

**SOME THOUGHTS ON BEING A BLACK GRADUATE IN SOUTH
AFRICA
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Lord broughan, speaking in 1828, four years before the reform bill opened the franchise and changed the face of England, said the following to the house of commons:

“Education makes a people easy to lead, but difficult to drive; easy to govern, but impossible to enslave.”

This observation has a few telling lessons to South Africa’s black graduates today. For far too long, South African blacks have been driven by people whose designs and interests are inimical to black welfare and prosperity. Driven yes, because the authorities that be are not representative of South African society. We cannot talk of government either, because government presupposes a say in and a willingness to be governed. We can talk of neoslavery and a neocolonisation of the black mind.

These broad parameters thrust the black graduate almost willy-nilly into a role which is more serious than that of any other graduate in a normal society. Today’s black graduate in this country has to play the role of a catalyst for positive change, a liberator of minds, a motivator and source of inspiration for a downtrodden and disadvantaged community.

Before we get carried away on what may be misconstrued to be a socio-political lament, let us pluck a leaf from Dr. Grayson Kirk, a Columbia University educationist, on the responsibility of the educated person.

The first responsibility is to endeavour to achieve clarity and precision in his spoken and written communication.

The second is to develop a sense of values and the courage with which to defend them; “good taste” which can be used as a yardstick in making moral, social and aesthetic judgements.

The third is to make every effort, honestly and objectively, not only to understand the nature and problems of our society, but to comprehend compassionately the differences that separate it from others.

And tile fourth is the responsibility to look squarely at the world and its problems with courage and hope and not with fear and rejection.

Using the guiding principles suggested by Dr Grayson Kirk, please allow me to share with you some thoughts on challenges South Africa’s black graduate of today should grapple with if he is to be relevant to the situation.

I propose to comment on the following:

THE CURRENT SITUATION IN THE COUNTRY

South Africa is currently going through a period that is tragically difficult to describe. Some commentators have chosen to describe it as a “state of violent equilibrium”. Pain, division, death and destruction reign supreme. The incessant loss of innocent human life is reduced to cold statistics which appear as regular features in news bulletins. Demands for fundamental changes are at best met with reform promises, and at worst answered with constitutional nightmares which are nothing but monstrous offsprings of apartheid.

All this stems from the skewed nature of our society. In the scramble for jobs, investment capital, education and political power, whites in South Africa continue to hold a virtually unassailable position of strategic superiority. They preside over all economic and political power and have a secure lock on the ability to decide who gets what. This state of affairs is clearly an affront to the rest of the population, an insult that is clearly hard to swallow. In fact the black response is now one of raging indignation. A determination to put a stop to this affront and a demand for restoration of human dignity.

AN AFFIRMATION OF HUMAN DIGNITY

Allow me to affirm my belief in human dignity. I submit that whilst humanity is an emphatic and resounding yes to numerous important aspects of human life; it is also an emphatic and resounding no to others:

Yes to the brotherhood of mankind;

Yes to fraternity that cuts across race, colour and creed;

Yes to the equality of all human beings before the law;

Yes to equal opportunity and just treatment in all walks of life;

Yes to the inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Humanity is also an emphatic and resounding no.

No to degradation of man by man;

No to exploitation of man by man;

No to discrimination based on race or colour;

No to neocolonialism in whatever form;

No to having to live on lonely islands of poverty in the midst of vast oceans of material prosperity.

In a sense, this is the essence of the blackman’s cry for the restoration of his human dignity. Now is the time to translate these beliefs into action.

MAKING BLACK GRADUATES RELEVANT TO PRESENT-DAY SOUTH AFRICA

Given the background sketched above, how can we make black graduates relevant and useful in present day South Africa? Well, as members of the small group of black South Africans who are fortunate to acquire some education we are obliged to do several things; including the following:

Develop tough minds;

Transform ourselves into creative nonconformists;

Plan and act to eradicate the inequities of South African society

THE CHALLENGE TO DEVELOP TOUGH MINDS

Let us consider, first of all, the challenge to develop a tough mind, characterised by incisive thinking, realistic appraisal and decisive judgement. To gain relevance, black graduates need to develop minds that are sharp and penetrating, breaking through the crust of false legends and myths, and sifting the true from the false. Today's black graduates need a strong, austere quality that makes for firmness of purpose and solidness of commitment.

Today, South Africa is one big lie. Our minds are constantly being invaded by legions of half-truths, prejudices, and naked lies. One of our greatest needs is to be lifted above the morass of false propaganda. Dr Martin Luther King jr. warned that a nation or civilization that continues to produce soft-minded men (and women) purchases its own spiritual (and I daresay political and socio-economic) death on an instalment plan.

The message is clear: unless you as the enlightened educated few in the black community develop tough minds that will help explode the big lie that is present day South Africa; you are in fact paying installments for the political and socio economic death of this nation.

TRANSFORMING OURSELVES INTO CREATIVE NONCONFORMISTS

Asking black South Africans not to conform is not an easy request to make since massive doses of propaganda have conditioned our minds and feet to move to the rhythmic drumbeat of the status quo.

As graduates, you have also been subjected to certain of our intellectual disciplines which persuaded you of the need to conform. Some psychologists say that mental and emotional adjustment is the reward of thinking and acting like other people.

In order to gain relevance and usefulness, today's black graduate must contribute to ensuring that the black people of this country become makers of history and not just continue to be made by history. Longfellow said "in this world a man must either be anvil or hammer", meaning that he is a moulder of society or is moulded by society. Who doubts that today most black graduates are anvils and are shaped, by the racist structures and institutions of present-day South Africa? Or to use another figure of speech, most black graduates tend to be thermometers that record the temperature of prevailing opinion, not thermostats that transform and regulate the temperature of society.

This hour in South African history needs a dedicated circle of nonconformists. The country is teetering on the brink of a catastrophe: thousands of black people die of hunger in a land of plenty - a land notorious for its maldistribution of wealth, justice and opportunity.

Our youth choose to remain ignorant rather than lap up education for servitude - and racist intransigence on the part of those who claim to plan education for blacks continues to be unyielding and uncompromising. Black people get killed in mounting numbers and South African society is lately beginning to take this tragedy for granted. Our country will be saved from pending doom, not through the complacent adjustment of the conforming majority, but through the creative maladjustment of a non conforming minority.

The well-adjusted life has its own dangers. Everybody passionately seeks to be well adjusted. We must of course, be well-adjusted if we are to avoid neurotic and schizophrenic personalities, but there are some things in this country to which people of goodwill must be maladjusted. It is time we refused to become adjusted to the evils of apartheid and the crippling effects of discrimination, to economic conditions that deprive men of work and food, to a system that makes all black South Africans aliens in their own country. I refuse to be well-adjusted to the triple insanities of racism, militarism and economic exploitation.

We must make a choice as enlightened members of our society: will we continue to march to the drumbeat of conformity and false respectability? Or will we, listening to the beat of a more distant drum, move to its echoing sounds?

FACING THE CHALLENGE OF BEING A SOUTH AFRICAN BLACK GRADUATE IN THESE TIMES OF CHANGE

Having reflected on our bona fide status as enlightened members of the South African community, and by extension as citizens of the world community, let us now address some of the challenges inherent in the fact of being a black South African today. How do we resolve the dilemma of being a South African with its legacy of dispossession, being discriminated against and oppressed, servitude, etc?

One positive response to resolving our dilemma is to develop a rugged sense of somebodyness. The tragic legacy of having been conquered, colonized and oppressed was the instilling in the black South African a disastrous sense of his worthlessness. To overcome this terrible feeling of being less than human, the black South African must assert for all to hear and see a majestic sense of his worth. There is such a thing as a decolonised mind! We must no longer allow the outer chains of an oppressive society to shackle our minds. With courage and fearlessness we must set out daringly to liberate our minds. This alone will give us a confirmation of our roots and a validation of our worth. This sense of somebodyness means the utter refusal to be ashamed of being black.

A second important step that the black South African must take is to work passionately for group identity. This does not mean group isolation or group exclusivity. It means the kind of group consciousness that blacks need in order to participate more meaningfully at all levels of the life of our nation.

The kind of group unity referred to here necessarily involves group trust and reconciliation. One of the most malicious effects of the black South African's damaged ego has been his frequent loss of respect for himself and for other blacks. He ends up with an ambivalence

toward his own kind. To overcome this disabling conflict, it will be essential for the South African black to find a new self-image. Only by being reconciled to ourselves will we be able to build upon the resources we already have at our disposal. Too many blacks are jealous of other black people's successes and progress. The various ethnic groups are warring against each other for squalid little plots, oblivious of who in fact has the land. Remember, the pharaohs had a favourite and effective strategy to keep their slaves in bondage: keep them fighting among themselves. But note too, when slaves unite, the red seas of history open and the Egypt of slavery crumble.

As I see it, the South African racial revolution is a revolution to "get in" rather than to overthrow. We want our fair and proportionate share of the South African economy, the educational system and the socio political opportunities. This goal itself suggests that political and socio economic changes in South Africa must be constructive and preferably non violent. If one is in search of a better job it does not help to burn down the factory. If one needs better education, physically assaulting the educators and burning down buildings will not help much. If housing is the goal, only building and construction will produce that end. To destroy anything, person or property cannot bring us closer to the goal that we seek.

All these challenges remind us that there is a need for a radical restructuring of the architecture of South African society. For its very survival's sake, South Africa must re-examine old presuppositions and release itself from many things that for centuries have been held sacred. For the evils of apartheid, racism, poverty and militarism to die, a new set of values must be born. Our economy must become more person-centred than property - and profit - centred. Our educational system must focus on developing human potential regardless of race. Land must be equally accessible to all South Africans. Common citizenship must mean uniform and equal franchise for all South Africans, regardless of race, sex, colour or creed and that means one person one vote. The central government must depend more on its moral power than on its military power.

This is essentially the challenge. If we will dare to meet it honestly, historians in future years will have to say there lived a great people – a black people - who bore their burdens of oppression in the heat of many years and through tenacity and creative commitment injected new meaning into the veins of South African life.

SOUTH AFRICA AND THE POST APARTHEID ERA

I take it that we are by now all convinced that apartheid is on its deathbed, terminally sick. The only thing uncertain is how costly its architects, exponents and custodians will make its funeral.

The imminent death of apartheid poses a new set of challenges to black South Africans. Are we prepared or, genuinely preparing for full participation in the various walks of South African national life

Do we have in our midst sound and solid educationists who will be able to rise above planning and dispensing tribal education to the realm of planning and providing effective and useful education for a non-racial south africa?

Do we have or are we breeding scientists of a high enough calibre? What of technologists and engineers?

Are there enough black economists, industrialists and well qualified managers to help run the South African economy, thereby, ensuring effective black participation in the main stream of this country's economy?

How does black expertise stack up in the agricultural sector, the health sector, the legal sector and other sectors?

If we can respond to all these questions in the affirmative, then we deserve to be congratulated. If not, which I suppose to be the case, then the challenges are clear and are staring us in the face.

CONCLUSION

In concluding I can do no better than quote a leading black American thinker, Frederick Douglas, on self-determination:

“Our destiny is largely in our hands. If we find, we shall have to seek. If we succeed in the race of life it must be by our own energies, and our own exertions. Others may clear the road, but we must go forward, or be left behind in the race of life.

If we remain poor and dependent, the riches of other men will not avail us. If we are ignorant, the intelligence of other men will do but little for us. If we are foolish, the wisdom of other men will not guide us, we are wasteful of time and money, the economy of other men will only make our destitution the more disgraceful and hurtful.”