

# The Big Read: Don't look back in anger

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**If you want to grasp the political future of our country, listen to those who plan to live their future adult lives in it.**



***PEACE BY PIECE: Students and members of The Christian Revival Church, pray for unity in a parking lot outside the University of Pretoria's Hatfield campus. Violent protests have crippled the country's tertiary education institutions. Photograph by: ALON SKUY***

**"This rage is destroying us, be it in parliament or on social media"**

Visiting high schools recently, I was shocked to hear the questions posed by normally optimistic and enthusiastic young people.

"Is there still a place for me in South Africa?" asked a young white student.

"Would you recommend we study in a South African university with all the stuff going on?" asked a black student.

"Why are we so angry with each other?" came from more than one student. "I have white friends," said a black student, "and I am criticised for that."

In countless visits to high schools for purposes of motivation and recruitment, this is the first time the questions are so urgent, so personal and so direct. On Tuesday I had to leave for continued fundraising meetings for student bursaries before I could listen further to a room full of anxious youths.

Young high schoolers are not stupid. They see the now violent return of race talk and racism in the country and they are worried.

"We must confront the history and legacy of racism," I tell the youth, but in ways that yield healing and restoration rather than bitterness and bile. Many young people are told half-stories about the past. Angry adults present them with stories of either a glorious or bitter past. Often the stories are one-sided, about black heroes and white villains. No complexity or nuance, no Beyers Naude or Molly Blackburn among whites who stood against injustice, or only Botha and Verwoerd representing their entire race. All blacks were good, noble and on the right side of history; no homeland leaders or tricameral parliaments feature in their regular doses of political education.

Normally, as we travel further from our racist past, young people are more and more comfortable living and learning and loving together. But now they feel the strain of race talk in broader society and many look over their shoulders as they make inter-racial friendships, especially in the senior years of high school. This is not good. Our

hope as a country lies in these young people building a different kind of South Africa, together, and the prevailing race climate does not help.

These young people want to know about rage. Why, they probe, are we so angry? There must be few countries in the world where the default reaction in a crisis is to fly into a rage, assault others, burn property, and break down the very facilities we need the day after the fury. I still believe we raise our boys wrongly from our sporting cultures to our understanding of love relationships. They watch us as fathers and mimic our behaviour; in a crisis, they learn to use their muscles and not their minds to resolve the problem.

This rage is destroying us from the precincts of parliament to those unseen stories of marital violence behind closed doors to the very public displays of vicious language in the social media.

The youth inquire about recrimination against those whom I call frontier people, courageous South Africans who buck the trend, who form lasting friendships across those formidable borders of colour, class and creed. They feel the deep resentment in our country and want to know why we cannot solve these problems through reason. This is, if I may interpret their angst, an age of unreason in which anti-rationalism and anti-intellectualism mark so much of our behaviour in the cities and the rural hinterlands, on campuses and in companies, in school and society. Unsurprisingly, our solutions to problems like racism are extremist and impractical even if all kinds of silly pronouncements provide easy political kudos - like the proposal to treat racists like registered paedophiles.

We have a solemn responsibility towards high-school youth, and that is to inspire hope. How do we do that?

First, by giving perspective - this is still a great country with so many assets that count in our favour. Second, by conveying proportionality - the majority of people in this country are decent, hard-working and committed to our common humanity.

Third, by encouraging practice - that is, no Mandela will rise from the grave. We carry his extraordinary legacy to repair this country through a progressive activism in education, the economy and human relations.

And fourth, by modelling peace-making - this is especially true in crisis situations and where stored hatreds, as somebody called it, can so easily derail human relations.

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