

Iph'indlela?

Finding a way through confusion

2000

There is a small story to the origins of my title. A formidable frustration for most writers is what to do with a blank page. It stares at you with a silent, intimidating power. To deal with this situation, I decided to put down words at random. Here they are: peasants, foreign policy, the environment, HIV/AIDS, higher education, the media, Zama-Zama, racism, globalisation, Tito Mboweni, culture, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, black intellectuals, poverty, two nations, xenophobia, Brenda Fassie, penguins, street children, *Thath' amachance*, *thath' amamillion*, Trevor Manuel, abortion, market forces, crime, size and shape, game parks, identity, African bourgeoisie, witches, taxi wars, the African Renaissance, cities, tribalism, Cosatu, farm murders, Human Rights Commission, Northern Province, primary schools, TV, Tim Modise.

After this brief burst of automatic writing, I leaned back to see if I could spot any emergent trends that would suggest a possible title. I stared at the words and found no sustainable connections to hook onto immediately. But, just as I was about to decide that my random collection of words had not helped, I sat forward as a question formed itself without any effort on my part. I wrote 'Iphindlela?' I did, indeed, feel lost. I could find no immediate path through this forest of words.

The only thing that was certain was the realisation that the act of writing was a supreme effort at finding your way through immense confusion. It is the act of 'finding your way' through a turbulent sea of words. The only thing that sustains you is a daring act of faith. You'll get somewhere. Somehow, I did. Hence, I arrived at this title.

This experience hit me as a fitting metaphor for what our country is going through. It struck me that, though some daring act of faith, we are 'finding our way' through a turbulent sea of events. These events are the words that we write down almost randomly on the pages of our future. We work our way forward through a continuous play of random events. At each point along the way, we have to respond to events both anticipated and unanticipated. We remember, for example, how the elections of 27 April 1994, on which we put so much hope, threatened to explode each time a series of unanticipated obstacles loomed in the way, making us sway precariously between deliverance and desolation!

But by the time we got to the elections, we had done some surviving. We survived the hope that flew on the wings of the release of Mandela and crashed with the assassination of Chris Hani, threatening never to rise again from the harrowing commuter train killings and Boipatong. At the same time, kwaito flourished. Later, after the elections, art and politics did a delicate dance over AIDS. Mandela had tea with Betsy Verwoed. P.W. Botha, facing a black magistrate, wagged his notorious finger more out of habit than conviction in a tired effort to relive some of the past.

In the Northern Province [now Limpopo], many old women were chased away from their homes or burnt to death on the grounds of being witches. Elsewhere, initiates began to die in increasing

numbers from circumcisions that went horribly wrong. The Mandelas divorced. Members of the new black elite took up membership of the wealth-making class, driven by compelling visions of instant wealth. Some crashes and disappointments occurred as empowerment dreams faded. We were so excited as we formulated new policies to cover every aspect of national life. But we also saw student activism falter and waver, losing its visionary vitality as it strangely began to look like P.W. Botha's wagging finger. The hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission came, often tearing us apart, and then left, leaving us emotionally drained but still holding on to our faith.

I refer to these events almost randomly in order to convey the very real sense of finding our way through randomness. But I also want to suggest that this is our own kind of peculiar randomness. It prompts a set of responses that incrementally define us. It is impossible to approach randomness from a singular perspective. We look for trends and shifts and react, sometimes in control, sometimes drifting until we find a foothold that enables us to regain control. It seems to suggest that the process of looking for the way is not to focus on specific issues but to let emerging tendencies provide an explanation which, even while not totally clear, opens up more room for new, innovative solutions. I locate this search in the realm of consciousness: something that Steve Bantu Biko struggles with intensely in his brief dramatic life.

On this day, 12 September 1977, Steve Biko died in detention. It is twenty three years ago. Two days later, the then minister of justice, Jimmy Kruger, is said to have 'provoke[d] laughter among delegates to the Transvaal Congress of the governing National Party with remarks about the death: "I am not glad and I am not sorry about Mr Biko ... He leaves me cold. The minister also agree[d] with a delegate who applaud[ed] him for allowing the black leader his "democratic right" to "starve himself to death". Commenting to the press on his verdict after the inquest into Biko's death, the presiding magistrate, Prins followed his political leader and declared some three months later, 'To me it was just another death. It was a job like any other.'

Of course, the cause of death was not starvation. It was 'head injuries' which led to 'extensive brain injury'. This leads us to the memory of what must be one of the most imagined events in South African history – imagined, because only four men witnessed it. Yet, the rest of us, who were deeply affected by the horror of the situation, the outrage it evoked, and the bonds of solidarity and empathy that it strengthened, can still see it vividly in our minds, almost as if we were there in that journey through the night.

I am reminding you of the naked manacled, and lonely body of Steve Biko lying in a Land Rover being driven through the night from Port Elizabeth to a prison hospital in Pretoria by Captain Siebert. It was a distance of more than seven hundred miles, which ended in Biko's death. According to SW Kentridge, counsel to the Biko family, Steve 'died a miserable and lonely death on a mat on a stone floor in a prison cell', as Millard Arnold poignantly tells it in his book *Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa*.

There is a continuum of indescribable insensitivity and callousness that begins as soon as Steve Biko and Peter Jones are arrested at a roadblock near Grahamstown on 18 August 1977. It starts with lowly police officers who make the arrest in the relative secrecy of a remote setting, and ends with a remarkably public flourish, when a minister of government declares that Biko's death leaves him

cold. This situation lets us go deep into the ethical and moral condition of Afrikanerdom, which not only shaped apartheid but was itself deeply shaped by it.

It strikes us now just how terribly unreflective Afrikanerdom became once apartheid had wormed its way into the centre of its moral fibre. When apartheid culture became both a private and public condition, defining a cultural sensibility, Afrikanerdom significantly lost much of its sense of irony. In this situation, the combination of political, economic and military power, validated by religious precept, yielded a universal sense of entitlement. Afrikanerdom was entitled to land, air, water, beast, and each and every black body.

At this point, the treatment of black people ceases to be a moral concern. Speaking harshly to a black person; stamping with both feet on the head or chest of a black body; roasting a black body over flames to obliterate evidence of murder (not because murder was wrong, but because it was an irritating embarrassment); dismembering the black body by tying wire round its ankles and dragging it behind a bakkie; whipping black school-children; handing to, in the words of Biko himself, 'an illiterate [black] mother presenting her ailing infant for treatment... a death certificate in order that the [white] doctor should not be disturbed in the night' *when* the infant died... These are things one who is white, in south Africa, can do from time to time to black bodies, in the total scheme of things.

No wonder the death of Steve Biko left the minister cold, and that Magistrate Prins could admit to having witnessed another ordinary death, just as he would have had another glass of water. In all this there is a chilling suggestion of gloating that borders dangerously close to depravity. Suddenly, 'the heart of darkness' is no longer the exclusive preserve of 'blackness'; it seems to have become the condition of 'whiteness' at the southern corner of the African continent. Its expression will take on various degrees of manifestation, from the crude to the sophisticated.

That is why such instances of the desecration of the black body have yet to evoke significant expressions of outrage from the education, religious, cultural, and business leadership of this country, caught in the culture of 'whiteness' which they built. Certainly not to the extent of anything that signals an historic movement towards a new social and moral order. Indeed, the quest for a new white humanity will begin to emerge from a voluntary engagement by those caught in the culture of whiteness of their own making, with the ethical and moral implications of being situated at the interface between inherited, problematic privilege, on the one hand and, on the other, the blinding sterility at the centre of the 'heart of whiteness'.

I confess to being one of those who have had an ambivalent attitude towards the recent national conference on racism. On the other, I remain deeply worried about the terms on which the problem was highlighted and engaged. I am bothered by the phenomenon of a black majority in power, seeming to reduce itself to the status of complainants as if they had a limited capacity to do anything more significant about the situation at hand than drawing attention to it. It is not that the complaints have no foundation; on the contrary, the foundations are deeply embedded in our history. But I cannot shake off the feeling that the galvanising of concern around racism reflects a vulnerability, which could dangerously resuscitate a familiar psychology of inferiority precisely at that moment when the black majority ought to provide confident leadership through the government they have elected.

I worry that the complaining may look confusingly like a psychological submission to 'whiteness' in the sense of handing over to 'whiteness' the power to provide relief. 'Please, stop this thing!' seems to be the appeal. 'Respect us.' I submit that we moved away from this position decisively on 27 April 1994. We cannot go back to it. It should not be so easy to give up a psychological advantage.

I am bothered by the tendency that, when a black body is dragged down the road behind a bakkie, we see first proof of racism rather than depravity and murder. When we give racism in Africa this kind of centrality of explanation, we confirm the status of the black body as a mere item of data to be deployed in a grammar of political argument, rather than affirm it as a violated humanity. The inherent worth of a black body does not need to be affirmed by the mere proof of white racism against it. The black body is much more than the cruelty to which it is subjected. If we succeed in positioning ourselves as a people above this kind of cruelty, we deny it equality of status. We can then deal with it as one among many other problems in our society that needs our attention.

I think this is what Steve Biko meant when he cautioned against 'the major danger' he saw 'facing the black community ... to be so conditioned by the system as to make even our most well-considered resistance to it fit within the system both in terms of the means and of the goals'. I quote from his book *I Write What I Like*. It is possible we are not entirely out of this danger.

Is the foregrounding of race and racism a veiled admission that perhaps there is as yet no material basis for the black majority to contain this scourge through the imposition of its own versions of the future? Does this speak to the black majority's perception that perhaps they are not yet agents of history?

I ask these questions in the knowledge that white racism in South Africa no longer exists as a formalised structure. We conjure in our minds the continued existence of such a structure to our perceptual peril. There is no evidence of a Ku Klux Klan that is regrouping somewhere in the far-flung corners of the country. On the contrary, with the disintegration of apartheid as a formal structure, white racism has reacted in a number of ways.

In some cases it has simply died.

In other cases, particularly where strong pockets of white power remain, such as in commerce, industry, and in higher education, it has either mutated and assumed the colour of change while retaining a core of self-interest, or has genuinely struggled with the agonies of embracing necessary change.

In other cases, racism also continues to exist as individualised pathology, frequently exploding into acts of suicide or desperate acts of brutality against any black bodies in sight. In almost every case, we witness a crisis of identity with various degrees of intensity. But what these various forms of reaction do show is the danger inherent in a singular approach.

That is why the black majority carries the historic responsibility to provide, in this situation, decisive and visionary leadership. Either it embraces this responsibility with conviction or it gives up its leadership through a throwback psychological dependence on racism which has the potential to severely compromise the authority conferred on it by history

In an essay, "Martyr for Hope" in *I Write What I Like*, Father Aelred Stubbs writes:

Given the circumstances he faced of a strongly entrenched, powerfully armed minority, on the one hand, and a divided, defeated majority on the other, perhaps the political genius of Steve [Biko] lay in concentrating on the creation and diffusion of a new *consciousness* rather than in the formation of a rigid *organisation*.

The relationship between emergent social process and organisational forms created to define and assist such social process is a complex one. A way of life is not reducible to institutional forms designed to support it. Indeed, when the Black Peoples Convention was established in 1971, there were arguments to the effect that Black Consciousness was a quality of being rather than an organisational project that could be subjected to harassment and banning. In our own day, the African renaissance as an emergent historic phenomenon is often used interchangeably with the notion of the African renaissance as an institution-driven project seemingly designed to midwife the African future. In my view, the latter cannot meaningfully come before the former, although it can anticipate it.

The problem is not so much the establishment of organisational forms as the threat of a constricting rigidity in organisational interpretations of social processes. Potential rigidity and ownership of definition can pose a number of threats. I think that, despite the wars, the famine, outlaw governments, and HIV/AIDS, some reawakening is underway. Some economies are growing. There is a creeping spread of democracy. The Southern African Development Community and other regional economic formations are making a committed effort to contain decay and help on positive trends. Like all social processes, the African re-awakening is a messy yet creative development, far from being subject to a body of predictive rules and regulations, nor is it reducible to a political programme. It has yet to be satisfactorily characterised as an irreversible process.

It goes without saying that my approach is to put more stress on emergent phenomena than on evoked realities. I will now explore briefly what I mean.

David Philip publishers published a remarkable little book earlier this year. It is entitled *Marketing through Mud and Dust* by Muzi Kuzwayo. I was fascinated by the central idea behind this book. It is this: 'The economic future of this country lies with blacks.' This remains a singularly simple but profound statement. What it states cannot be otherwise in a country with our kind of demographic profile, and the place where the currents of history have taken it at this point. From this perspective, this book fundamentally re-writes the textbook of South African marketing.

Kuzwayo tells the story of a township taverner's contact with the 'rep' of a certain company. 'Most reps,' says the taverner, 'do a sterling job, but man I don't know where they get some of them from. You can see that the guy is well educated but is not street smart at all. The problem is that reps are interviewed in an office environment and the human resources people want to see how they fit into the office as opposed to the streets where he'll be marketing the product. What this suggests is that the pressures of life in the township will significantly exert influence on the strategic choices to be made in company boardrooms and in academic departments and faculties increasingly dominant social forces which will, over time, exercise a decisive hegemonic effect. A situation such as this cannot be led by policy. Policy can only be developed from it in order to support it.

Commercial and industrial enterprises and institutions of higher learning that fail to recognise this fundamental shift in the orientation of the economy will not survive in the medium to long term. To

survive in the future, they will have to rethink and innovate around the needs of the emerging black market. This market, of course, has always been there. But it was rendered officially invisible because the State was primarily constructed around meeting the needs of its white citizens. Clearly the white market is not big enough to shoulder the burden of economic growth. It can accommodate only so much growth before it begins to run aground and stagnate.

Similarly, there will be an optimum capacity in both economic and cultural terms beyond which white residential areas can become a home to black people to any significant degree of rootedness, in the short to medium term. By the same token, white-based commercial and industrial concerns with a large base of white shareholders can absorb only a certain number of black experts before their number peaks. In a paper delivered at the inauguration of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation I argued that there are some advantages to this situation. I noted:

It should not be expected that the levelling off of black participation, and the subsequent limitation in black influence in such institutions, should lead to their destruction. On the contrary, the service they provide remains essential to the survival of the entire country. The perceived limitation in total black control results in the maintenance of essential productive capability and some measure of predictable stability. By the time a critical mass of blacks is in place, there will be an institutional tradition of company practices into which new members are socialised. This situation may not be desirable from the perspective of a short-term radical project. But such an understanding may be crucial for a long-range perspective.

This long-term transitional process may have some particular benefits for a white society that has lost political power. It retains for them a certain measure of cultural familiarity, which assures them some basis for working levels of self-confidence. But to the extent that this familiarity may become an expectation that is not shared by the new order it may run aground and self-destruct in decay. To prevent such an outcome, it will have to ensure a large measure of buy-in by a critical mass of participant black members.

All this suggests that traditionally black localities around the country will become new zones of economic growth and evolve complex economies built around meeting the needs of embedded black communities. The success of this historic trend will largely depend on an extensive distribution of inventive capacity in the scientific and entrepreneurial fields throughout the entire population, freeing us from the current dependence on limited white expertise.

Although this development may emerge on its own, it will require a great deal of stimulation and steering in the form of complex public policy interventions. This may involve developing an active capacity to build thirty-to-fifty-year planning scenarios involving, at their centre, high-quality social planning that stresses the creation of functional and productive living environments throughout the country. From such a perspective, a great deal of current policy perspectives take on a fresh significance: urban and rural planning; a high-quality schooling system; lifelong learning; adult basic education and training; strong provincial and consolidated local governments. The aim would be to maintain reasonable levels of service to privileged communities while considerably improving service provision in traditionally black localities.

What is the connection between the project development so essential to our finding the future and this critique of 'whiteness' and what our response to it has been? Of course this question has to be considered alongside the hegemonic growth of a black consciousness (not in the sense of a philosophy or movement associated with Steve Biko, although it may not exclude it, but rather, in the more fundamental sense of the inevitability of a particular kind of social process).

It will be obvious that the flow of social influence is not going in one direction from the black to the white community. There is a two-way process setting itself up as a critical stabilising factor as we negotiate change. Because the process will not always be smooth, it will require a number of negotiated positions. On the balance, though, white South Africa will be called upon to make greater adjustments to black needs than the other way round. This is an essential condition for a shift in white identity in which 'whiteness' can undergo an experiential transformation by absorbing new cultural rootedness. That is why every white South Africa should be proud to speak, read and write at least one African language, and be ashamed if they are not able to.

This matter of rootedness is important. For example, from a black perspective, whatever the economic merits of the case, it is difficult not to see the transfer of capital to big Western stock exchanges as 'whiteness' de-linking itself from the mire of its South African history to explore opportunities of disengagement, where the home base is transformed into a satellite market revolving around powerful Western economies, to become a market to be exploited rather than a home to be served.

This kind of 'flight of white capital' may represent white abandonment of responsibility towards the only history that can promise salvation to 'whiteness'. 'Whiteness' has a responsibility to demonstrate its bona fides in this regard. Where is the primary locus of responsibility for white capital, built over centuries with black labour and unjust laws? A failure to come to terms with the morality of this question ensures the continuation of the culture of insensitivity and debilitating guilt.

In the past, 'whiteness' proclaimed its civilising mission in Africa. In reality, any advantages for black people, where they occurred, were an unintended result rather than an intended objective. An historic opportunity has arisen now for white South Africa to participate in a humanistic revival of our country through a readiness to participate in the process of redress and reconciliation. This is on the understanding that the 'heart of whiteness' will be hard put to reclaim its humanity without the restoration of dignity to the black body.

We are all familiar with the global sanctity of the white body. Wherever the white body is violated in the world, severe retribution follows somehow for the perpetrators if they are non-white, regardless of the social status of the white body. The white body is inviolable, and that inviolability is in direct proportion to the global vulnerability of the black body. This leads me to think that if South African whiteness is a beneficiary of the protectiveness assured by international whiteness, it has an opportunity to write a new chapter in world history. It will have to come out from under the umbrella and repudiate it. Putting itself at risk, it will have to declare that it is home now, sharing in the vulnerability of other compatriot bodies. South African whiteness will declare that its dignity is inseparable from the dignity of black bodies.

The collapse of 'white leadership' that would spearhead this process has been lamented. On second thoughts, perhaps this situation represents a singular opportunity. The collapse of 'white leadership' ought to lead to the collapse of the notion of 'black leadership'. Where there is no 'white leadership' to contest 'black leadership', where these descriptions of leadership were a function of the outmoded politics of a racist state, we are left only with leaders to govern this country. There can be no more compelling argument than this to urge for care and caution in addressing the issue of racism at the southern tip of the African continent. The historic disintegration of 'white leadership' imposes immense responsibilities on how we frame notions of leadership in the resultant political space we are now inheriting.

This way, the South African State is placed in a unique position to declare its obligations to all citizens. It should jealously and vigorously protect all bodies within its borders and beyond.

When I began to write this talk, I had no idea where it would take me. Faced with a daunting randomness, I settled on the themes of race, consciousness, and social process around which to explore any possible ways into the future. I am humbled by the knowledge there can never be one, single, definitive way. There are many other possible paths.

Muzi Kuzwayo, in the conclusion to his fine book, tells the story of how, a year before the 1999 elections, a 'white guy' who discovered that Muzi was in advertising came to him with a bizarre proposal. He sought advice on how to market a coffin-manufacturing company, which would flourish from the violence being anticipated at the time, and from all the HIV/AIDS deaths. As Muzi relates:

I refused to help him because I have faith in this country and its people. And every day my faith is reaffirmed by the millions who get on buses, trains and taxis to go to work. Lately, the increasing crime, disease and interest rates are causing justified desperation. But I still have faith. And faith doesn't have to be justified. My future depends on South Africans spending their hard-earned money on bread, books, alcohol, savings or investment accounts or anything else that keeps the economy going. If you are in marketing, advertising or any other industry, you must have faith. Irrational as it may be. Sometimes it will waiver and when that happens remember those people who stock-piled tons of food, water and petrol before our first democratic election. They were all wrong.

It is my act of faith in the act of writing that has got me where I am now with a few ideas.

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