

HARNESSING DEMONS

Leon Wessels

The first step towards greater racial reconciliation is to acknowledge that the demon is in our midst. It is not easy to harness this demon. I battle to bury my own racial prejudices. Of this I am not proud. That my earlier bias sometime overpowers me is a great disappointment.

Racism raises its ugly head all the time – it happens in spite of the fact that it is impossible to find a self-proclaimed racist in our country. It is also very difficult to find anyone that ever voted the National Party with its roots embedded in statutory racism into power.

During a visit to Eastern-Europe I discovered that it is not possible to bump into a communist to talk about the old days. Nobody – in Eastern Europe or South Africa wants to be associated with a failed state. This means nobody wants to take ownership for the past and then no one knows how to cure the past. You can't build the future if you don't understand the past.

I am not brave enough to claim that I am not a racist because I grapple with my prejudices every day.

At dusk I watch the pedestrians closely. I relax when I see people that look like me – people who are of the same colour. To my astonishment a colleague is hijacked in the parking area of a hotel in Johannesburg by “my people”. I came to realize that criminals are everywhere and that they don't look alike.

The world is contaminated by racism. We are not the only ones that suffer from it. Amartya Sen, Nobel Prize Laureate for his books about welfare economy, writes that when he first came from India to study in Cambridge in 1953, his landlady warned him to clean the bath nicely. She was afraid that his hue would stain the bath.

There is greater colour and race awareness than before. This is true in South Africa but certainly also in the world. We want to move away from this chapter where race is the determining factor but in this in-between phase we still struggle to come to grips with our abnormal past.

Hugh Masekela, internationally renowned jazz personality talks to a small circle of friends in Krugersdorp and expresses his surprise that South Africans – black and white – still do not know how to speak with one another. Everyone is very apologetic: our children will get it right because they don't have the barriers we had to contend with; children now go to school together and have opportunities to mix that we never had, are the excuses tendered.

To me this is nothing but shirking our responsibility, coming from a generation that has to set the pace to bridge the divides of the past. To the contrary; they are passive and in a very subtle way and sometimes not so subtle instill their old fears and prejudices in their children.

Business consultant Alida de Wet found during the research for her doctoral thesis that racial prejudice is a deep emotional phenomenon. It cannot be resolved with superficial chit-chats. It must be addressed at a very deep emotional level, in a safe group situation, where honest eye-to-eye; human-to-human meetings happen.

Until we learn how to live with our pasts and face our racial prejudices head-on we will not be able to see the future clearly because our glasses are polished by our pasts.

We have given our statute book a facelift and removed all the hurtful racial provisions. It is now the moment to give our society a heart-transplant. We must remove our racially tinted sun-glasses.

We live in a stunningly beautiful country. Your vantage point however determines whether you notice this beauty or not. There are vantage points where your main concern is to survive, to breathe fresh air; where hunger pains and the squalor around you weigh heavily on your mind. The beautiful skyline and scenery means nothing because your main concern is feeding and clothing your children.

We must never get used to poverty. We should never accept poverty as a given. We should never settle for half measures when we rise to fight poverty.

The residue of colonialism and apartheid is still there. A few democratic elections cannot undo this. It does not only revolve around those things that lie behind us, but also around the values and rights that we now want to make part of our daily existence. These new values sprout from our past and form the basis from where we reach out to the new future.

The challenge remains: how do we bridge these divides?

The Constitutional negotiations that concluded in 1996 gave us a set of ringing phrases in the Pre-Amble and the Foundational values without a common understanding what they meant. South Africans did not embrace those phrases with the same enthusiasm. The conclusion of this process left us with a feeling of negotiating fatigue. Rightly so, because through a number of elections South Africans have legitimized the Constitution and determined

who would hold power. Those holding power would implement their programs without having to negotiate about them.

The end of Constitutional negotiations did however not herald the end of constitutional dialogues or dialogues about matters of national importance to ensure the realizing of the Constitutional ideals.

Elections come and go but we as South Africans will always be called upon to uphold the constitutional values of respecting one another because that is what our common humanity and the Constitution expects us to do – regardless the language you speak or your skin pigmentation.

Paul Kruger's winged words: "Africa shall be free" when he was fighting against colonialism could never have foreseen that the Afrikaner revolutionary Bram Fischer would have found the inspiration in his words for his struggle against the apartheid government. Our political freedom has not yet matured into freedom from prejudice and old stereotypes.

In Accra, at the University of Ghana, my friend Prof Kofi Kumado, introduces me as a true son of Africa. This honour gives me unexpected heartburn, because just prior to my departure I had been part of a committee who, on behalf of the Northwest-University, had to complete the annual Fair Employment Practice forms—those forms deny by definition that I am an African.

An Afrikaner's European heritage and appearance is not unimportant, when his permanent address is in Africa, and specifically in South Africa, it presents no stumbling block. As a matter of fact, elsewhere in Africa it is a recommendation. However, in South Africa it will take some while yet before those Fair Employment Practices forms which irritate me so much, are changed.