An open letter to SA's youth

Jonathan Jansen | 01 September, 2011 00:46

This must be a very confusing week for you. You saw the children of Cosmos High trying to overturn a police van with school bags still strapped to their backs.

You saw the pupils of Goldfields High ripping into each other with blood streaming from the mouth of one of the fighting girls.

You saw children of your age among the hordes that attacked police and assaulted media workers in central Johannesburg in one of the most violent protests to visit the city in recent times. You can be forgiven for wondering "what kind of country am I living in?" or, as some of you might have thought, "how can I get out of this place?"

So I thought I would share some pointers that might help you make sense of this madness, and help you secure your future in this otherwise beautiful country.

- You are not alone. The violent youth do not represent all South African children. They are a minority, so keep perspective. Most of the near-13million children in our schools are decent. Even though more and more youth think that it is okay to burn, break down and respond violently to things they want or against people they disagree with, always remember that most of our children, middle-class and poor, still believe in things like respect for other people.

There are more good people among us than there are bad people.

- You are not a victim. The worst thing you can do is to think that you are powerless in the face of this social decay in South Africa. Do not be a spectator in the face of this vile conduct among some of our youth.

Write letters to the press or call in to radio shows objecting to the trashing of your city.
Participate in political structures and demand decent public behaviour in politics and everyday life. Mobilise within faith-based communities to set a public standard for social behaviour. But do not simply sit there and condemn the bad things: do something about it.

- You can do things differently. Organise discussions on conflict resolution by inviting activists to your school to talk about alternative means of expressing concern or dissent. Learn how to reason with others in ways that argument trumps anger and reason replaces revolt. Make sure your school has an active debating society where the habits of democracy can be practised; there are more and more inter-school debating competitions that you could participate in. Organise other youth to march for peace and to show how peaceful protests can be more powerful than violent protests.
- You have powerful role models. It would be a mistake to think that the current crop of political leaders represent your teachers and mentors. They do not. When you are faced with spineless leaders who refuse to take a stand in the open against public violence, draw on the many positive role models available to you.

The role models I draw on when I am despondent with our selfish, scared, opportunistic leaders are Lucas Radebe in sport or Mamphela Ramphele in business or Samuel Isaacs in education or Father Andile Mbutye in the faith community or Ella Gandhi in the peace movement. These are the great South Africans - and there are many more - who remind me daily that there are more good leaders than bad ones in this country. Draw inspiration from them.

- You must use your most important asset for fighting back. The low standards of public behaviour have one root cause - poor education. Many of the youth you see running around to destroy property and demean people are the products of a bad education.

I guarantee there are school dropouts among them, and learners who are struggling to pass their grades. In nine out of 10 cases a person with bad public behaviour is one who failed to take advantage of the education available to them.

Whatever you do, study hard and pass well (simply passing is no longer good enough) so that there are options available to you through university education and in the job market; and so that you are equipped to make a difference as a competent human being in a broken country.

Finally, as I have said before on these pages, you must learn to stand alone. You might find yourself among pupils who find the destructive behaviour of this past week acceptable, even funny. Stand up, speak out, and make sure you are the difference between South Africa's slide into barbarity and the promise of a better country.