In your book, Knowledge in the Blood, you discuss the effects of political and social changes on youth in the post-apartheid South Africa. What efforts have been made within your institution toward racial reconciliation?

It seems to me that a crisis sparks an opportunity on a divided campus or in a divided country, like South Africa. A racist event, disseminated on Youtube, of four White male students racially abusing five older Black workers (four women), inter alia, appearing to urinate into their food, deepened a fomenting racial crisis at the University of the Free State (UFS) in central South Africa.

I came to UFS as the new university leader (Vice-Chancellor), and the anger was palpable. After a period of observation and analysis, it became clear to me that apart from what the courts might decide on the criminal case, there was an institutional charge to be faced with respect to the conditions, over 100 years, that had been created for such racial abuse to emerge and to sustain itself on this former White university campus.

It was in this context that I invited the students back to study, against common sense, and for the institution to apologize and pay reparations to the five workers. It took more than a year for the students and the workers to eventually come together, for the victims to offer forgiveness, and for the perpetrators to fully understand the seriousness of what had happened. But the door was opened, the opportunity was created for all students and staff to begin a process of open dialogue on racial division and racial togetherness. White students, a minority, felt that they could be accepted and their voices heard despite a terrible past. Black students faced up to the challenge that there was a better way of achieving social justice beyond the reach of the legal process or the accusatory frame within which anger often operates.

The reconciliation has happened, and the UFS is now hailed in South Africa, and abroad, as a model of human togetherness in a still-divided country and a once bitterly-divided campus.
What happened on one campus sparked debates and encouraged dialogues across South Africa, and drew world figures—from Tutu to Winfrey—to the campus to affirm the wonder of deep change through reconciliation and justice.

Given the multifaceted political, social, and cultural ecologies within South Africa, how are the current education reforms addressing students’ opportunities to access quality education?

Not well. South Africa’s education system is dominated by union politics whereby political intervention is neutralized since those in power depend on an alliance with the dominant trade unions for their future positions (e.g. a second term for the nation’s President). As a result, two school systems have emerged after apartheid—a small, well-resourced Black and White (integrated) school system to which the elites send their children (including the unionists who disrupt the majority Black school system) and a largely Black, under-resourced school system where more than 60% of the children cannot read, write, and calculate at the grade level. What sustains this dual school system is, in large part, a union that disrupts school time in the bottom three-quarters of the disadvantaged school system for up to one third of instructional time allocated; that protects incompetent teachers (their fee-paying members) at the expense of the children; and that prevents any attempts at accountability through systems of supervision and inspection, or even testing for subject matter or professional knowledge.

The fact that South Africa spends more than any other African country on education—either as a percentage of GDP or in terms of overall government expenditure—and achieves the worst results, is not simply a legacy of apartheid, though the past is obviously a factor. It is also a consequence of a social and educational ecology dominated by union politics and the related absence of political intervention by government.

More than elsewhere, your chances of entering university, and succeeding, depends on which of the two school systems, described above, you attended. Those from rural schools where English-language instruction is limited will find access even more difficult than those children from urban schools with more English language exposure. Those from deracialized middle class schools, where Black and White children attend, routinely enter and succeed in higher education. In other words, new forms of race and class interactions combined to determine scholastic success, or not.

What advice would you offer to educational leaders navigating post-conflict societies?

It is hard. Change is difficult. The challenge is not only one of knowledge and strategy; it is also one of emotions and spirituality. It is worth recalling, in such circumstances, William Faulkner, the American novelist, who said that “the past is not dead; it isn’t even past.” It is especially useful to be reminded of Mahmood Mamdani’s, Ugandan and University of Columbia historian, epithet, “the present is not its own explanation.”

The one thing I have learned is that you cannot change something—like a racially divided university—unless you understand the problem deeply. This means understanding not simply the racism or racial behaviors on display, but where it comes from; how it is revealed within a university or a school; how it is sustained; how it is understood by both perpetrators of the bad behavior as well as by its targets; what it does to people; what language it uses; how it comes to assume commonsense for some; what happens when someone throws the proverbial spanner in the racial works; where it is vulnerable and therefore, easy to
change; conversely, where it is hard and difficult to change; how and why the targeted respond to the bad behaviors, and how and why they do not. This means as change-leader going into the belly of the beast and using all the skills of the anthropologist to not only observe and interpret, but become part of the native community. It means understanding the emotional architecture of an organization—what holds it together, and what can tear it apart. You cannot change meaningfully what you do not understand deeply.

The second thing I had to come to terms with is that you cannot change something or presume to change somebody else unless you come to terms with yourself. I am part of the history, the politics, the emotions, and the people I wish to see change. I am inextricably part of the community and its memory of a painful and violent past. I come to the change project with a sense of my own vulnerability—in this case, as a victim of apartheid—and therefore, with a consciousness that I have to deal with personal anguish, bitterness, and loss if I am to find it possible to lead in ways that keep reconciliation and social justice in close conversation with each other. I am so grateful that through my White students, and their vulnerabilities, I found it possible to deal with self-knowledge of the past in ways that were not destructive or partial or insensitive to the needs of my White brothers and sisters.

The third thing I found useful in change is to know your purpose and stand in it. Being clear about what needs to be done is crucial. Here the distinction between authoritative leadership and authoritarian leadership is a useful one. Having listened to both sides of the story of the past traumas or present tragedies, the role of the leader is to act firmly yet compassionately in moving the organization towards a higher goal (e.g. the integration of residences, classrooms, and other campus spaces that were once divided by race). Once understanding is achieved, action is crucial. A focused view of what needs to happen does not mean, of course, that midstream corrections do not happen. Understanding is never complete and human reactions are not always predictable. Without losing sight of the principled commitment, adapting the strategy or slowing down the momentum might be necessary from time to time. But know what it is you wish to achieve, and persuade your students and your colleagues to move in the same direction. This is more art than science, and requires a leader sensitive to the emotions that change provokes, and knowing when to push hard and when to go slow, when to listen for longer, and when to push on towards the goal.

As the rector of the University of Free State, what are some main challenges and opportunities facing your institution, and the higher education system at large?

In the South African context the main challenge is how to keep in balance a set of age-old tensions such as equity and excellence, reparation and reconciliation, compassion and discipline, change and continuity. In post-conflict societies you are constantly aware, as leader, that you are being watched. Your sense of political balance is crucial, for both sides need constant conviction that the choice you make is based on a set of constant values (such as high standards for all students and financial relief favoring the disadvantaged). It takes time. It is about building trust among followers that you will always act on the basis of principle and not on the basis of convenience.

We have to repair the past; we have to hire more Black professors; we must ensure Black students from apartheid’s devastated schools, made worse by union politics in a
democracy, find ways of bridging into a top university like the UFS. But you also have to keep the attention of the present, of White students who wonder why they must be punished for the sins of the fathers. They need to be constantly convinced that merit and potential are both critical in making resource allocative - decisions in an unequal society. Symbols matter, in such contexts, and visible signs of acts of reconciliation enable acts of reparation to proceed.

The pressure to lower standards in the name of equity is another serious problem in higher education systems of the postcolony. That is why leading African institutions after colonialism became mere empty shells of academic endeavor for the remaining poor who could not escape to English or French or American universities. Universities are expected to compensate for the dire quality of the school system, turning those who oblige into massive compensatory programs rather than serious institutions of higher learning where scholarship thrives.

These tendencies can only be countered by strong leadership committed to educational change without succumbing to populist politics and passions especially in unequal societies.

What do you see as one of or the most pressing issue related to educational change today?

The most pressing issue is the quality and depth of educational leadership in schools and universities today. Change does not happen in a vacuum; it requires leadership. But the leadership required is different from the past. The strong-man theory of leadership has now been completely discounted. Technicist visions of leadership—the tool-box approach to change—is not enough. Top-down or bottom-up approaches to leadership are false choices; we need both. What is needed in a floundering world—whether in corporate, ecclesiastical, familial, or educational contexts—is ethical, compassionate, emotional, and spiritual (not religious) leadership that recognizes the complexity of the human condition even as the higher purposes of learning, and teaching, are pursued. The cold calculus of learner achievement tests and new managerialisms fail to address the heart of education. Children are not cognitive machines and teachers are not mindless mechanics. Change that endures goes much deeper that routine tests, more paperwork, and external demands to account.

In many parts of the world there are no formal leadership development programs for principals or professors. People still stumble into leadership too often without the necessary preparation. But formal training is one thing; observing leadership through powerful role models in the practice of leadership is a completely different thing. What is desperately needed is both new knowledge on leadership and multiple opportunities for apprenticeships in leadership. Schools and universities that identify potential leaders from among the learning population and provide structured opportunities for the nurturing of such leadership already make an important contribution towards next generation leadership of the kind described in these reflections.
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