

Zapiro “Jiving with Madiba”
Reflections on an Exhibition

I would like to thank Jonathan for inviting me to open the *Jiving with Madiba* Exhibition with a few remarks. The Zapiro cartoons have over the years become an essential part of the landscape of public commentary. This exhibition displays one, albeit significant segment of his large canvas. We see Madiba, through the sharp eyes and graphic insight of Zapiro’s mind.

The exhibition invites us to remember how from around 1983 up to today, Jonathan, as Zapiro, has interpreted and responded to the relationship between Mandela and our aspirational democracy. Nelson Mandela is the compass that unwaveringly points in the direction of the freedom, prosperity, dignity, honour, integrity, and happiness that we desire. I like to think that the characteristic aptness with which Jonathan captured this relationship is visible even in the derivation of “Zapiro” from “Shapiro” which sounds cartoonishly just right!

A few months ago a Facebook friend posted a video of Gill Scott Heron performing his poem: “the revolution will not be televised”. This performance immediately reminded me of the activist 60s and 70s. The poem’s central message was that what does not get televised, and is censored out, is where the real change is occurring. Perceived as threatening the status quo, the sources of discomfort are strenuously hidden from view. Gill Scott Heron’s intention is precisely to direct our attention to the value inherent in what has been censored.

A cartoon by Zapiro in 1987 recalls a similar situation in South Africa. Zapiro depicts a Comrades Marathon with its thousands of runners. In the foreground is a banner with capitalized and bolded “Comrades Marathon” written on it. In the second line, capitalized but not bolded is “The Comrades You Won’t See on S.A.T.V.” At the left hand bottom corner of the cartoon is a countdown clock. The comrades have been running for 335 years since 1652, and for 39 years since 1948. The price and destination of their comradely effort, at the end of all the hurdles and the testing hills is the crossing line of “liberation” with the sun shinning in glory in the far background.

These comrades that “you won’t see on S.A.T.V” run a dangerous gauntlet: barbed wire, tanks, caspirs, and awesome Roikat tank destroyers. The backs of their t-shirts tell us who they are: UDF “Forward to People’s Power!,” or “ANC: Release our Leaders”, and “SAYCO”

Today, we run a different gauntlet. We ourselves placed many of the hurdles on the path towards the banner of “sustainable democracy” in the far background. While we may have inherited some hurdles, we have certainly made them more intractable. Here are some of them: the Arms Deal (the scale of its impact now makes it no less than an act of treason); the criminal syndication of public service; the impulse towards official concealment or denial in the face of the scale of willful wrong-doing, justified by inherited loyalties; the persistent hacking away at institutions of democracy; and application of the lowest common denominator principle, in the selection of leaders of institutions or

organizations. These are just a few. A great deal more of others can be derived from them.

Today's hurdles are not as concrete, visible obstacles as barbed wire and weapons of war. They are invisible because they are outcomes of human behaviour whose real impact is not immediately recognizable. Their real impact is insidious and cumulative. The shock of their revelation is even more devastating when we are unable to immediately explain the causes of such behaviour, and would even refuse to believe what we hear or see the first instance we were confronted with them. So for a while we stay with the drama of the occurrence. That is how we miss the real drama.

The real drama is not so much in that the Arms Deal occurred, but in the unexpected transformation in the internal landscape of thinking, visualizing, feeling that led respected political leaders to behaviour inconsistent with the solemn commitments they had publicly declared, upholding the values and social goals that drove the struggle for liberation, and on which the new, envisaged society would be built. This is the source of the current intention to conceal and the concomitant concealment of intention.

The new hurdles on our marathon run are the three fingers that point back at the pointer. They suggest that the greatest threats we face as a country may fundamentally not be about poverty, unemployment, crime, or corruption. All societies have these to various degrees.

The greatest threat we face is the impact on the public mind of the emergent, unconstitutional culture of concealment. How will this impact on the capacity of the public mind for ethical and moral cognition, as a result of the disconnect between the internal landscape of leaders and the bedrock of public expectation internalised by the public in the struggle for liberation. The threat occurs when we no longer see corruption, unemployment, poverty, inefficiency, incompetence, entitlement for what they are, because we would have legislated them into normality through officialized mechanisms of concealment, new hurdles on the marathon run such as the government proposed media tribunal, and the Protection of Information Bill.

The cumulative impact of undeclared, concealed intentions at the highest levels of government is not easy to visualize. The drama of their destruction is slow, and relatively unspectacular, building over time. It occurs as what South African academic in the US, Rob Nixon calls "slow violence", by which he means violence "that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous but instead incremental, whose calamitous repercussions are postponed for years or decades or centuries."

"The long dyings", Rob Nixon continues, "the staggered and staggeringly discounted casualties, both human and ecological—are often not just incremental but exponential, operating as major threat multipliers. They can spur long-term, proliferating conflicts that arise from desperation as the conditions for sustaining life are degraded in ways that the corporate media seldom discuss."

We can see such exponential threats all around us: the decayed schooling system; decayed systems of public governance in the Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga, and increasingly Limpopo; the high probability of syndicated crime close to the centre of the national police and intelligence systems; the unanswered public concerns regarding the condition on the national defense force; the decline in our continental and global prestige; the widespread protests of disillusionment; the stasis of vision in the annual drama of uncritical conflict between employers and the trade union movement; and the phenomenon of organized political youth making demands whose sources are understandable but under the circumstances, become no more than a “threat multiplier”. They, like the trade unions, do what they have to do in a democracy, but their increasingly uncontested strength points to weak societal countervailing, balancing capabilities. It is a situation that turns good intentions into compounding factors.

Rob Nixon’s is a very useful insight. It reminded me of how politicians who have been found with their hands in the cookie jar like to say the media sensationalize things, and give the impression of a crisis when there was actually none. It now strikes me that this reaction illustrates two ways of perceiving the national reality before us: the short-term and the long-term perspectives

The hurdles of our own making that now lie on our marathon run are manifestations of the drive of short-term politics. There is nothing inherently wrong with the short-term, only that the lining of strategy that drives it must be visible. More significantly, the dominance of the short-term spells the end of visionary politics. The resolve to transform oppressive inherited systems of governance and behaviour has wilted definitively in the face of short-term gratification. The commitment to visionary politics that got us to where we are now is gone. It’s gone. Let’s not kid ourselves. We have to wake up now and re-dream.

Inherent in the practice of journalistic exposure is the perceived scale of impact of what is exposed. Implicit in that, but not always fully realized and articulated, is long-term impact. The long-term impact of corruption of a defunct schooling system, for example, is not always immediately visible. You may sense it, but not imagine it concretely. Most exposure senses without visualizing.

The future of serious journalism will be in its ability to recognize and describe concretely the long-term impact of current public behaviour. The ability to assist the public to develop and sharpen the intellectual disposition to see the long-term implications concretely and dramatically, and to express them clearly, is the challenge of contemporary journalism. This intellectual ability will emerge as a mandatory requirement of citizenship in an aspirational, qualitative democracy that we seek, inscribed in the banner at the end of the comrade marathon we are running. This is the challenge of the new!

And this for me, is the significance of this exhibition. It is the demand for detail beyond the attractions of short-term announcements. As we see in this exhibition the recent history of our society through Zapiro’s interaction with

Madiba, we see more than the large brush strokes. In a Zapiro cartoon the objective societal big picture is always locked in intimate conversation with the detail of subjectivity. This is the genius that results in our engaged reflection. It is something to be grateful for.

That is why I can still see Lady Justice vividly. She is still distressed on the ground. But she is no longer lying down. She is sitting up now, hugging her knees; her head resting on them. She is gathering herself together. It is tempting to reach out with a helping hand. But it is not helping hands she needs; she needs to hear voices of affirmation that support and encourage; that tell her just how much she is needed; urging her to find the inner resources to raise herself up to her feet, after the trauma of assault. She needs to find the strength to reaffirm her professional allegiances, and keep at bay the pressures of external allegiance.

And that is what should speak to all of us who come to exhibitions of recall and reminder, such as tonight's. Lady Justice in her current posture is in touch with her subjectivity. There, there can be no drama of posture. Our salvation might lie precisely there: in our subjectivity, the elemental site of our conscience, our moral sensitivity, ethical awareness, and our self-esteem. This may have become the most precious source of our future citizenship.

So when Public Protector, Thuli Madonsela, reportedly sought spiritual counsel, she was seeking to restore her inner strength, her precious subjectivity that would enable her to stay true to her professional vocation.

We share that subjectivity: all of us, the rich and the poor; the black and the white; man and woman; the rural and the urban; citizen and foreigner; Christian, Jew, Moslem, and Hindu; teacher and pupil; employer and worker; the robber and the robbed. Let's take it all out there, into the public domain, expose it, share it, renew it each time we do so. This is how we will give birth to honest public conversation, far from the duplicities of the moment. Much of our current politics, now old politics, draws little sustenance from the emergent subjectivities of our new country.

This is what we celebrate tonight: the possibilities of finding ourselves again; to recommit to arriving at what's written on our banner at the end of the Comrades Marathon, in bold and caps: **HOME**.

Njabulo S Ndebele
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