

Eric Miyeni

As I was deliberating on whether or not to respond to the Nelson Mandela Foundation (NMF) position paper on “Race and Identity in 2015 South Africa” and teetering more towards not writing a thing, I came across a Kiffness posting on FaceBook called “Coming to terms with my white privilege”. Dave, the author, was appealing for empathy from ‘them’, white South Africans, for the pain and or suffering that is felt by ‘us’, black South Africans - to couch his words in the “us and them” language of exclusion that South Africa still suffers from today. After a description of what he considers the privileges that he has “inherited from being white...”, he wrote: “The least I can do is respect that there is a lot of pain in the people who have been oppressed & it is important to not only understand that pain, but to feel it.”

I read that posting and wrote: “Have the conversation” on my Twitter handle and posted the link to this Kiffness article for all my Twitter followers to see, hopefully read, and maybe even participate in the discussion.

What amazes me here is that these people were not at our deliberations on race and identity at the NMF. Yet, as I read the comments below the Dave piece, I felt like I was back at the NMF again. It would appear that not only is this conversation on race, identity and racism also happening sporadically, spontaneously and passionately in unorganised platforms, but that it is arriving almost exactly where we arrived when we were done with our organised, well thought out and adjudicated conversations at the NMF.

Apparently South Africa is trying to look squarely at its racist past, that racism’s impact on the present and what the future will yield without a rigorous and honest engagement with that question of race and identity. The sobering thing is that there seems to be a feeling that a future without this engagement is not a healthy one. And, for the first time, at least from what I have observed, the “Rainbow Nation” project is being seen as not only a black task to keep whites feeling safe, but a necessary national undertaking.

This brings me back to the NMF position paper.

Now that there might be growing consensus that there is a need for national self-examination on the issue, what kind of language could hinder progress here, and what could speed it up? Here is an innocuous looking sentence from the NMF position paper, “Much of the work to be done involves black South Africans working with themselves and for themselves, and white South Africans working with themselves and for themselves.” Here’s another, “ Although all sectors of society will need to be mobilised to achieve..., the state and private sector carry a fundamental responsibility.”

Far too often, I see that when we talk or write about responsibilities, even now that we are, for the first time, really acknowledging that the white side of the divide needs to come to the party too for unity in this bid to build a better South Africa, we still list the parties needed for the job to be done by starting with the

black side of the equation so that, somewhat, with strong, often unintended symbolism, most of the burden remains there. It is not “the private sector and the state” that “carry”. It is “...the state and the private sector.” It is time for this to be reversed so that those who have been largely more responsible for the freedoms we have today to, for example, talk as we do, without fear, are given some relief as the inheritors of “privilege” from “being white” start to feel the need to pick up the spade too, and begin shoveling.

The burden of responsibility to change things and move South Africa forward has for far too long been placed on the black side of the divide so that the white side stands in condemning judgment of the black side’s “failures”, Inkandla notwithstanding, the Eskom induced electrical black-outs, and: “My! what a mess!” As though we are not all in the same boat here, whose sinking could kill us all.

A better South Africa is the entire country’s project. Our language, in trying to make everyone come on board, must start to reflect this. It can’t always be, first, the blacks who must do “Much of the work to be done...”, followed by whites. The order in which we name the “responsible” also talks to who we burden with most of that responsibility. We need to sensitize ourselves to this.

We must also start to see Mandela in a realistic way. It is, for example, often in looking at him more as a god than a man that we start ascribing notions, powerful ideas, such as the ones embodied in the phrase “Rainbow nation” and all the powerful reconciliatory spirit it brought with it, to him instead of Archbishop Emeritus Tutu who actually coined the phrase. Mandela, as inspiration, is a commanding figure. We need him as a guiding spirit, but we also need to take him down a notch to unleash our own powers. It is hard to achieve things when you are standing in awe.

That aside, the paper is a wonderful reflection of what was discussed at the NMF and a delightful testimony to our ability as a country to sit down and talk deeply.

With regards to the NMF sessions that I attended, I was saddened by how the last one had lost a large number of the white people who were in the first one. Their contribution was immense. It was in sitting in that room full of their passionate presence that I realised, for the first time, that it did not matter at all that I did not believe that Afrikaners were getting the short end of the stick in the new South Africa, for instance, that they were experiencing the highest number of murders today, or that South Africa was basically out to Hitler them.

Through our interaction, I saw that white South Africans did not, and most likely could never fully comprehend the depth of my pain as I look at my past in this country, as I see how little of the wealth unleashed since we democratised the South African political landscape is trickling down to those who fought for this freedom the hardest and lost the most, or that there might be more farmers being killed today than there were under apartheid, but that the numbers of dead Afrikaans farmers at the hands of thugs will never equal even a quarter of

the number of young black men being murdered at the hands of the same on a daily basis.

We do not have to believe each other.

All we have to do is trust that, to the other, what is being said, what we are battling to believe, is as real as the sun rising in the morning. What should matter to white people is that the pain I say I feel is real to me. What should matter to me is that the fear of losing everything, including culture, language and identity in this new South Africa, is real to the white people who say it is. We need to trust each other to be the experts on what we respectively feel. Only then, with empathy, do we have a chance to help each other step over these supposedly unfathomable realities, and plan a better future together.

I think we can do this.