

## ON RACE AND A SHARED VISION OF UNITY

The 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Robert Kennedy's "Ripples of Hope" speech at the University of Cape Town turns our minds and imagination to the powerful importance of his enduring message. "Ripples of Hope" was not just a landmark eloquent speech. As an address with "rare qualities of mind and heart," as the then UCT SRC President, Charles Diamond, in his introduction of Robert Kennedy predicted it would be, it was a passionate call to action. It was a vision of social justice action that continues to speak to our highest aspirations—that despite what seems to be insurmountable challenges that we face as a society – that we faced then under apartheid, and continue to face now after the end of that violently repressive era—each of us can and should rise to the call to action. *All* our voices matter. Together as citizens our collective actions can bend history in the direction of social justice and transformation.

What is remarkable about "Ripples of Hope" is that a quote from this speech delivered in the decade marked by the height of injustice in South Africa, with some of the worst acts of repression by the apartheid government, is one of only two quotes memorialized on Robert Kennedy's grave in US Arlington National Cemetery—the second quote is from a speech he delivered to a group of African Americans in anger and grief after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. In the quote from the latter speech, he tried to calm his fellow countrymen and women by elevating—again—the vision of his infinite hope in humanity that ultimately, the fight for a better future is not to "imitate" the hatred of those who want to destroy freedom, but rather to "enlarge" the possibility for engagement across the lines that divide us. He told the group of people shattered by Martin Luther King's murder: what we need in the United States is not hatred, not violence and lawlessness; but love, wisdom, and compassion toward one another.

Perhaps what is more remarkable about the commemoration of "Ripples of Hope" then is not so much the speech itself, but rather the fact that the event being commemorated, the 1966 National Union of South African Students' (NUSAS) "Day of Affirmation," was at the same time a dramatic statement of protest by South African students, led by white students at UCT, against the apartheid government. Of course, there was nothing extraordinary as such about white students protesting the injustices of apartheid. Two years after Kennedy's memorable speech at UCT, students occupied Bremner Building for nine days to protest UCT's withdrawal of the appointment of anthropologist Archie Mafeje as senior lecturer after the apartheid government demanded

reversal of the offer. Like Pontius Pilate, under pressure from the apartheid government, the UCT Council at the time washed its hands off and announced that it was unable to appoint black academics and would only do so if there were “special circumstances.”

From the perspective of contemporary South Africa, it is remarkable to witness images of black and white students at UCT marching together with a shared vision for social justice and change. I am not ignorant of the racial tensions that plagued NUSAS, and subsequently came to a head when black students left the organization to establish the Black Consciousness Movement. What interests me in the NUSAS “Day of Reaffirmation of Academic and Human Freedom” is its symbolism as a moment that represented – through the collective “voice” and presence of black and white South Africans, and especially through Robert Kennedy’s words and actions throughout his five-day visit—black and white sharing a common vision of “human freedom.” The voices of young white anti-apartheid activists were in support of the black struggle in an atmosphere of apartheid’s oppression. Today, however, two generations after Kennedy’s inspiring speech, black-white student activism has been the site of racial tensions that started to bubble, extending their reach to the broader society. The noisy traffic of social media has brought into public discourse some of the vilest language that has exposed deep fissures in our politics of race relations. Some of these social media utterances not only show a repetition of the past—a re-enactment of the racial hatred inscribed in apartheid laws. Rather, their intensity demonstrates a deep level of hatred that sometimes makes one cringe. For instance, it was not 26 year-old Matthew Theunissen’s reference to sport minister Fikile Mbalula as “kaffir” that was shocking to me, but his reference to “~~fuck~~ing black ~~cunts~~.” “Kaffir” still recognizes the humanness of the other—it is a devalued, and dehumanized human alright, but its form and shape is still human. “~~fuck~~ing black ~~cunts~~,” however, the other part of Theunissen’s insult, obliterates the very humanity of the other. It is a total annihilation of the other, making the other into a thing, a mere hole in a woman’s private parts—a *black* woman who herself has already been reduced in fantasy to a mere “thing.” Such wrath and anger to come out of the lips of a young man born in 1990 gives one pause.

If “we the people of South Africa believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity,” it may be important to create alternative conversations in pursuit of the goal of healing the divisions of the past, while the social media runs its course of endless tweets and retweets of hateful and racially charged insults. Anger among young white South Africans who cannot get jobs, who may see their black friends from their elite private schools getting jobs, and may not experience the kind of privilege that their race is supposed to bestow upon them—white

rage—is a reality in post-apartheid South Africa. The resentment that this condition of post-apartheid whiteness breeds is something that should not be dismissed simply as racist rants.

At the same time, young black South Africans' lives are burdened with the legacies of generations that were deprived education, and denied opportunities to own property and other economic privileges. Many of them suffer daily the humiliation of knowing they are born “free,” yet they lack the means to bring that freedom into being in order to reclaim their human dignity. Thabiso Nkoana, in a play at the Baxter Theatre's Zabalaza Festival, reminded audiences that these are stories of pain waiting to be written: “I just wanna write,” he said, “but not in that #hashtag revolution kind of way.”

Even for blacks who are privileged, race continues to define their lives in fundamental ways. The issue of race in our country is a complex one. The complexity is at the core of our collective woundedness, which, as Mamphela Ramphele reminds us, requires to be addressed through national dialogue. Recently I was on a panel with a former student activist who in her closing remarks said “we cannot eat dialogue.” She is right, dialogue alone will not address the monumental problem of inequality. Yet we have a responsibility to avoid descending into the chaos of hatred and violence and to reclaim the hope of living in the future of our dreams. Black voices matter; perhaps white voices matter more because the weight of privilege is tilted in their direction. The words of Chief Albert Luthuli in conversation with Robert Kennedy about the apartheid government resonate: “Can't they see that men [and women] of all races can work together—and that the alternative is a terrible disaster for us all?”

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