

**Mind, Spirit, and Imagination**  
Inaugural Address as Chancellor  
Of the University of Johannesburg

I have written many speeches in my life. But an unexpected hitch occurred as I began to write this one. What does a Chancellor actually say on his or her inauguration? I have been a Vice-Chancellor for many years at different campuses, carrying all the vices associated with that particular job. So what do I say being in a position with a familiar title but which does not carry the qualification “vice”?

For sure, Vice-Chancellors often get under the public spot light for one thing or another, while their Chancellors fly innocuously outside the radar screen. What do they actually do and then say in the penumbra of public attention?

The more I thought of it, I came to the conclusion: why worry about such things? Being used to talking, I must just learn to say very little and enjoy having a title without power. The one official that gives the appearance of being my assistant, the Vice-Chancellor, actually wields all the power. A powerful assistant, indeed!

So you must be wary of the qualification “vice”. You might think you are dealing with an assistant, only to be knocked down. It will hit you like the sting in the tail, far more effective than the gaze of a hawk far up in the sky.

It is best to relax and savour this moment. Life in the penumbra of public attention might involve not having to say a great deal. Unless, we invoke one of our national habits since 1994, of reviewing, and reviewing one thing or another under the inspiring but sometimes confusing term: transformation.

Since we took on this word, we have been sweeping clean: street names, airports, buildings, stadiums, schools, and universities, have all been the target of “transformation”. If you did not know who were the characters after whom streets were named since Jan Van Riebeeck hit these shores, you soon

realise you don't know who many of the new characters are or were after who things are named or renamed. Even pupils became learners, and good old teachers became educators.

So something tells me that perhaps there is a moment for letting be some things, and contemplating why they became the way they are. It might be necessary to do this when you begin to experience constant change as an unending process of disorientation; of values replaced by new ones that remain undefined and have the ring of change without a substantive experience of change.

It was at the point of this realisation that I thought perhaps Chancellors perform one of the most enduring, special tasks in the world. It is a task *to be*, rather than *to do*. It is to exert presence rather than apply particular skills.

Chancellors do not always have to prepare speeches - except at their inauguration. They do not have to pore (or perhaps to paw) through a board pack, preparing for a meeting. This is because their entire life has been a preparation to exert the power of presence.

The secret seems to be in the pageantry of spectacular pomp and ceremony which involves dramatic entrances and exits in imposing robes and magnificent costumes (such as we have just witnessed at the beginning of this very ceremony) that invoke the history and virtues of teaching and learning, and their centrality in constantly reconfiguring the DNA of human society throughout history.

All this history is invoked when a Chancellor performs a capping in a pageantry of great dignity – the graduation. In a graduation, the Chancellor recognises success, through a ritual that marks the culmination of a rigorous academic process, and confers honour or rank for an achievement attained after a great deal of effort. Everyone has worked extremely hard, and along comes the Chancellor to say: how wonderful!

There is no salary for this task. But everybody strives to make you feel comfortable. Strangely, this lack of financial reward

affirms a value that has somehow lost a place of honour in our country: to experience the greatest joy possible, from affirming the happiness of others who have deserved achievement. No quantity of money can be an adequate measure of that experience.

I guess that is why the Chancellor has no power of command. Rather, without power, not only will you have no vices attached to the performance of your role, you are in a most treasured space to exercise presence and authority without having to instruct or command anyone to do anything except kneel before you for a capping.

So I unwittingly found myself meditating about power and authority. Considering that a Chancellor may have little power, yet be able to exert some authority, I came to the conclusion that it is possible to have a great deal of power and yet have little or no authority.

The recent death of technology genius Steve Jobs got the world reflecting on the sources of his global influence. So much was said about him and how he created one of the most profitable companies in the world today, and made him one of the richest people in the world.

I like to think however, that whatever financial wealth came his way, meant less to Steve Jobs than the deepest satisfaction of having made products that helped millions of people around the world to navigate with relative ease through an incredibly complex world. No quantity of money can be an adequate measure of that experience and the satisfactions it yields.

So, if God was the ultimate Chancellor, he capped Steve Jobs for the genius of his imagination. That is why the success of some of the greatest countries in the world can ultimately not be measured by the quantum of their gross domestic product, but by how much they created conditions for the maximum growth and development of the minds and imaginations of their children.

Their children will never have been exposed to the

nightmare of books being shredded in public in a graveyard of knowledge. It is the obscenity of this scene that ultimately deprives of authority, those responsible to exercise power over this state of affairs. Authority has a social source; power, a formal one. The source of formal power is broad society. Where the link between social purpose and power disappears, social drift may be the result.

I guess a Chancellor is placed somewhere along the chain in which human talent is accorded recognition. The gesture of a Chancellor's hand over an academic achiever's head becomes much more than the movement of a hand: it is an affirmation of mind, spirit, and imagination. In the process, social purpose is affirmed, and power given the material with which to win legitimacy and authority.

The nurturing of mind, spirit, and imagination seems to carry inherent ethical weight. Mind, spirit, and imagination require the most appropriate conditions for them to grow and flourish. They require care, dedication, and the ultimate sense of duty and the greatest respect and love for people.

The image of books being shredded in a place made desolate by discarded paper sticks in the mind, in the spirit, and in the imagination. And then the realization is frightening. Human beings are capable of reproducing any condition, depending on the direction in which their mind, spirit, and imagination are orientated. They may reproduce desolation, misery, and bleakness, with as much gusto as they can reproduce success, triumph, and prosperity.

It depends on what is valorized and then rewarded. What pays off can be repeated even if the nature of payoff is itself problematic. The relationship between effort and payoff can lead either upwards or downwards. That is the measure of the impact of positive feedback: the reward for any action undertaken. Once the starting point and the intended end result have been determined, a self-replicating process can then occur.

One of the things that struck me about Marikana recently, beyond the protests and the shootings, and the hearings; something that stays in the mind like the shredding of books, are the desolate conditions of life in the human settlements surrounding the mine. Mind, spirit, and imagination will not flourish there. What brought Steve Jobs the greatest joy and satisfaction is impossible ever to achieve there.

Only one dominant narrative of our times can emerge from such conditions: it is the story of making wealth without imagination and human happiness. Then in fact there is no wealth, only money. The original meaning of wealth conveyed wellbeing, prosperity, as a state of social being in which the standard of living was an enabler of human creativity.

It is within the intention to create and maintain a state of social wellbeing that a Chancellor's role may have evolved. A Chancellor must keep capping, and that each act of recognition of achievement edges us closer to a narrative of hope, inspiration, and success, enabling the mind, spirit, and imagination of each South African to grow and flourish in new cycle to replay. Then perhaps we can reproduce true success, instead of money and the subsequent failure to create human happiness.

Indeed, the satisfactions of the academy have fundamentally little to do with the making of money as a driving goal, but a great deal to do with the rewards of peer recognition from the social value created in teaching, learning, and the discovery and preservation of new knowledge. All the pomp and ceremony of tonight is about the academy allowing itself this one moment of splendour, to affirm the achievements of mind, spirit, and imagination.

The University of Johannesburg is a mega institution of some "47,500 full- and part-time students [who] come from all parts of South Africa." So said the Vice-Chancellor of UJ, Professor Rensburg at a graduation earlier this year. It includes, he added

“2,500 international students from 52 countries.”

But there was more. “Our university” he added, has an outstanding national and international reputation, and a high level of public confidence: last year UJ was for the third year running ranked second only after the University of Cape Town in the Sunday Times Generation Next university brand study among 8-22 year olds. This study also saw UJ recognised for everything that first-rate universities stand for: academic excellence, cultural diversity, global credibility, stature and freedom.”

So I figured out why on earth would UJ want to have anything to do with me. It must be the UCT connection! It is certainly a good feeling to be attractive to, and needed by, young people. It represents a tremendous opportunity. It is a strategic moment. It offers the privilege of shaping the mind, spirit, and imagination of South Africa’s youth; shaping South Africa’s future where it fundamentally matters.

Cape Town, the Mother City, and Johannesburg, the Golden City, are high energy urban centres, and like all such places, they offer the stimulations of human interaction.

I think UJ also wanted to do me a favour, and to remind me that I was a boy from Jozi, umfana wase Mjibha, who was born not too far from here in 1948, at 923 John Mohohlo Street, Western Native Township, otherwise popularly known as Thulandivile. I have no idea why.

But on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 1948 when I was only six weeks old, I was baptised at Christ the King Church in Sophiatown by the Priest in Charge, one Father Trevor Huddleston. I am proud that such a remarkable person baptized me. In my creative moments, I always imagine myself in his arms, or maybe his hands - which may have accommodated my entire size. There was my body turned upside down such that my head slanted towards the aspensory. And then the priest poured water down my forehead in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and my little body involuntarily twitching in a



squirm. That was a long time ago.

My family moved to Nigel after my father, who taught at Madibane High School, got a job as principal of Nigel Secondary School at Charterston Township. But we kept our links with Johannesburg closely and firmly, visiting family and friends, in particular my grandfather, Walter Mbalekwa Ndebele, and grandmother MaMhlongo, who lived at 1144 Mhlongo Street. That is why I have vivid memories of going to church on Sundays at Christ the King.

In our immaculate Sunday best, we crossed the tramline in both directions between Western Native Township and Sophiatown. My sister would have been in her white dress, white socks, white shoes, and a strange white hat that flared upwards. And to crown it all, a small white handbag hung from her wrist making her look like vintage Queen Elizabeth.

What about me? I would be a grey suit for boys, distinguished by short trousers and socks that went up to the calves. And black, polished shoes!

My next vivid memory is more recent. In 2001, upon an impulse, I decided to drive to Sophiatown and to find Christ the King Church. Consider that I last saw the church as a child in the nineteen fifties. What would it look like some forty years later? I was to be disappointed. Is this all? I exclaimed to myself, when I saw the church.

When I was a child, Christ the King was a huge edifice with massive pillars. But many years later I stood there looking at this small church. What happened? Who changed? Was it I, or the church?

Never could I have imagined that Einstein's theory of relativity that I once struggled with could hit me with such forceful clarity, and so unexpectedly. Did the church become smaller as I grew older, and away from it?

Or did the church remain as it was, as I grew older, such that it has always been its size? But then, I do have the reality of two sizes of a church: a big one and a small one. Or one more

question: could the size of Christ the King have remained the same had I lived close by and never left? Things do not seem to change when you are around them all the time.

These questions, I found intriguing. Maybe the answer to all of them is “yes”, and that each one may be correct from its own perspective. If so, it does seem as if what is big can be small, and what is small can be big. You always have to describe the perspective from which you view it.

Awareness of perspective makes you less inclined to venture a quick opinion. It imposes the responsibility to listen, weigh, and then decide. I think this is the way of the mind, spirit, and imagination.

Perhaps perspective offers a principle of engagement in a complex democracy such as ours. If interlocutors in a discussion declare and clarify their perspectives, they create a pool of experiences from which to craft an understanding that results in a new reality for all of them. That emerging reality may become the basis for new relationships and loyalties. An open society thrives from the interaction of perspectives.

If all this makes sense then we need to recall that in 1994 we committed to an open society. Openness would be the default position. Then anyone would need to argue why certain spaces in the life of the nation need to be closed off in what is referred to as “the national interest”.

By definition, openness and perspective are antithetical to a security driven state. A security state creates numerous hiding places with undeclared perspectives. It can declare an anti-corruption position while itself being corrupt. It can call for efficiency while being inefficient. This is because a security state tends to have limited or no self-awareness. It has only its appetites: to secure state control, and to stay in control, in perpetuity if possible.

That is why a security state is inherently deceptive. It declares its appetite for total control to be to the benefit of the



state, while in reality those that benefit from such a situation are those seek out and achieve total control. The consuming appetite of a security state is to impose its own single perspective on a people; and then to thrive on their silence. A security state ultimately strangles mind, spirit, and imagination.

A security state is one in which the police, the army, the intelligence services are used as the principal means of securing public control; in which the management of the state increasingly takes on the look of a syndicated operation. Often the quest for a security state can be from a desire to secure a permanent state of power, in the sense that a current state of affairs can be maintained forever.

Such are the delusions that may occur whenever power disengages from the source of its authority and fails to realize that people, the source of power and authority are a fluid and generative energy, constantly evolving and creating new realities. The purpose of government is to understand this chemistry of social change and work with practical discernment to discover opportunities to leverage the growth of the social mind, spirit, and imagination. It is a labour of love, not of control.

The government of the future is government of mind, spirit, and imagination. It is a government of openness and perspective, driven by an intelligence that has the ability and capacity to receive and process multiple perspectives and one that enables to perspectives to self-create within the permissive constraints of the constitution and the rule of law.

This kind of government, South Africa eminently deserves.

And so, the life of a Chancellor begins: without power, and only a sense of presence, and rituals of affirmation available to the office. Each is a term of office that generates few words while conferring a great deal recognition, affirming each person who has succeeded, and extending circles of achievement.

Ultimately, it affirms what countries and their universities are about. I look forward to my time as Chancellor as the University

of Johannesburg. May it capture and be energized by the spirit of Jozi; be renewed constantly by the young of our country and their beautiful talents. Each generation reminds us that the growth of mind, spirit and imagination is as continuous as the life of a nation. South Africa is one such nation, destined to thrive from openness and its affirming efficacies. That is our destiny with history: to rule ourselves with mind, spirit, and imagination.

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