



### **The True Meaning of Reconciliation**

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Good evening! Thank you for your very warm and gracious welcome. To the Vice Chancellor, Professor Jonathan Jansen, I want to thank you for extending the invitation to me, and to Professor Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela and Dr. Marcus Ingram, thank you for doing such a wonderful job of coordinating my visit. From the moment I stepped off the plane and was greeted by Ms. Carol Bunn, I have experienced such warm and gracious hospitality, and a special thank you to Professor Dennis Francis for arranging time for me to speak with faculty colleagues in Education and for hosting such a lovely dinner last evening. To the faculty, staff, and students of the University of the Free State and those visiting from other universities, I bring you greetings from your counterparts at Spelman College, some of whom I know are watching us via live streaming as we speak. Technology is a wonderful thing! And, I am so pleased that we are also joined by the US Consul General, Mr. Earl Miller as well as the other dignitaries who have gathered here.

It is truly an honor to have been invited to the University of the Free State to deliver the Second Annual Reconciliation Lecture here in Bloemfontein. To be an American asked to speak about reconciliation – specifically racial reconciliation – here in South Africa is a humbling task, as we in the US still have much to learn about the subject. This year the United States marked the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, which brought the official end to legalized slavery and later this month, we will commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the historic March on Washington led by Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a watershed moment in U.S. Civil Rights history – yet we have never experienced the power of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. And I know of no US college or university that hosts an annual reconciliation lecture

– an idea from which we too might benefit.

In 2008 we, the citizens of the US, elected our first Black president, surely a milestone in our history, yet as a nation we ***still*** find it very difficult to make peace with the painful truth of

our past and too often still our present. So we have much to learn from you as you publicly acknowledge through this lecture and other similar events the importance of the process of reconciliation.

I am also quite aware, as I stand here, that South Africa is a nation experiencing a very important time of transition. The prayers of the world have been with you as the most esteemed Mr. Nelson Mandela clings to life. He is to so many a symbol of both the *struggle* for freedom and the *hope* of reconciliation and peace in a time of uncertainty.

In preparation for my remarks today, I spent some time listening to an audio recording of Mr. Mandela's most famous speeches spanning from the time of his trial in 1964 to his last speech as president in 1999, and I was struck by these words, spoken in 1996 on the occasion of the adoption of a new national constitution that guarantees equal rights for all South Africans.

He said:

*While in the past diversity was seen by the powers that be as a basis for division and domination, while in earlier negotiations, reference to such diversity was looked at with suspicion, today we affirm in no uncertain terms that we are mature enough to derive strength, trust, and unity from the tapestry of language, religious and cultural attributes that make up our nation...*

We are mature enough to derive strength, trust, and unity...

That phrase caught my attention because surely it is those qualities – strength, trust, and unity – that can come from true reconciliation – IF we can but grasp what true reconciliation is. What do we *mean* when we say reconciliation? Many people might first think about the concept of forgiveness, but if we focus on that for a moment, we might realize that “forgiveness” by itself does not lead to reconciliation. For example, I can think of a time in my own life when I felt deeply wronged by someone, and I was really angry about it. I *struggled* to let go of my anger about what had happened between us. I must be honest, my first thought was of revenge – how could I even the score with the person who had wounded me. But, then I realized what I wanted most was to be completely free of that person, to no longer have any relationship at all, and to “get even” would require continued interaction. Once I realized that truth, I knew I had to *release the anger*, as intense as it was, otherwise, I would never be free of that person. In the

wise words of Nelson Mandela, *"Having resentment against someone is like drinking poison and thinking it will kill your enemy."* I could feel that my anger was toxic to *me*, and *me* alone, and I had to let it go. And, in a moment of grace, I did release it. I even felt able to forgive. But forgiveness did not lead to reconciliation. I have no relationship with that person today, nor do I want one. I moved past anger to absence. That is not reconciliation.

When we talk about reconciliation, we are by definition talking about individuals or groups who intend **by choice or necessity** to remain in relationship with one another. That is more complicated. When I let go of my anger, the other person did not have to do anything except leave me alone. Eventually I moved to another city and our paths no longer crossed. But when we are a part of a community or, as Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, an inescapable network of mutuality – where one part of the community has been wronged by another – true reconciliation cannot occur without joint participation.

So, if it is not just forgiveness, what *is* true reconciliation? Last year I spoke at a conference in the US, in the city of Tulsa, Oklahoma, on the anniversary of a horrific set of events that took place more than 90 years ago – known as the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921. The incident involved several days of rioting by an angry White mob in a prosperous Black community known as Greenwood. The end result was the murders of many by White attackers, the destruction of hundreds of homes and the ruin of a thriving commercial district. The impact of the destruction had an enduring impact on the Black survivors of the assault and their descendants. Hard-won economic gains made by a lifetime of effort by former slaves and their children were wiped out in a weekend of violence, from which some never recovered. To quote an entry of the Oklahoma Historical Society,

"The deep scars left by the riot remained visible for years. While Greenwood was eventually rebuilt, many families never truly recovered from the disaster. Moreover, for many years the riot became something of a taboo subject, particularly in Tulsa...One of the great tragedies of Oklahoma history, the Tulsa race riot has lived on as a potent symbol of the ongoing struggle of black and white Oklahomans to forge a common destiny out of an often troubled past."<sup>i</sup>

“To forge a common destiny out of an often troubled past,” is a phrase that provides a framework for understanding why reconciliation – in this case racial reconciliation - is necessary not just in Oklahoma, not just in South Africa, but everywhere the legacy of colonization has created dominant and subordinate groups, and a history of violence and oppression. Like it or not, whoever you are, wherever you are from, it is inescapable - we do indeed have a common destiny. We will succeed or fail together. So, I return to the question of “true reconciliation” – what is it?

### **To Restore Friendship or Harmony**

The Merriam-Webster dictionary offers several definitions for the verb, to reconcile.<sup>ii</sup> And in some ways, they are all relevant. The first is “to restore to friendship or harmony” as in “reconcile the factions.” But has there ever been true friendship or harmony to which one can *return*, in the context of a long history of racial oppression legitimized by the state? Of course, one can find individual instances of interracial friendship, even love, but we know the history of intergroup relations that South Africa and the United States have in common, both beginning with the *subjugation* of entire peoples based on artificially imposed racial categories. Let’s be clear, *there can be no genuine friendship or harmony based on mutual respect and recognition of the other’s shared humanity while in the context of a forced condition of subjugation*. In the US, enslavement was replaced by Jim Crow subjugation and institutionalized segregation. In South Africa, you called it apartheid. But when the forced condition is outlawed, what happens then? What comes after that? Uneasy coexistence? A coexistence easily disrupted by misinterpreted behavior?

Here’s what happened in Tulsa: In 1921 a Black man inadvertently stepped on the foot of a White woman as he entered an elevator, causing her to scream, and ultimately leading to his arrest and the actions of an angry White lynch mob. Behavior misinterpreted resulted in disaster for that Black community.

In 2012, almost 100 years later, misinterpreted behavior led to the shooting of an unarmed Black teenager named Trayvon Martin. For those unfamiliar with this recent event, this 17-year old boy was visiting a family friend with his father in Florida, and decided to walk in the evening to a neighborhood convenience store to buy a snack. He purchased candy and a bottle of

iced tea. On the way back to the friend's house, he was spotted by a man in the neighborhood, George Zimmerman, who didn't know he was a visitor and suspected him to be a potential thief. George called the police and told them he was following the teenager to monitor his behavior, and was told by the police not to do that. He ignored that advice, and continued to follow Trayvon in his car. At some point he got out of the car and confronted Trayvon. We don't know exactly what happened next, but the two got into a fight, and in the struggle that ensued, George Zimmerman shot and killed the unarmed Trayvon without even being arrested by the local White police force until weeks later, when public protests mounted demanding his prosecution.

In this incident, there was no recognition of the shared humanity of Trayvon Martin on that night or in the verdict that set his killer free without *any* legal accountability for his death. Of course, these are U.S. examples, but I know there are South African examples some of you could offer me – where *stereotypical assumptions* have led to misunderstandings with harmful, if not tragic, consequences.

It is not just the trauma of the distant past that keeps those stereotypes and misunderstandings alive. It is the structure of the present – with segregated neighborhoods and segregated schools (following the patterns of the neighborhoods they serve) – that combines to reinforce our understanding of social roles and fuels assumptions of assumed superiority or inferiority and tells us who is destined to play which parts on the stage of life – even when we have highly visible public symbols of change such as President Mandela has been and as U.S. President Barack Obama is now or as Professor Jansen is on this campus. How do we move beyond stereotypes to more authentic knowledge of one another?

The answer lies right here on this campus. Unlike the primary and secondary schools from which many students come, this university brings people of diverse backgrounds in close contact with one another – sharing classrooms, laboratories, residence halls, public spaces – providing a unique opportunity to engage with one another across lines of difference, to seek to understand each other's life experiences and unique perspectives. For many people, the university represents *the first opportunity* to have the kind of frequent and ongoing cross-racial interactions that might lead beyond the superficiality of mere acquaintanceship or the politeness of congenial collegiality to form genuine friendships. But that doesn't happen quickly.

Engaging in a meaningful way with those we have been socialized to mistrust requires some courage. Why? Because *we have to be **brave** enough to have our assumptions challenged.*

The reality is we ALL have misinformation about those “Others” – whoever they may be (perhaps defined by race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, physical or mental disability) – and those “Others” have misinformation about us.

We also have misinformation about people like ourselves. That misinformation has come to all of us from the way we heard our parents and teachers and friends talk about them and about us, and the way we saw those Others treated in comparison to how we ourselves were treated and talked about. Whether you are a part of a historically advantaged group or a historically disadvantaged group, you have been a part of this process. That misinformation is *so common, so pervasive*, it is like smog in the air, and none of us can avoid breathing it. And if you breathe in smog, you are sooner or later bound to breathe some out.

This is why we have to be courageous enough to be willing to make mistakes. Because if you want to engage with people different from yourself, you are bound to make mistakes – you might inadvertently use offensive language (because that is the language you grew up with), or act on erroneous assumptions (because they are so deeply ingrained). If we are honest, I imagine that we can all think of a time when we said or did something that revealed our smog-breathing past.

We can take comfort in knowing that everyone makes mistakes. But, knowing you will make mistakes does not mean that you don't have to take responsibility for the mistakes you make. Ignorance is common but in a learning environment it cannot be tolerated as a permanent condition. I want to repeat that: ***Ignorance is common but in a learning environment it cannot be tolerated as a permanent condition***, because we now have the opportunity to seek out new information and correct the misinformation we have internalized. When we do that it increases our ability to truly *see, hear, and understand* each other in our full humanity. We all want that affirmation – to be seen, heard, and understood – for who we really are, not as the figment of someone's imagination shaped by years of incomplete or distorted information.

If we don't challenge ourselves and each other about what we have learned in the past, we are destined to pass it on in the future. Without intervention, we teach what we were taught,

and the cycle of socialization – the cycle that perpetuates and reinforces the stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes that are so instrumental in the maintenance of oppression and inequality – that cycle goes uninterrupted.

If we want a *better society*, one characterized by *strength, trust and unity*, we must interrupt the cycle and there is no better place to do it than at a university like this one, where the next generation of leaders is being prepared. But it requires intentionality. **It takes practice.**

Faculty and administrators might ask how best do we facilitate this kind of practice? It is a good question. I want to share a study done at the University of California in Berkeley that might shed some light on it. Though it was done in the US, I think it might have relevance for the South African context. Sociologist Troy Duster (1993) and his associates found that most undergraduate students at Berkeley expressed interest in having more interracial experiences, yet how that interest was expressed varied along racial lines. While white students wanted to make friends with black students, they wanted to do so in informal settings, maybe just hanging out and having a beer together, and were less likely to want to participate in special programs, courses, or activities that structure cross-racial contacts, like the Social Justice modules I heard about in the Education Department yesterday. On the other hand, black students were far more likely to want special programs and activities like those modules and were less interested in

hanging out in informal settings, in part because it was in those informal spaces where the casual yet offensive remarks were sometimes made, it was those places where the racist jokes might be told, especially after a few beers. The research showed that both groups wanted interracial experiences but they wanted them on different terms. Professor Duster concluded, “The task is to provide all students *with a range* of safe environments and *options* where they can explore and develop terms that they find comfortable. In the absence of such opportunities, the tendencies remain for each group to see the others from a distance, in terms of images, stereotypes, stories, and myths that are not informed by direct contact and experience (p.241).”

In other words, we need to create *structured opportunities* in classrooms, *as well as* casual conversations in cafes, for students to engage with each other in meaningful ways. A great example of that here at the University of the Free State is the Leading for Change program. Students are brought together to have a shared experience – traveling to new places, often



internationally, in a context that requires active engagement across lines of difference with the support of caring mentors to help facilitate both self-examination and cross-group dialogue.

I know that there are those who think that the way to interrupt the cycle is to ignore it. The logic of that argument is, “If I don’t talk about it, maybe you won’t notice it and it will just fade away by itself.” This point of view was shared with me by a South African woman I met on my first trip to South Africa. It was in 1995 shortly after the system of apartheid had been brought to an end. I was traveling with a group of educators from the US who had been invited to participate in a conference on school desegregation, sharing lessons learned in the US with educators here in South Africa, where the process of school desegregation was just beginning. I led a workshop on interrupting the cycle of oppression, and one of the participants was a middle- aged white South African woman who said that there was no longer a need to talk about race or racism because apartheid had come to an end. She asserted that South Africa was now a post- racial society and to talk about race was to fuel the flames of the past. But how can we move beyond it without talking about it, I asked her. The years of socialization that have shaped everyone’s behavior in the apartheid era don’t just disappear overnight, I said. Even for those born after apartheid was officially over, the attitudes and experiences of the parents and grandparents still shape the family narrative and how we view each other. That is worth talking about.

### **To Settle or Resolve Differences**

Cross-racial dialogue is especially necessary if we understand “reconcile” to mean “to settle or resolve” differences. Reconciliation of differences requires taking the time to understand what the differences are – and that means knowing one’s history *in its full complexity*. We need to understand how what we experience today is still being shaped by that history. We cannot really know each other authentically without that understanding.

I know that there may be some people in this audience who might feel the same way that South African woman I spoke with in 1995 did. Especially if you were born after 1994, you might feel that this history has nothing to do with you. You might be thinking, I don’t want to sit in a class and be made to feel guilty or blamed for circumstances I did not create or control. Students of color may want to avoid the topic too, maybe because it makes them feel too angry

or depressed. My students of all backgrounds would ask me, “How do I get past my fear? How do I get past my anger? Am I willing to take the risk of speaking up? Can I trust that there will be others to listen and support me? Will it make a difference anyway? Is it worth the effort?” In my view, the answer is yes!

If we commit to the process, there is a way to have these conversations without blaming or attacking each other. Will there be moments of discomfort for everyone? Yes, absolutely. Can you get past those moments to deeper understanding? Yes, guaranteed. It is not instant or easy. But when you do engage in honest dialogue, it is amazing how liberating that process can be.

For many years, before I was a college president, I did professional development with white teachers in a community that had a long history of segregated neighborhoods and interracial animosity. Yet this group of white teachers were teaching in schools with black children and they found that they could not really work with their students effectively without taking into consideration the way negative racial attitudes and lowered expectations were affecting their students’ daily lives. My role in that setting was to help these teachers begin to explore the meaning of race in their own lives – what it meant to have racial privilege, for example, as well as what it racism meant in the lives of their students – both black and white. One of the most interesting and unexpected things I learned from that experience – which was often quite challenging – was how energized the teachers were when they began to have sustained conversations about this taboo topic.

Here’s what some of them said about it: “The thing that’s happened for me is that I’m no longer afraid to bring [race] up. I look to bring it up; I love bringing it up.” This educator now brings these issues up regularly with her colleagues, and they, like she, seem to feel liberated by the opportunity for dialogue. Describing a discussion group in which participants talked about racial issues, she said, “It was such a rich conversation and it just flowed the whole time. It was exciting to be a part of it. Everybody contributed and everybody felt the energy and the desire.” Another participant described the process of sharing the new information she had learned with her adult son, and said, “There’s a lot of energy that’s going on in all sorts of ways. It feels wonderful.” Yet another described her own exploration of racial issues as “renewal at midlife.” The increased self-knowledge she experienced was apparent as she says, “I’m continuing to go

down the path of discovery for myself about what I think and what I believe and the influences I've had in my life. . . . It impacts me almost every moment of my waking hours." The benefits of self-discovery became available as the silence about racism was broken.

Why were these conversations so energizing? I think the answer is because we use a lot of energy silencing ourselves. Not speaking, not noticing that which is right before us takes up a lot of energy, energy which is released when we give ourselves the freedom to talk about what is really happening around us. We can't be reconciled – that is, settle or resolve differences, until we do.

Reconciliation of differences requires taking the time to understand what the differences are, and how history has shaped them. Those of us in higher education need to provide the tools of analysis so that this generation can understand the political, economic and social structures that have shaped our reality and what we can do to bridge the gap between that reality and the ideals we hold for our democratic society.

I know I have mentioned several times the importance of knowing our history and understanding how it is still shaping our present. I want to underscore the need to know the *whole story*. What do I mean by that? Simply this, yes, we need to know the way people were oppressed to understand current realities, but we also need to know the way subjugated peoples stood up for themselves and resisted their oppression. We need to know not just who the oppressors were, but also who among them stood up against the injustices they saw around them. Who were the allies and what inspired their just action? Learning more about both resistance to oppression *and* resistance to domination opens doors of possibility as we consider how we want to live our lives, how we want to reconcile with our *present day* conditions. Because we know there is still work to do. The cycle is still operating.

We need sources of inspiration, and when we find them, we need to lift them up high. Recently an acquaintance of mine at Wheelock College in Boston, Dr. William "Smitty" Smith, wrote to me about a project he is working on – a documentary entitled, *An American Story: Race Amity and the Other Tradition*. He wrote, "our mission is to move the public discourse from the blame/grievance cycle in which it has been stuck for the past thirty years to amity/reconciliation. The "other tradition," he writes, "has served as the counterweight to the tradition of racism in

America's social history. The 'other tradition' is the tradition of amity and close cross-racial collaboration that is found central to all advances towards access and social justice... A key aspect of our work is to share the uplifting and liberating perspective of 'the other tradition.'"

We need to know the stories of "the other tradition" in South Africa as well. Those stories are here, and I urge you to search them out and lift them up. Not only that, I urge you to *create new ones right here in Bloemfontein*. Let this university be the home of the "other tradition!" Truly South Africa can be the example of a nation with the maturity "*to derive strength, trust, and unity*" from its diversity. We need that "other tradition" to help us align our reality with our ideals.

### **To Reconcile Ideals with Reality**

Indeed that is yet another definition of reconciliation we must consider. Reconcile also means "to make consistent or congruous, as in "*reconcile* an ideal with reality." For those of us in the U.S. who "pledge allegiance to the flag and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation indivisible with liberty and justice for all," we need reconciliation to make our actions as a community, as a state, and as a nation consistent with those ideals. For example, when there is *unequal* treatment under the law (as was witnessed in the circumstances following the killing of young Trayvon Martin), the question of reconciliation rises once again. To reconcile an ideal with reality requires action which is congruous with the ideals. There can be no reconciliation *without* such action.

On my bulletin board at home, I have a quote – simple yet powerful. "Look at your goals, look at your behavior, does your behavior match your goals?" When they don't match, I know one of them has to change. I either have to modify the goal, or change my behavior. Collectively we have to ask the same questions on a societal level. What are our stated ideals? What is our collective behavior? Does the behavior match the ideals? If not, as individuals who make up the collective, we have a responsibility to take action – to bring the ideals and the reality into alignment. That too is reconciliation.

## Reconciliation as Status Quo

To reconcile can also mean “to cause to submit to or accept something unpleasant” as in “she was *reconciled* to hardship.” It is this form of reconciliation which is perhaps more common than we would like in contemporary society. When those who can vote choose not to, when those who can speak up about injustice remain silent, when passivity in the face of injustice is the response instead of active struggle, one might say there has been an apparent reconciliation to the status quo, an acceptance of the cycle as it is. In psychological terms, we sometimes speak of learned helplessness, the phenomenon that occurs when repeated attempts to escape a painful situation have failed. Over time, a person may succumb to a sense of helplessness that persists, even when the circumstance has changed. One who has been trapped in a cage a long time may not even recognize the opportunity to escape when the door is finally opened.

The irony in societies with racist histories like the ones that the US and South Africa share is that it is not just people of color who have been trapped by the dysfunction in our society caused by racism. Wendell Berry, a White writer raised in the Southern United States – in Kentucky – wrote quite movingly in his memoir, titled *The Hidden Wound*, about the psychic cost of racism to him and members of his racial group:

“If white people have suffered less obviously from racism than black people, they have nevertheless suffered greatly; the cost has been greater perhaps than we can yet know. If the white man has inflicted the wound of racism upon black men, the cost has been that he would receive the mirror image of that wound into himself. As the master, or as a member of the dominant race, he has felt little compulsion to acknowledge it or speak of it; the more painful it has grown the more deeply he has hidden it within himself. But the wound is there, and it is a profound disorder, as great a damage in his mind as it is in his society.”<sup>iii</sup>

Though Wendell Berry speaks in his own context, using the binary terms of Black and White, his point is relevant to all of us, regardless of race or ethnicity. *These are issues that impact all of us- whether we have been part of a dominant group or a subordinate group. **Reconciliation to the status quo is one form of reconciliation that we do not need, and that none of us can***

**afford.** In a global economy in which every nation needs to be at its best, reconciliation to dysfunction will be disastrous for its success. To again invoke the words of Dr. King, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly...” He added, “I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be...”<sup>iv</sup> We must never settle for the status quo when we are capable of so much more.

### **Reconciling the Ledger**

Finally, to reconcile can mean “to check (a financial account) against another for accuracy”, as in “to reconcile a ledger.” Though we don’t often talk about reconciliation between people in this way, there is a form of accounting that is needed for true reconciliation. There needs to be acknowledgment of pain caused and of injuries done that is part of the healing process. This is perhaps most clearly evidenced in the work of the famous South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission led by Bishop Tutu after the end of apartheid. As part of the process, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission established something called the Register of

Reconciliation. As most of you probably know, the Register was not a checkbook register of the kind in which we balance our withdrawals and deposits, but it did allow for a kind of accounting which helped the nation’s healing process. You can find entries in the Register of Reconciliation on-line and I read some of the postings in preparation for this talk.<sup>v</sup> At the website, you will find this note of explanation:

*This register gave members of the public a chance to express their regret at failing to prevent human rights violations and to demonstrate their commitment to reconciliation.*

*Mrs Mary Burton, the TRC Commissioner who proposed the establishment of the register, explains:*

*‘The register has been established in response to a deep wish for reconciliation in the hearts of many South Africans -- people who did not perhaps commit gross violations of human rights but nevertheless wish to indicate their regret for failures in the past to do all they could have done to prevent such violations; people who want to demonstrate in*

*some symbolic way their commitment to a new kind of future in which human rights abuses will not take place.*

*'We know that many South Africans are ready and eager to turn away from a past history of division and discrimination. Guilt for wrongdoing needs to be translated into positive commitment to building a better society - the healthiest and most productive form of atonement.'*

Among the Register postings that I read, I was particularly impressed by this one, posted on 12/15/ 1997 by Dr. Merle Friedman, a resident of Johannesburg:

*It is with deep regret that I reflect on my past. It is with deep sorrow that I acknowledge my complicity as a white South African. And it is with immeasurable guilt that I assume responsibility for my role in our shameful past. I cannot say "I did not know." I can only say that I chose not to know. I chose the safety of my own family over my moral duty to my compatriots. I chose my own comfort over the pain of knowing and the imperative to risk that this knowledge would bring. I raised and educated my children with privilege, whilst those around me were deprived. I am so deeply sorry! And the opportunity to express this regret and offer apology does not unburden me. This privilege allows me to reach even further into my soul to express the remorse that I feel. It impels me to continue to see in my own small way to help repair the damage to our people and our land caused not only by "perpetrators," but also by us, the bystanders, in the tragedy of our past. It impels me also to rejoice in the present freedom to build a new and great South Africa.<sup>vi</sup>*

The opportunity for this kind of national accounting has never happened in the U.S. in any systematic way, and I imagine that, in our current political climate, even the suggestion of such a thing would result in an outpouring of defensive venom from some quarters. Such is the toxic nature of conversations about race at this moment in our history. Yet, recognizing that we all, regardless of racial group membership, have participated in the dysfunction of racism in our society in some way – actively or passively – we all stand in need of reconciliation – in at least one of its many definitions.

## The Role of the Leader

So where do we go from here? How does any society move forward? This is where leadership is required. In the US, perhaps across the globe, we live in an anxiety-ridden time. If we had more time together, I could talk at length about the anxiety that comes from a changing paradigm – when things happen in ways you don't expect. Whether the unexpected thing is the election of a Black president, an unanticipated terror attack, the collapse of the economy, paradigm-changing events cause discomfort, and when they pile up, one on top of another, the result is fear. That's what I see in the United States, and maybe you see some of that here as you prepare to transition from the Nelson Mandela era to something not yet known.

And how do we deal with fear? Whether in the US or South Africa, we as human beings, behave like other animals; typically we either *withdraw or attack*. In the current climate of incivility, we see evidence of both patterns. The withdrawal takes the form of “hunkering down” – pulling in and pulling away from those we feel threatened by. When we are afraid, we quickly begin to categorize who is for me and who is against me. We start to think and act in terms of “us” and “them”. We withdraw into our circles of safety, and we attack those we believe are outside that circle and who pose a threat.

Living in a time of rapid social change, one might ask, how am I supposed to manage my anxiety and my fear – by lashing out? Certainly we see that kind of irrational response growing more common across the globe. I call these symptoms “birthing pains” because something new is emerging from a changing paradigm. Hopefully it can be something positive, but let us be clear, the moment of birth – a time of transition -- can be a dangerous time. And I think across the globe we *are* living in a dangerous time and should take that danger seriously.

When I listen to the polarizing rhetoric of radio and TV commentators in the United States, full of “us-them” language, I think of a book I read recently, *Left to Tell* by Immaculee Ilibagiza, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide.<sup>vii</sup> She speaks of the hostile rhetoric that was on the radio airways before and during the genocide, demonizing the ethnic minority to which she belonged. That rhetoric was made especially powerful because it came from the country's leaders. Her story makes clear that *what we say matters*, and *leadership matters*. The



expectations and values of the leaders can change the tone of the community, and the nature of our conversation.

Fundamentally, we know that human beings are not that different from other social animals. Not unlike wolves, we follow the leader. Yes, we have an innate tendency to think in “us” and “them” categories, but we also look to the leader to help us know who the “us” is and who the “them” are. The leader can define who is in and who is out. The leader can draw the circle narrowly, or widely. When the leader draws the circle in an exclusionary way, with the rhetoric of hostility, the sense of threat among the followers is heightened. When the rhetoric is expansive and inclusionary, the threat is reduced. It sounds simple, but we know it is not. It requires courage, and sometimes means we must speak up against strident voices. But that is what leaders do. You are fortunate to have such a leader in Professor Jansen, one who is drawing the circle bigger every day.

The leader has to ask the question, how is the circle being drawn? Who is inside it? Who is outside it? What can I do to make the circle bigger, more inclusive? When I speak of leaders, I want to be clear that I am not just talking about elected officials or heads of universities. I am talking about every one of you.

Each of you here plays a leadership role in some context. We all have a sphere of influence. It may be in your home, your classroom, your house of worship, your neighborhood, your workplace, your civic organization. In those leadership roles, we all have to ask the question, how is the circle being drawn? *How am I drawing the circle?*

We live in a time when fear is rising – and us-them lines are being drawn in a way that *does not bode well* for the health of our society. We cannot lock people out and expect success. We cannot lock people in and expect success. Truly we are caught in a “web of mutuality,” and that means we must look to *include*, rather than *exclude*; we must *expand* opportunity for all, not *limit* it; we must *recognize* talent in *all* communities including low income communities of color, not *overlook* it; we must *set the example*, knowing that others will follow.

***When we do that, we will be on the road to reconciliation*** – meaning, on the road to friendship and harmony, on the road to being able to understand and resolve differences, on the road to aligning our reality with our ideals, no longer accepting the status quo, but instead on the

road to taking accountability for our actions, and to borrow a phrase from Dr. Friedman of Johannesburg, we will be “able to rejoice in the present freedom to build a new and greater” world in which we live!

Every one of you here is a leader, a builder – we are building the future one interaction, one classroom discussion, one hiring decision, one university community at a time. It is undeniable – we have the power to create something new. We are all products of our history, and we need to know and understand that history, but we are also producers of our future. Let’s move past our fear to our freedom.

As President Mandela said in his farewell speech to the nation in 1999, “*Together we must continue our efforts to turn our hopes into realities. The long walk continues.*” Let us walk – and build – the road of reconciliation together!

Thank you very much for your attention.

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i <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/T/TU013.html>

ii <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reconcile>

iii Berry, Wendell. *The Hidden Wound*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1989. 3-4.

iv Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Letter from Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963.

v <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/ror/index.htm>

vi <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/ror/page01.htm> as posted on 5.28/2012

vii Immaculee Ilibagiza. (2006) *Left to Tell: Discovering God amidst the Rwandan Holocaust*. Carlsbad, CA: Hay House.