our own." Our leaders are otherwise occupied so we need to accept that we must rise to the responsibility of leadership to turn our country's fortunes around. Ours is a country with a huge potential for greatness. We are well endowed with natural and mineral resources, wonderful and beautiful landscapes and a diversity of people with a youthful population. We are the envy of the world, but have failed thus far to turn our potential into the reality of greatness. The highest priority should be leveraging the huge investments in education and training expenditure into excellent outcomes.

Excellence and equity in education has to be built on a platform of mind-set change for all citizens who are role players in the system: the parents, the

pupils, the teachers, the managers, the business community and citizens as taxpayers. Mind-set change requires a commitment to undergo the “revolution of the spirit” which entails going on a journey from seeing ourselves as subjects of authoritarian leaders to become citizens who own and shape our country.

Giving birth to selfhood, which the revolution of the spirit entails, is a painful process. We have to accept that we are wounded by the legacy of authoritarianism from pre-colonial, colonial and apartheid eras. Those wounds, have conditioned us to accept authoritarian, corrupt and disrespectful tendencies of the post-apartheid ANC government. Like abused men, women and children we have become dependent on the abuser and cannot imagine life outside the abusive relationship. Many of us have become abusive in our own relationships. How else do you explain the epidemic of domestic and inter-personal violence? How do you explain rape of women children by their own male relatives? How do you explain the abuse of power by former freedom fighters?

We need to come together in circles of healing. We need to confront our fears and share our stories with one another in supportive healing circles. Homes, schools, universities, workplaces, places of worship must become places of healing. For that we need wounded healers to support us on this journey. Citizen leadership is best when it is open to its own vulnerabilities. We must set aside the triumphalism that made us skip those crucial conversations about the impact of socio-economic inequalities on our sense of self. Many white people continue to believe that their higher socio-economic status is earned – they work harder and their children do better because they are more focussed on education. Many black people are beginning to believe that there might just be something wrong with them – how does one explain the failure of a black government to treat fellow black people with respect and to run a more efficient and effective state?

Open conversations are therefore needed to address these racist notions that have made healing the divisions of the past increasingly difficult. Jonathan Sacks enjoins us to recognize that “because we are different, we each have



something unique to contribute, and every contribution counts.”<sup>5</sup> Our history as a society has made us turn difference into a source of privilege at the expense of the other. Colonial and apartheid governments used a white skin as a ticket to privileged access to economic and social resources. Post-apartheid ANC government through Black Economic Empowerment policies has undermined burying of skin colour as an economic tradable good.

Redressing the injustices of the past needs far more radical socio-economic restructuring than BEE can offer. The ANC has used its power to create black elites who sit ever more comfortably alongside white elites. “There has not been in South Africa the desperately needed change of power that would change the nature of power itself.”<sup>6</sup> Citizens who “want to bear the responsibility of others” and who have assumed ownership of their own country must come together wherever they are: at home, at work, in communities and in the wider political terrain to challenge the system that is generating poverty and inequality.

The urgent agenda for radical socio economic restructuring should include fundamental transformation of education with the focus on:

1. Teacher competence and adequate support for retraining wherever necessary. Urgent attention to basic infrastructure and schools support service such as sanitation, water supply including access to broad band by all schools especially those in rural areas.
2. Radical transformation of the health system, with urgent attention to the big gaps in professional human capital; management and leadership at all levels; urgent maintenance and expansion of the health social structure to deal with basic needs including emergency services and access for remote areas.
3. Retraining and reskilling of young people who have lost hope because of lack of opportunities in the job market and their lack of employability which leaves them marginalised in the economy.
4. The government and private sector need to construct partnerships between themselves to utilise the 1 per-cent of skills levy that goes into the SETAs which

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *ibid*, p22

<sup>6</sup> Sampie Terreblance, *Lost in Transformation*, 2012 p91

can make a significant difference to the lives of young people who have nowhere to turn in the quest for a future income.

Finally we need radical transformation of apartheid geography. The persistent concentration of poor people in shack-lands at the periphery of cities simply reproduces patterns of unequal access to the resources of cities across the country and makes poverty truly expensive. We need to use the vast tracts of land belonging to the government to develop high density mixed residential areas in all of our cities. This will promote greater social cohesion and provide South Africans from different social classes role models for young poor people growing up in our country today.

## **Conclusion**

Let me leave you with a few questions to encourage you on your journey. As the community of the University of the Free State how well are you doing in challenging the failures in education in your province? How are you partnering with parents to insist that schools function for the benefit of every child? How are you insisting that schools are well-resourced and productive places to unleash the potential of all children? How well are you preparing your graduates to be active citizens who will be ready to make the choices that will reflect their 'assumption of responsibility for others'? Can you honestly say that you are doing all that needs doing to educate citizens for the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

In the words of Nelson Mandela, 'Sometimes it falls upon a generation to be great. You can be that great generation. Let your greatness blossom.'

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UFS 25/10/2012