

WHITHER AFRICAN EDUCATION?
SOME THOUGHTS ON PURPOSEFUL EDUCATION
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I chose as a theme on which to address this graduation ceremony, whither African education? Some thoughts on purposeful education. Whither African Education? Is a question that goes beyond rhetoric. The question demands more than glib and platitudinous answers. Sound analysis and serious explanations are called for because our country is currently in the grip of a crippling wilderness. There is a national imperative for us to find a way out of this chaotic wilderness.

The rough terrain of the wilderness through which we must negotiate our way en route to the Promised land is characterised by inter alia, the rot in our institutions and infrastructure: the seeming inability of our schools to teach; slovenliness in standards of efficiency and precision; the cumbersomeness of an over-regulated society; the bland arrogance of some of our news media; the apparent irrelevance of our colleges and universities; the short-term myopia of some of our industrial leaders; and the seeming inability of government to do anything with circumspection. These and other symptoms of our troubled society nag at us like a compulsive neurosis, and unless we consciously and purposefully seek to transform the situation, it will continue to plague us.

Since the cardinal object of our come-together centres on academic achievement, let us kick off by citing the views of a leading academic, Dr Grayson Kirk, (erstwhile?) President of Columbia University, 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 his society, but to comprehend compassionately the differences that separate it from others.

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

No doubt very serious responsibilities. Using them as a guide let us continue to take a closer look at:

THE UNIVERSITY AND ITS SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

The fundamental issue to address in this regard is: what are the requirements towards making African Universities a healthy, humanistic and therefore enjoyable and elevating learning environment?

Well, first the basic freedoms have to be realised according to universal standards: intellectual freedom; freedom of expression; freedom of association; freedom of enquiry; which is built into intellectual freedom; freedom to reject faculty and educational content that seek to undermine those rights and to humiliate students and fellow lecturers with racist motives: accessibility of faculty to students.

Only then can there be a healthy, humanistic and therefore enjoyable and elevating learning environment. Without recognition of and adherence to these principles there must continue a turbulent campus atmosphere which the mindless use of political authority can only aggravate and render unbearable.

A university must open its doors to the young and adult population around for self-improvement and upgrading as an extension service. Other extension services can be provided when faculty and student research the human environment and also become part of community development. All this means that there must be constant exchange of resources between university and environment so that both are elevated and inspired, one by the other.

This calls for a university administration and faculty that are committed to truth, intellectual integrity, humanistic education that, in contrast to authoritarian education, intrinsically promotes freedom of enquiry, of expression, of association, and of the creative spirit. What is being talked about here is an all-inclusive humanism that engages not mere cold intellect, but also the heart, and therefore has no room for master-race attitudes or condescending and patronising drives.

Any lecturer, or administrative officer who brings no such commitment to an institution must know that in the eyes of the international community he or she is utterly unworthy of the profession, and has no place in that universe for which the human spirit has been striving throughout history to emancipate itself.

Before I leave the subject of the university and its social environment, may I make some observation on the ratio of black white per capita expenditure. Until 1982, for every rand spent on educating a black child, the state spent eight rands on educating the white child. I am here talking of the situation in so-called white South Africa. The situation in the homelands and the so-called independent states is slightly worse.

In this way the system conspires to perpetuate unfair status and to prepare the blacks for those tasks that no one else wants, hence creating a mass of unskilled, cheap labour for the society at large. Already in childhood black lives are crushed mentally, emotionally and physically, and then white society develops the myth of inferiority to give credence to its lifelong patterns of exploitation.

However much it is denied, however many excuses are made, hard cold fact is that many white South Africans oppose the complete scrapping of apartheid, i.e the repeal – not modification – of such laws as the Group Areas Act, because they unconsciously, and often

consciously, feel that blacks are innately inferior, impure, depraved and degenerate. It is a contemporary expression of South Africa's dalliance with racism and white supremacy.

No black person escapes this scourge of subtle discrimination. Even the new so-called black middle class often finds itself in Bantustanised urban housing and in jobs at the mercy of the white world. Some of the most tragic figures in our society now are the black managers who sit with no authority or influence – managing neither human nor financial resources – because they were merely employed for window dressing in an effort to win the black sector of the market or to comply with directives from head quarters of multinational corporations in America or Europe.

These are some of the manifestations of the social environment in which the black university finds itself in this country. Now let us turn our attention to one or two aspects more germane to the situation at black university campuses.

LECTURER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP AND THE NEED FOR COMMUNICATION

Effective communication in a learning situation thrives in an atmosphere of mutual trust. Mutual trust stems from knowing one another. White lecturers and black students have a limited knowledge of one another because the macro social environment in this country is structured to actively encourage ignorance between the races. We blacks don't go to school with whites, we don't live together. The first time we meet is as man to man, woman to woman – as adults. And these adults we see have power, authority. Until the day comes when we can begin knowing each other from childhood, we'll continue to view each other with a measure of suspicion. We as black people can only teach whites on their own terms. Their intellectual life extends to us only on their own terms, not ours.

The situation is not conducive to effective dialogue. Lecturers and students thus wind up talking to each other without communicating – without transmitting values and meanings. Under these circumstances effective learning is minimised.

Student-lecturer interface also seems to be limited to the formal session in class. At leading universities elsewhere the formal class session serves as a teaser – a learning appetiser. The bulk of the learning activity takes place semi-formally away from the lecture room – at informal sessions jointly agreed upon by students and lecturers.

Then too, the communication gap is compounded by the generation gap. Today's student, who is a product of a generally turbulent socio-political environment matures much faster than his predecessor. Prevailing conditions force today's student to compress late childhood, puberty, adolescence and early adulthood into a few years. Given the circumstances, student assertiveness could easily be misconstrued for reckless aggressiveness, greater maturity for arrogance. Things are changing fast. Lecturers with attitudes of the 1960's and early 70's will invariably have problems relating to students of the eighties. Adaptability is a crucial attribute.

Let us now turn our attention to what could be called the Africanisation imperative.

As long ago as 1974 there has been a loud and clear cry for the Africanisation of black universities and this university was at the forefront. At the time the ratio for black to white staff was approximately 30 to 70. I am reliably told that the profile is still largely the same

– more than ten years later. By stark contrast, when RAU decided to Afrikanerise the effect was almost instantaneous. Why?

It is the desire of many blacks to see this university Africanised in terms of:

A predominance of African personnel – both administrative and faculty

Projecting an African personality and ethos

What would Africanisation achieve? Well, on a philosophical plain, a university cannot reach out meaningfully to the larger world community and attain universal standards before and without the strength it stands to derive from its local environment, ie. Local at two levels – the immediately cultural context and the South African or national context. It was Plato who said that if one is true to himself (ie. Knows himself – past, present and the projected self of the future) he cannot be false to others. I am a strong believer in African humanism as propounded by such leading thinkers and exponents as Es'kia Mphahlele. African humanism is by its nature inclusive, not exclusive. Right here is the devastating irony of the position I'm striving to take, indeed of our institution here. I am not allowed to speak for whites, because this is supposed to be a university for Africans – in fact worse – a university of Lebowa. It is not a university in the international sense in which people can visualise a concourse of free minds irrespective of race and colour at all levels, in which an institution must express the loftiest ideals a culture can cherish for itself. And if our universities were controlled entirely by us, and expressed an African personality, our highest aspirations, we would become such an institution by international standards. Why, because then we would enter into a free exchange of students and faculty with other universities, here and abroad. We would embark upon research programmes that would expose us to other institutions of learning other cultures. What's more, we would ourselves provide a free base for other scholars whose research projects can benefit us as well as themselves.

Delightful will be that day when University of the North will be University in the North.

THE BLACK GRADUATE – PARTNER OF PHILISTINE?

In a society where the number of graduates constitutes less than one percent of the population, all the graduates are thrust into leadership roles willy nilly. As black graduates you are immediately faced with numerous challenges of mammoth proportions.

Graduating as you do into a situation characterised by socio-political and economic turmoil, you are expected to behave like creative obstetricians presiding over the birth of a new age. You cannot afford to behave like packaged goods – manufactured at University of the north, branded B.Com – and then start atrophying intellectually. In today's world the need for self-education is fundamental. In a society where black graduates are perceived as deficit models this need for self-education is compounded and more acute. Graduation is not an end, but the beginning of a period of intelligent and informed inquiry. As black graduates we should not allow ourselves to fit into the mould that has been cast for us. We should strive unrelentingly to transcend the man-made limitations and constraints imposed on us.

There is a general silly notion among our youth that a university graduate automatically qualifies for 'elitism' or a 'middle-class' status. This ambivalence – wanting to graduate but

fearing to be categorised as 'middle-class' – derives from half-digested imported marxist views, usually from the textbook. There is no black middle-class in this country except for the few misdirected who are so gullible as to succumb to the perverse and divisive designs of the authorities that be. For the rest of us, we are all a workforce, some more 'educated' than others, less miserable than others. There is no middle class anywhere in the world that is forced to live in rural and urban ghettos, that is denied universally accepted influence on local and national government, that is denied access to the best schools for its children and youth, that is programmed that way all blacks are in South Africa.

Besides, marxism is a European concept that grew out of industrial conditions, which we do not fully share in South Africa. And no European ever conceived a theory for any population group but Europeans.

In our situation, which is a race struggle, we need first and foremost a strong and proud nationalism. Nationalism brings together all African ethnic groups, urban and rural, which can also open doors to other black groups. Black consciousness is a basic necessity. But it must expand into an African consciousness. Because we belong to Africa, and therefore our constituency is continental in the final analysis. This increases the size of the black world.

Elitism, like other 'isms', is an ideology. It exaggerates the importance of the individual, above communal and national interests. This is bad. But, to be an elite is merely to assert the importance of one's presence in public affairs as one who was fortunate enough to receive an education. There is nothing wrong with this. In all societies it is the elite who plan, design, debate social, political and economic policies.

When Verwoerd planned Bantu Education, he said that it was to discourage a 'Bantu' elite. He made the word elite sound only for his own people – all whites – were being led by an elite, including himself.

It is the responsibility of a black university to sharpen a student's awareness and expand his consciousness so that it expresses its Africanness. It's Pan African aspirations. We must make such an institution express us, not someone else. We must continue to refuse to be educated for other people's purpose and ideology. We must insist on education for full active participation in the socio-political and economic affairs of this country.

Black graduates, as you enter into the so-called real world, please heed the following where the black community is concerned:

Your academic achievement will bring about a measure of economic security, but, this should not make you forget that that came about as a result of support from faceless, unlettered and unheralded blacks who did ordinary jobs in an extraordinary way. Remember that uneducated and poverty-stricken mothers and fathers often worked until their eyebrows were scorched and their hands bruised so that you could get an education. Therefore, for any black graduate to forget the masses would be an act not only of neglect, but of shameful ingratitude.

Black graduates, we exhort you to take the lead in uniting the black community and the various organisations that seek to provide leadership. Too many black organisations are warring against each other with a claim to absolute truth. The Pharaohs had a favourite and effective strategy to keep their slaves in bondage: keep them fighting among themselves.

The divide-conquer-and-rule technique has been a potent weapon in the arsenal of oppression. But when slaves unite, the Red Seas of history open and the Egypts of slavery crumble.

My plea for unity is not a call for uniformity. There must always be healthy debate. There will be inevitable differences of opinion. The dilemma that blacks confront is so complex and monumental that its solution will of necessity involve a diversified approach. But blacks can differ and still unite around common goals. The least we can do is stop liquidating one another.

A FURTHER COMMENT ON GREATER BLACK SOUTH AFRICA

Black South Africa came into effective contact with western civilisation in 1652.

333 years later racial injustice is still the black man's burden and South Africa's shame. Yet for his own health and outer functioning, the black man is called upon to be as resourceful, as productive and responsible as those who have not known any oppression and exploitation.

This is the black man's dilemma. He who starts behind in a race must forever remain behind or run faster than the man in front. A major dilemma. It is a call to do the impossible. It is enough to cause the black man to give up in despair.

And yet there are times when life demands the perpetual doing of the impossible. The life of our unskilled forebears is eternal testimony to the ability of men to achieve the impossible. So, too, we must embark upon this difficult, trying and sometimes bewildering course. With a dynamic will, we must transform our minus into a plus, and move on with determination through the storms of injustice and the jostling winds of daily handicaps, towards the beaoning lights of fulfilment. Our dilemma is serious and our handicaps are real, but equally real is the power of a creative will and its ability to give us the courage to go on 'inspite of'.

Allow me to conclude with this quotation from Frederick Douglass, an Afro-American thinker and writer of the nineteenth century, on *self-determination*:

'Our destiny is largely in our own 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. If we are wasteful of time and money, the economy of other men will only made our destitution the more disgraceful and hurtful'.

The world of now and that of the future beckons to mankind with a new promise and each one of us has a share in its fulfilment. Black man, you dare not be caught marking time – do something now. Education, as taught by others and self-taught is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today. When you think

of the radical changes we are going to experience during the next decade or two, think of them in terms of opportunities for yourself and your nation. And whatever you do, don't try to stand still.