

Graduation Address
University of the Witwatersrand
Njabulo S Ndebele

The Chancellor
Vice-Chancellor
Graduands
Ladies and Gentlemen

One evening in 1959 as a boy of 11, I sat with my family somewhere in this Great Hall. We were there to watch a performance of the opera King Kong which had Nathan Mdledle and Mirriam Makeba in the lead. We had driven all the way from Nigel in our fawn 1948 Chev, and returned there afterwards. The remarkable performance of that night is still vivid in my mind to this day, testimony to the enduring power of art in the making of which nothing was spared to achieve the highest effect. It was testimony too, to the enduring impact of exposing young people to powerful formative experiences, which then live with them throughout their lives. Thinking of that evening makes me a young boy each time.

But there is something more to remember.

It may have also been in this hall that my father, Nimrod Njabulo Thabo Ndebele graduated on Thursday March 4, 1948 with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in IsiZulu and Political Science from Wits University, after having been a part time student. It is a proud moment in our family history that today I join him in receiving an honour from the same distinguished South African University, sixty one years later.

Before then, in 1941 as the sixth title of its famous Bantu Treasury series of publications, the Wits University Press published UGubudele namaZimuzimu. This drama, written by my father, made history as the first play ever published in the Zulu language. It is with pride that I dedicate this address and the honour that prompted it to my father's memory.

To remember my father in this manner is not only to remember an individual, it also to remember something of the texture of the times in which he lived, and to pay some tribute to it, in retrospect, not out of sentimentality, but from the harsh realities of contemplating the present.

I thought of my father last Sunday. That was on Human Rights Day. A few months after seeing King Kong, my visiting maternal grandfather turned on the radio to indulge the ritual of the seven o'clock news when the house had to be reduced to absolute silence while his imperial majesty listened to the news. On that darkening evening before the candles were lit, he did not have to try hard to secure silence, it was just the two of us in the house. I heard his deep voice boom in outrage as the number of the dead was mentioned on the Monday March 21, 1960. The massacre at Sharpeville had just occurred.

Exactly fifty years later on Human Rights Day, I walked to parliament with thousands of young learners under the auspices of the Equal Education Campaign in Cape Town to deliver a memorandum addressed to President Zuma and Minister Motshekga of Basic Education. The memorandum carried a very simple demand: 1 School 1 Library 1 Librarian.

For the best part of his life, my father he was a teacher. In that role he was part of generation of legendary African men and women teachers who taught in African schools in the fifties and sixties. Their teaching, despite institutionalized discrimination, produced men and women who played outstanding leadership roles at the national and local levels in the politics of resistance; in community organizations such as teachers' associations, youth clubs, sports clubs, church clubs; who became journalists who defined the mood of the times through their powerful writings; authors, musicians, and playwrights; and doctors and lawyers of the time; and business people who created retail businesses in the townships bringing much needed goods and services where they were immediately needed. Under demanding times with much less, these teachers produced a lot more than was intended by a repressive state.

Why did a simple demand 1 School 1 Library 1 Librarian trigger such powerful memories? The full power of its simplicity is in its ability to call up for us the wisdom of all successful societies since the dawn of human civilization: their consistency in transmitting new and proven knowledge, skills and practices, and social values from one generation to another in a continuous ever improving effort of commitment. It is from there that we derive sustainable social effort.

For some reason, South Africans have forgotten this basic trait of societal survival. But I am wrong. There is much to suggest that some of the more socially powerful segments of South African society have not forgotten it. Black South Africans, who are now in power in South Africa, show every indication of having forgotten it. For black South Africans, the preferred schools are based in English and Afrikaner communities and other similar ones, who have never forgotten the wisdom of community sustainability through inherited and proven systems of social reproduction.

This terrible truth results in a unbearable irony. The demand: 1 School 1 Library 1 Librarian is a powerful reminder of how at a crucial moment in history, a vision of the future that sustained the struggle for liberation for close to a century of effort appears to have been abandoned. The demand is a moving call to the ruling party, the African National Congress, to return to source.

The easier it has become to consolidate the capture of the state by the African National Congress the easier it has become for an ethos of self-enrichment to overtake the ethos of broad social interest. It seems easier to accumulate wealth and in the process to consolidate the legacy of an unequal society, than to struggle with the demands of creating a new society for everyone. The former objective is easier and short-term in effect; the latter, harder and more lasting. And that is precisely why I remembered my father as I marched with the learners of the Equal Education Campaign, many of whom were not born when Nelson Mandela was released in February 1990.

The teachers of my father's time appear to have said to themselves: let it not be said that we did not teach well; that we did not prepare for each lesson; and that we were not there on time when the school began. Let it be said that we did our best against the greatest odds; that we supplemented the poor resources in our schools with our own resourcefulness.

Today, 16 years into our freedom, we have a system of education with an envied budget designed to reshape it to produce citizens of and for a new society. We live in an environment of extraordinary technology to support teaching and learning. The need for teaching and learning is greater than ever. Yet, we all know that our education seems more inferior in the vast majority of our schools than it has ever been. It points to a serious failure of a vital institution of society.

But the condition of the schooling system speaks to a greater looming failure. It speaks to the general condition of institutions in our country. Some constituent features of that condition are emerging.

- There is a sense that the constitutionally accountable functionality of many institutions of democracy, parastatals, security services, business institutions, is being corroded progressively.
- That such corrosion is more increasingly intended rather than inadvertent;
- That such corroded functionality is being refocused to serve a restricted rather than the larger societal interest.
- That this is a trend that will entrench pervasive corruption in the fabric of national life.
- That the trend is embodied unashamedly in the example of national leaders at the highest levels.
- That public declaration by government to combat corruption and crime seems designed to create a false sense of security and is not reflective of genuine commitment.
- That the total picture emerging represents a fundamental threat to the project of democracy installed in April 1994.
- That, specifically, some of the measures taken, such as the militarization of the police services, purportedly to intensify the fight against crime, represent a fundamental retreat from the visionary project of democracy and its workings in a new society.
- Public politics has been denuded of critical, self-corrective, restorative thought. An unbridled sense of unraveling is under way.

Against this process there are some countervailing processes under way:

- There is increasing and forthright public criticism of national leadership. Leadership response to this will constitute a record of the extent of its sensitivity.
- The rise in corruption appears to go with an increase in social unrest, which in turn leads to the emergence of social movements that span the range of social endeavour. They represent the broadening of the societal interest beyond the dominant legacy of the overbearingly political.

- Social movements are a barometer that measures levels public confidence in the public institutions. The barometer suggests that such confidence is low.
- Social movements are a popular, corrective counter to the centralizing tendencies of an increasingly kleptocratic state. This is a state with a government that steals from its people.
- In combination, these counter factors may possible represent the contours a new kind of politics in South Africa.

This situation we are contemplating strongly suggests we may be entering another critical phase in the evolution of our new democracy. It is the challenge of living our constitution. In that ethos, the Equal Education Campaign demand 1 School 1 Library 1 Librarian will lead us to memories not of striking teachers, but of teaching teachers; public institutions will be restored to the integrity intended by the constitution; of a culture of public service that values competence over loyalty; of leaders who are chosen by the people of South Africa, not arbitrarily assigned to communities by their parties; and of the reinstatement of the collective interest in the affairs of state.

Those who graduate today when may be fortunate to be at the cusp of a special moment in our times. They carry the special opportunity to rekindle our hopes.

The University of the Witwatersrand
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