

September 2012

In defence of ubuntu

WHAT is the meaning of ubuntu? Is it relevant as a philosophy of life or is it merely a convenient slogan for cynical political and business leaders to rally support for themselves? Should we pursue ubuntu or never mention it again?

Recently the journalist Andrew Donaldson, reporting from the National Cohesion Summit at Kliptown, said he'd had enough South African moral narcissism:

"Ubuntu, I've heard ad nauseam, has many qualities, all of them purportedly good. For instance, it dictates that we place a high value on human life, promote understanding and tolerance, are generous in our dealings with others, and so on. These, frankly, are universal concepts and are not uniquely African in any way whatsoever. However, it is only the South African moral narcissist who will shamelessly declare that ubuntu is something we can teach the rest of the world". (Politics Web: Let's never mention Ubuntu again)

Donaldson's dismissive attitude is nothing unusual and I daresay that many South Africans are tired of hearing about all the good things that ubuntu represents. Our everyday observations - from the revival of racism around dinner tables and the upsurge of xenophobia in the streets to corporate verneukery and meanly divisive politics - suggest that the dream of national cohesion under ubuntu is about as realistic as a whiff of dagga smoke.

But I don't agree with this negative attitude. Ubuntu is as necessary to us as breathing; it saved us from perpetual conflict and is part of our makeup as a nation. It is certainly not all smoke and mirrors, and a strong case can be made for African humanism (ubuntu) to be regarded as one of the great universal philosophies, but distinctive in its own way - as they are too. Each of these universals stems from the histories and cultures of peoples in different parts of the world, and while they do share some ethical features they are by no means all the same. Spiritually they diverge enormously.

To lump them all together is crude, and to dismiss ubuntu out of hand is extremely arrogant. Brusquely to set aside whole traditions of thought and experience is an impatient, typically Anglo-Saxon response to perplexity.

This said, Donaldson makes some good points. He wrapped his gibes in references to President Jacob Zuma wanting more respect for the elders and DA leader Helen Zille telling us that no government can foist a common culture on a passive society. You can't fault the journalist for picking up choice quotes that highlight our national schizophrenia. We do want to be good people but we are knowingly behaving badly.

Many centuries ago a famous philosopher called Plato remarked that "we must value truthfulness highly" and, quoting his teacher Socrates, he added "the unexamined life is not worth living". If our society is riddled with hypocrisy, and we turn away from truthful examination, it's not the fault of the value systems we purport to hold. Another good thinker, the French Duke de La Rochefoucauld, held that "hypocrisy is the homage that vice pays to virtue". Well, we can observe that on a daily basis.

If we go along like sheep following abberant leaders we can't blame this on the rhetoric that they sprout from public platforms. We have a democratic responsibility as followers to hold our leaders to account and insist they should do a lot more than pay lip service to principles they espouse - or be kicked out.

Donaldson's first mistake is to confuse poor leadership with the cultural underpinnings that we need to hold us together as a people. Ubuntu is a founding principle of our Constitution. The philosophy is not yet as well-developed as its Western or Eastern peers, but coming out of Africa as it does it is our philosophy and we would be foolish to abandon it.

We need value systems that are congruent with our experience and our history, giving us direction into the future. Personally, one of the things I have always noticed in South African business practice is the yawning gap between the individualist culture at the top of corporations and the collective ethos at the bottom. This cultural gap has arisen from colonialist attitudes and must be countered with a liberatory sense of Africa's own destiny.

A form of corporate communalism or community-based stakeholder capitalism - implying consultation within and without the organisation - is an appropriate model for African business. Indeed, given the erosion of faith in global capitalism during the current Great Recession, perhaps Africa does have something to teach the rest of the world (although Donaldson pours scorn on this).

The journalist's biggest mistake is to pay no heed to the heritage of ubuntu with the generalisation that "universal concepts and are not uniquely African in any way whatsoever". Whether Donaldson is conscious of having a blinkered outlook, or blithely unconscious of it, he is in effect saying that "universal" ideas are those that stem from the West - that is, from his own worldview.

To give an example. Buddhists, I imagine, would not agree that their concept of the All (which is not a god) is the same as the Christian idea of the Almighty, though both are universal ideas. By the same token, the ethical framework that communists derive from historical materialism cannot be equated with liberal humanism, which is equally secular but poles apart from the iron laws of Marx and Engels.

For that matter, liberal humanism and African humanism are also highly distinct though they share an emphasis on man (and woman) as the measure of things. Some liberals are religious; others not. Throughout the African continent there are various expressions of ubuntu but they all embrace what I call the God principle, or the belief that a Supreme Being governs our lives. This is not a secular humanism. Liberals, drawing their ideas from a long tradition of Western thinkers, see the individual as the core of social consciousness. Africans, respecting the wisdom of the sages and remembering the council of elders under the village tree, idealise the community as the core.

It matters little whether these models are mythical or rationally based. What they have in common - and also what separates them - is that they are cultural archetypes, grown from the soil in which they were seeded. I have maintained in my book *Attuned Leadership: African humanism as compass* (2011) that the very notion of our Being is quite different in Western and African thought.

When the Frenchman Rene Descartes coined the phrase cogito ergo sum (I think therefore I am) he located our sense of existence in the individual consciousness and our essential human nature in the private person. By contrast, the Zulu proverb Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu (I am because you are, you are because we are) conveys the belief that we only exist because of other people and our consciousness is made up of an endowment from the rest of humanity. It is our humanness that binds us together, rather than our individualism that sets us apart.

Look at it this way: the team is superior to the lone ranger. Innovation may arise from someone's bright idea but to roll it out you need teamwork. On balance, however, even the inner-directed individual needs the support of the group; while the group that maintains vigilance can hold the individual to account.

The strengths of individualism reside in our ability to think for ourselves, be creative and innovative, and act in accordance with our conscience. But individuals may be selfish and act without reference to the common good. When looking after No 1 becomes an organisational principle, all sorts of pathologies come to infect the morality of society, its leadership and its governance.

The strengths of communalism are found precisely in the assertion of the common good. Individuals recognise that their primary duty is to use their creative energies in the service of others, being mindful of the need for equity, probity and mutual respect. The inherent danger here is one of conformity at the cost of independent thinking, and this in turn produces dogma and authoritarian leadership.

In South Africa we have inherited both streams - individualism and communalism - from European and African forebears. To extract the best from these traditions is a balancing act that citizens are obliged to attempt.

Lack of understanding of our philosophical differences is one of the root problems of social cohesion in South Africa today. In seeking to overcome barriers we must try to grasp the point of view of the other. That will not be achieved by dismissing either ubuntu or the heritage of Europe. The common culture that we must pursue in order to weld our nation into a self-conscious and creative whole will never be purely European or African. It will contain elements of both in a steadily evolving mix.

The history of racism from which we obtain so many of our disparaging stereotypes has been superseded by what is termed meta-racism. In place of intolerance and discrimination based on skin-colour we now face a much more sophisticated onslaught on the dignity of Africans in the form of cultural contempt.

This meta-racism is something arising over and above old lines of demarcation. It is like an invisible cloud that hovers over the South African experiment in shaping a common destiny from disparate parts. We have warred, hated, collaborated and loved each other over generations. We yearn for a better future but we are shadowed by our conflict ridden past.

Meta-racism has yet to be tackled frontally and vigorously. It is more insidious and resilient than the older version, given that it comes dressed in sophistry and niceties of complexity.

It is very much unlike naked racism...which is just that: naked!

I am always shocked and disappointed when I hear the prophets of a “second transition” denigrating the democratic settlement reached at Kempton Park in 1993, as if this was something we never fully agreed to. The “so-called Constitution” with which we are allegedly “saddled” was written by a majority ANC Assembly and sought to recognise that South Africa belongs to all who live in it – in line with the Freedom Charter. This dispensation, embodying ubuntu, was launched by Deputy President Thabo Mbeki in 1996. In his moving speech to Parliament on that occasion, “I am an African”, Mbeki gave notice that Africa had its own identity and own destiny to pursue.

The country had survived the divisive years of apartheid and hundreds of years of racial conflict and separation before that. The enduring solution to South Africa’s almost insoluble problems was predicated upon sufficient consensus between the negotiators. You cannot have it all; but you can get close enough to a tolerable agreement that represents a commitment to live together in harmony despite the past. The elders of the ANC wisely embraced this principle as the best of all possible outcomes.

Mbeki’s subsequent speech was by no means a plea for cultural relativism or a bid to excuse African failings. Speaking of Africa’s historical shame, poverty and despair, he said the adoption of the the Constitution “contributed decisively to the evolution of humanity”. This is the claim that ubuntu makes on all of us: we must seek renewal and show the world that Africa can lead.

To be a person is to know your own self (as liberals truly recognise). To be a country means to set our own direction as a member of a continent and so make our way in global affairs. To be self-conscious is to know that we cannot progress alone: we need each other.

As to cultural relativism and universals, here’s an interesting anecdote.

The American management theorist Peter Drucker once observed that American businessmen were like poker players while the Japanese played chess. Americans made snap decisions based on their estimate of chances, while the Japanese thought everything through in advance and then struck like lightning. The advantages of speed for the Americans were often outweighed by the need to revise decisions in retrospect, while for the Japanese what they lost in being slow they hoped to win back by working together like-mindedly.

South Africa’s quest for sufficient consensus aligns us more with the Japanese than the American model. Ubuntu is not merely a creed of liberal tolerance, of live-and-let-live, of not interfering with one’s neighbour while one pursues one’s own ends; it urges us to find each other and actively work towards shared solutions. This is its essential appeal as a business philosophy where managements apply ubuntu in good faith.

Cultural differences do not override our human commonality. Diversity contributes to what happens around the table as we draw inspiration from each other. Mbeki exalted the victories of Africans at Isandhlwana and Khartoum but he excluded no-one on the continent from the definition of an African:

“I am formed of the migrants who left Europe to find a new home on our native land. Whatever their own actions, they remain still, part of me. In my veins courses the blood of the Malay slaves who came from the East. Their proud dignity informs my bearing, their culture a part of my essence”.

Our great South African exemplars of leadership have demonstrated this principle in their lives and work. It is alarming that anyone could call ubuntu “moral narcissism” and forget the contribution it has made towards peace, good governance and progress in South Africa.

Mandela embodied forgiveness and a spirit of togetherness when he emerged from jail. Walter Sisulu did the same and was a steadying element through the angst-laden period of negotiations with white interests. Their old colleague Oliver Tambo returned from exile having led the armed struggle and was equally willing to bury the hatchet for the greater good, though sadly he didn’t live till election day.

These leaders took the course of compassion and good sense instead of seeking vengeance. In a lengthy Foreword to my book Let Africa Lead: African transformational leadership for 21st century business (2005), Mandela did something he rarely has done: he expounded on leadership and on his principles as a person. His opening words were as follows:

“All big ideas are simple. Ubuntu is a simple, big idea. It asserts that the common ground of our humanity is greater and more enduring than the differences that divide us. It is so, and it must be so, because we share the same fateful human condition. We are creatures of blood and bone, idealism and suffering. Though we differ across cultures and faiths, and though history has divided rich from poor, free from unfree, powerful from powerless and race from race, we are still all branches on the same tree of humanity”.

That is as eloquent a statement of the uniqueness of ubuntu, as well as its universal import, as we will ever find. The African origins of the philosophy are distinctive; yet like other world philosophies it embraces universal principles. It is not “just like” other universal value systems (as has been crudely alleged) but it is like them in seeking to encompass us all.

Incidentally, Let Africa Lead makes the explicit claim that Africa can lead the world in framing a set of caring and pragmatic values for the 21st century. Donaldson finds this ludicrous but look around you and decide whether perhaps a little more compassion - one of the virtues of humanness - would go a long way.

When someone in the media now derides the uniqueness of ubuntu we should ask: what would he rather have?

To accept Western values as the only true universals is to submit ourselves once again to domination (in a far more insidious form than colonial landings). I hope I have shown that all “universals” are not the same and to claim that they are is to punt dominion in disguise. On the other hand, to accept ubuntu merely as a colourful Africanist ethno-philosophy without real relevance to the rest of the world is also a mistake.

In effect, by emptying ubuntu of meaning, putative leadership at all levels in South Africa

leads us into a chaos of ideas and principles. If values go by the board then anything goes.

It seems to suit the agenda of many authority figures today to drag ubuntu across our path as a kind of scented rag to distract the tracker dogs of true democracy. They are illusionists: they prate the patter of ubuntu without really meaning a word of it while they go about extracting self-serving value rather than embodying true human values in thought and action.

We need our intelligentsia to engage freely and indeed fiercely over the key meanings and applications of ubuntu. Here, attacks on the cultural tradition are indeed of service because they stimulate a rejoinder.

But let's not dump ubuntu because some can't abide by its tenets. There is a central contradiction in the South African espousal of ubuntu: humanism is lost in our mean, bitter, self-centred political culture. Ubuntu is also a very convenient catchphrase for managements to claim they are on the worker's side while continuing with exploitative practices.

In African humanist terms, one's existence does not depend on what one thinks in the lone citadel of the mind, but on social ties, common values and ways-of-seeing, that is, empathy with others. This amounts to an all-embracing intellectual, emotional and spiritual acknowledgement of commonality.

And far from being a "soft" philosophy with no particular moral imperatives at its core, ubuntu dictates that what applies to one applies to all. By extension, it is a discipline of accountability of leaders to the led. Where good governance is lacking it is not the fault of ubuntu but of human frailty and the temptations of power.

If there's one thing South Africa needs right now to achieve social cohesion, it is ubuntu. Let's always mention it; discuss it; elaborate upon it; and explore where it leads. The path to enlightenment - and a better society - is collective reflection.