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The Journey of Education

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We, your mothers and fathers, grandparents - we present you now with your adulthood, grown up to live the worst time in eighteen years of what was fought for, died for, meant to be your generation's freedom from our country's shameful past. I don't need to remind you of the disaster of miners killed on strike, in this, what has been your academic year. They were striking as a last resort to be paid a living wage not alone for the risks of injury and death in their hard labour, but the lung diseases which come with conditions in the labyrinths underground. Commission of Enquiry, conferences dealing with must be done about this catastrophic example of much in our country's condition that is hung over from our past, and remains. We have failed you. Failed in giving you a good start to a new life for our country.

It's a platform cliché to say on occasions such as this that it is an honour to be invited to speak today. For me it goes further than that. To have an opportunity, as well, to see and hear myself that initiative established against enormous odds by one man, Jonathan Jansen, and being carried out with him by you, the youth of the country. For me that is a realisation of the answer to what individuals are asking themselves – 'But what can I do'? See what is being done, here.

'The past is another country. They did things differently there.'*

Yes. This university, makes use of that past by actuality of 'doing things' in South Africa differently from what was done in that 'other country' which was our territory of the African continent from the 17th century to 1994.

It is a maxim that a country's youth are a country's future. This means immense responsibility for you.

**C. P. Hartley, English novelist*

Education is the means of preparation for that horizon. In eighteen years of desegregation by race, colour, what has been arrived at in education is that upper income parents of black children are able to enrol them in formerly 'white schools'- and as for black schools, no-one would want to take advantage as 'open' –of those without toilets, electricity, supplies of textbooks let alone libraries and science laboratories.

Your integrated campus, 65% black, 35% white students reflects honestly something of the population proportion in our country. But to face facts , as in all south African universities there is that of the standard of school education necessary for a student's understanding, comprehension of the wider vocabulary of the subjects they choose to study at an university . I am one of the citizens who believed that universities must begin transformation to open higher education to our young people disadvantaged by inadequate schooling standards. The immediate of course has been a ladder of recognised universities entry standards. Sounds good. But academics teaching at universities tell me of the difficulties students on the lower

entry rung, despite their intelligence, suffer in not having been educated open to the level of literacy and comprehension essential for university courses.

This university's bold, vital Second Chance programme for students. The results are an illuminating example of what has to be, can be done to make ours a different country from the colonial and apartheid past. Your 'core curriculum' is an initiative concept that applies far and wider, to the present state of our country. The Constitution is our highest education in national justice, a core curriculum is what we must have to equal, in practice, to the Constitution in the civic institutions, the circumstances of daily life, above all in public and personal mind-set. The country's core curriculum must address something – let us put in black and white all senses of the labels - that evidences as an internal xenophobia.

What has meant for centuries, to be black makes it understandable when there is an ancestral resentment as a post, a job, given to a white applicant standing beside a black applicant when both believe to have broadly the same qualification. There is resentment when a black applicant is given a post, a job when a white applicant with the privilege of experience or a better education, is the loser. (As an aside, there is also a gender, not race, variety of the reaction. Out of centuries old enduring subjection of females, in one degree or another, depending on the culture of a society, there is resentment when the chosen applicant is woman. Or vice-versa circumstance, a man.)

Black and white we have been conditioned, brain-washed by legal and cultural, even religious demeaning distinctions between race and colour. This university has discarded, is tackling these; an image breaking of false consciousness. The child is teaching the man, the student is teaching the adult the approach to the truth. We are humans under the skin and bones, nothing more, nothing less. We await your generation's entry to public life, when you come out of the University of the Free State equipped to bring us along with your professional degrees, the way to function in a population as human beings you have learnt how to be at this university.

Education is not or entirely what comes out of the textbooks, test-tubes, and the great theories and works of exploratory thinking in the past. Something dubbed general knowledge is contemporary awareness of what is happening now, in your day, to the right to live and develop in the freedom won for our country at the price of thousands of lives since the earliest uprisings of the people against their self-appointed masters, from the 17th Century to the Everest of subjection, apartheid. There is the invaluable opportunity of 'immersion': first year students selected for international-wide leadership studies alongside graduates in Asia, West Africa, as well as North America and Europe. Is there one world? This experience is one of those to which we offer the answer in our one word UBUNTU.

"I am because of you"

“Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu”

Recognition of this is the initiative of the UFS in practice, a macrocosm of the macrocosm one world of the human race, united naturally, that international political institutions toward it haven't managed, so far. Those 'immersion' students bring back with them to the university a first-hand worldview, workman-like understanding of conditions outside our country which affect or lives within it - the uncertainty of world oil production, the failure of world banks.

But at home.

The great playwright Bertolt Brecht said of Germany after the defeat of Nazism: 'We have to start somewhere; we may never stop anywhere'.

You have certainly started somewhere with this institution, after the defeat of apartheid. In the collaboration of academics and students in place and advance of the conventional hierarchy. In your independent student groups, associations. I see there are more religious associations than any other? This in itself is a subject for your search of the nature of our society. Religion was misused by the apartheid regime in a totally distorted, contradictory way: the people, African, who had their own variety of faiths, beliefs, were converted to Christianity. Which was the religious faith of those who enslaved them. There have been great Christians, like Father Trevor Huddleston, Father Michael Roberts, Revered Beyers Naude, who in our past were fearlessly active in the other purpose of Christianity – I quote again UBUNTU. Which implies freedom of mind and spirit above the shackles of racism or any other discrimination.

I see you are using this freedom of independent thought in your student associations, and clubs , all the way from the 'Momentum Adventure and Climbing Club' to the adventures of your 'Cultural Organisation For Free State Hindu Students', 'The Pan-African Student Movement of Azania', 'The bond of Zimbabwe Students', of 'Lesotho Students' as they bring the presence of our neighbouring countries, other parts of the shared African continent, the 'Black Lawyers Association' ,the 'Student Empowerment Movement', 'Students for Law and Social justice', 'Artists, Actors, Musicians & Poets Society', the 'Agricultural Association' (We outside the UFS need to be with you urgently in this one, facing both rural labour conditions and the threat to nature ,our environment). 'The Democratic Alliance', the 'Young Communist League of South Africa'. The very experience explored with what it's like to be at UFS: 'A day In My Shoes...'

Just a few examples here is the open spirit , wide concept of the meaning of advanced education, engaged thought , learning how to live in self and as one of all others, truly as human beings.

Now—engaging with one another I am sure you are alert to the threats arising to your future, the future for South Africa, justice for all. Indivisible with that justice are the various freedoms which make up a free country, free people.

I'd like to take up some of these with you. What are the opinions among you of the proposed Traditional Courts? You come from different customary, cultural home-grounds, backgrounds. I respect, as I am confident you do, that the ways of celebrating the occasions of the marriage, birth, entering adulthood, of mourning death, differently observed by Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jews and other religious sects, are all forms of our national culture. They are and must be respected as such.

But—when a cultural custom denies, defies the Constitution, by which our rights as individuals are secured, where traditional cultural claims to set itself up as independent law, power above the country's law of human rights, can this be accepted, respected? The most obvious instance is the forced marriage of young girls to men decided upon by the father. Now this is not just a tribal cultural issue, none of anyone else's business, like the cultural customs of Christians, Muslims, Jews, and so on. It is the business of all of us, a transgression of the individual rights guaranteed in our national, non-discriminatory Constitution.

To turn away to what surely is high in your discussions, close to what will be the problems of your university after you leave, and for the near future. The entry of prospective students arrive on the campus: again, a coming situation foretold during this present academic year – the young people have been “schooled “through the year in many parts of the country, without textbooks. Two-thirds of primary school pupils, future high-schoolers, and university students, are leaving primary school without the three RS, reading ,writing, and arithmetic. We are all rummaging through shock and dismay of our time as we read in the papers, hear on radio, and see on TV the faces of these minors as a distinct but contemporary with the haunting faces of miners on strike. What is to be done about the neglect and corruption in our education system that keeps pupils illiterate and in science subjects incomprehensive, while attending school?

Whatever disadvantages many among you may have overcome in your schooling divided by colour and financial circumstances, you had school books.

From this crisis in education, let's turn to look at something positive that has last begun to be addressed in our schools. Professor Siphon Seepe tells that 'Research shows it is in language that people find their mutual home. In state schools learning an African language is now part of the curriculum for all, whether or not they have an African mother tongue. If a national culture diversity is to be ours, isn't this shared mutual home between South Africans a basic condition?

Of course, that home is a mansion. We have nine indigenous languages.

How , I wonder , do you future-orientated students of UFS think it can be decided which African language, where, in consideration of the one, most commonly spoken in a specific area, should be learnt in school there? And in the cities? Johannesburg is a prime example, where citizens migrate to from all over the country and have as mother tongue any one of the nine.

The University of the Free State has begun a national culture in so many ways.

Your University is of the province of South Africa where the mother tongue historically and in the present is Sesotho. You have what are known as module codes for studies in their language, which the information sheets gives the lists as: 'For Sesotho mother-tongue users', and is part of the degree qualifications. This is significant recognition of language as a mutual home and place. But someone ignorant of the language, I have yet been greatly drawn to the revelation of the language itself, all languages, for students (and myself become one here!) by the modules of this one: Module SSM112 – 'The Oral Traditions in Sesotho', understanding 'Sesotho oral tradition as an art form informing modern Sesotho Literature' . This is an introduction, indeed to what is true for all African Literatures, in all eleven languages we have. Witness the performance of African actors in our theatres - the gifted range of expression, so striking in oral tradition of Africans brings lively eloquence to actors speaking out in their roles in any language.

Speakers in their own nine of our African languages- no matter how far back in their DNA with them we have a living tradition of the force of the oral to be heard as part of art. Then there's the other module to go beyond the Sesotho language in relevance to others - knowledge of word structure as essential component of all language study. The module of theoretical approaches to prose, the ability to produce different types of syntactical construction of understanding the act of communication through a particular language. The 'modules' are for Sesotho speakers, but their wide impact on 'interpersonal communication' holds good for this factor in all, any languages.

I hope that students other than mother-tongue Sesothos also will take the lucky chance to sign up for these modules of the ancient and living culture of the region where they are in the learning process as such?

It does not need saying that freedom of expression in all its manifestations as essential to education exists in this university, as your right. This means you may disagree with the certainties and doubts of others. That is part of mutual enlightenment coming from civilised contest.

So what is your reaction, then, to the 'Protection of State Information Act', the 'Secrecy Act' that has been ready to drop on our heads since 1910? Hangs over us where we are gathered here together, no one of us safe from the gag of censorship? There has been and is continuing the State's trimming at the edges of particular clauses of the Bill that is to become the Act, to quieten the overwhelming response

to the Act for what it is. The end of access to the facts of the activities of our leaders and their appointed administrators, commercial collaborators, industrialists, in collusion. The end of our right to know. Corruption is the overall word for so much dishonesty that the act will make it a crime to reveal.

The Secrecy Act means that we the people are not allowed to know. The facts about our own country. Know how our society, our population is manoeuvred by those entrusted, empowered by our votes, to protect themselves in their multiple forms of wrong-doing, betrayal of our democracy. I don't have to tell you of tender deals, financial kickbacks for the benefit of family and friends, buddies of government ministries and officials who will be protected by the prosecution of anyone of us who speaks out, writes what is. Information means, I quote from the Act - 'any information contained in any document... written, copies, drawn, painted, printed, filmed, photographed, magnetic, optical, digital, electronic or any other type of recording, measure, procedure, object or verbal arrangement.'

This will be the blackout. To the extent that if you come to know of some factual wrong-doing intention, or already in operation under wraps in the governance of our country, and you speak of it, in pursuance of the public right to know, to a journalist in our press or any media in the above array, that journalist will not be charged alone under the Secrecy Act but will be forced by law to reveal the informant-you-to be arraigned along with him in court.

The sentences are heavy, for being a South African with a consciousness of the need to know of public wrong-doing.

This Act is the tsunami threatening to drown freedom of expression you are learning, practicing; ready to take with you, pursue what has been opened to you in this university, exceptional in its concept of education for the real world to be made of what is officially called the 'transition' – a passing phase - of our country. You are the Facebook, Tweet, Twitter Deck, Weblogs, Podcast, YouTube, Flickr, Reddit, Social Network, Delicious, stumbled upon of alert awareness. The great Algerian writer, Albert Camus says it: 'Freedom finally becomes inseparable from freedom of expression.'

My last words are my last question. Education, however exceptional, is never completed in places of higher learning. Reading is the education that goes on throughout your life. What do you read? Our own writers at home and of the African Continent, world literature? Franz Kafka, whom you may have read, if not are going to read, has said: 'a book must be an ice-axe to break the frozen sea inside you.' He was speaking of literature, novels, poetry, stories. The narrowed mind comes from having an answer to everything. A novel doesn't assert anything. Milan Kundera says the wisdom of the novel, so-called fiction, 'comes from having an implicit question for everything'. The writer is set on a discovery of life through the people the writer has come to create, a process of the relation to themselves and their

relation to the Other, revealed in them, which is the journey of living in the landscape, humanscape of whatever place in the universe we inhabit. Tolstoy, Chinua Achebe, Gunter Grass, Zakes Mda, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Wole Soyinka, Lewis Nkosi, Marcel Proust, Olaudah Equiano, William Plomer, Nuruddin Farah, Kenzaburo Oe, Es'kia Mphahlele, Kurt Vonnegut, Achmat Dangor, Salman Rushdie, Keorapetse Kgotsitsile, John Updike, Mandla Langa...

Take a deep breath and go on with the great names and the about to be, ought to be known. Writers, thankfully, are everybody's writers no matter where they come from to us. The writer has pulled the reader with him/her deep into the conscious and unconscious where something of the truth about us lies? To reach it you are writing in your mind the last pages, a different ending found in yourself, your continuing journey.

With non-fiction writers such as Edward Said, Amartya Sen, you are in exchange about those places in the Arts and Sciences where one's life is given over to an ideal and 'should be places of exploration and consolidation'. Political beliefs are a prime example.

In the freedom of this University of The Free State you are on the starting line of the journey, its e-tolls in frustration, and highways which must be opened in your time to fulfilment of that once- promised 'better life for all'.

We trust you.