

**Address at the
President's Award Volunteer Lunch**

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Introduction

Mr. Martin Scholtz, the volunteers associated with the President's Award for Youth Empowerment, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen

It is a great honour to be invited to be with you this afternoon, during the year that you celebrate your 25th anniversary.

In his letter of invitation Mr. Scholtz suggested that I share my "personal philosophy of needing to engage with a broader reality beyond the University". Accordingly, I wish to use this occasion to reflect on the issue of social justice in a society that continues to be characterised by acute injustice and to highlight what I believe are our individual, collective and institutional responsibilities if we are to create a society based on human dignity and rights, equality, social equity and justice, non-sexism and non-racialism, and economic and social rights and freedoms for all people.

Injustice

There are many kinds of injustice and injustice takes many different forms.

1. First, we will readily recognise the injustice that is rooted in beliefs, prejudice, stereotypes, chauvinism, intolerance and fear of the 'other' – whether the 'other' are people of different 'races', social classes, sex, gender, sexual orientation, cultures, religions, languages, nationalities or live in different geographical areas.

As South Africans we are all too familiar with racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia and similar kinds of injustice. These and other pernicious ideologies and practices create patterns of unjust social inclusion and exclusion, privilege and disadvantage, and domination and subordination in our society and have caused and continue to cause tremendous pain and suffering for individuals and particular social groups.

2. Second, and fundamentally important, there is the often ignored and largely unrecognised injustice that is deeply woven into the social and economic structures and relations of our society. These social and economic structures and relations have the appearance of being natural, pre-ordained and god-given. Over time they have become so ingrained that we forget that they are produced and reproduced by our own thinking and through our own actions.

These structures and relations underpin the coexistence of unbridled accumulation of wealth and desperate and grinding poverty, great privileges for a small minority of rich and huge deprivation for a large majority of poor, unbound economic and social opportunities for some and the denial of such opportunities for many others.

Before his tragic murder deprived the world of an outstanding humanitarian and fighter for justice, Archbishop Romero of El Salvador observed that 'when the church hears the cry of the oppressed it cannot but denounce the social structures that give rise to and perpetuate the misery from which the cry arises'.

The late Archbishop Dom Helder Camara who worked among the poor of Brazil was another who questioned the structures, systems and policies that produced great inequalities in Brazil. He once observed that 'When I feed the poor, they call me a saint; when I ask WHY they are poor, they call me a communist'.

Jody Kollapen, the Chairperson of our Human Rights Commission, eloquently observes that:

...the reality remains that for millions of people the promise of human rights and the vision of a just and caring world remains an illusion. Intolerance, war and impunity; starvation and greed; power and powerlessness all combine in a conspiracy of the powerful against the weak that invariably deepens the faultlines that exist in the world and within nations.

(T)hese millions... see a world where disparities in wealth, resources and opportunities have grown, where human rights norms and values seem invariably to yield to the dictates of the rich and powerful; which expresses shock and outrage at arbitrary killing but at the same time is complicit in the killing of many more thorough hunger and disease – which could have been avoided (Kollapen, 2003:26).

Archbishops Romero and Camara and Jody Kollapen all draw attention to the injustice that is a result of how our societies are structured economically and socially and how we choose to conduct our affairs; that it is not by chance or accident that are wealthy and poor, well-fed and starving, privileged and disadvantaged, and powerful and powerless.

Take our own country, South Africa, or closer home, our own province, region and towns. During the past fourteen years of democracy we have seen some important economic and social improvements. Yet the reality is that South Africa continues to be one of the most unequal and unjust societies on earth in terms of disparities in wealth, income, living conditions, and access and opportunities to education, social services and health care.

The Presidency's *Development Indicators Mid-Term Review* released in June 2007 reveals that the Gini coefficient, which is a measure of income inequality, increased from 0.665 in 1994 to 0.685 in 2006 (2007:22). This indicates that the social grants that are provided to 12 million people and new jobs that have been created have been insufficient 'to overcome widening income inequality' (ibid.).

The percentage of income of the poorest 20% of our society has fallen since 1994 from 2.0% to 1.7%; conversely, the percentage of income of the richest 20% of our society has risen since 1994 from 72.0% to 72.5%. At the same time, the per capita income of the richest 20% has risen much faster than that of the poorest 20% (Presidency, 2007:21).

43% of our fellow citizens continue to live on an annual income of less than R 3 000 per year (Presidency, 2007:23).

The cleavages of race, class, gender and geography are still all too evident. Hunger and disease, poverty and unemployment continue to blight our democracy. Millions of citizens are mired in desperate daily routines of survival while, alongside, flaunted wealth, crass materialism, unbridled individualism, and a vulgar mentality of "greed is cool" and "grab what you can" runs rampant in our society.

Patriarchy and sexism continue to stifle the realization of the talents of girls and women and the contribution they can make to development. The rape and abuse of women is a pervasive, morbid ill that destroys innumerable lives and wreaks havoc in our country. HIV/AIDS exacerbates the fault-lines of our society, intensifies our social challenges and has over the past decade reduced life-expectancy from almost 60 years to about 47 years.

3. We can highlight a third form of injustice, which is rooted in the abuse and irresponsible exercise of power, or the ethical failure on the part of those who wield economic and political power to appreciate the immense responsibilities that are associated with their powers, and especially in so far as governing and functioning in a 'democratic and open society' in which 'everyone has...the right to have their dignity respected and protected' is concerned.

We must be concerned whether some who are entrusted with governing, leading, managing, providing key public services in education, health care and social development fully grasp the profound moral, political, social and organisational responsibilities that are associated with the freedom for which countless other black and white and men and women South Africans gave their lives. We must also be concerned whether there is an appreciation of what is at stake and what the implications of particular choices, decisions and actions (and non-actions) are for our society and future generations.

We can provide any number of examples, but three will suffice to illustrate the injustices that can arise when those in power fail to act or act irresponsibly.

- One is the response of the state to the HIV/AIDS pandemic that afflicts our society. The fruitless debate on the cause of HIV/AIDS resulted in a stultifying absence of leadership in dealing with the crisis while the initially myopic and tardy responses created unnecessary delays in the provision of treatment and tragic loss of lives.
- Another example is that the government has committed itself to building an innovative, effective and efficient 'Public Service that will provide an excellent quality of service'; a Public Service that would be the 'servant of the people (and would be) 'accessible, transparent, accountable, efficient and free of corruption' (Reconstruction and Development Programme). The watchword of the Public Service was to be *Batho Pele* (People First).

It has become clear that not all of our public service is imbued with these laudable ideals. Instead, there is widespread unprofessional and disdainful conduct and service, and sheer indifference to ensuring that the basic needs of people are met. Instead of Batho Pele we have among some a culture of Batho Morago (People Last).

The poor of our society hugely depend on the effective provision of public services to enable them to meet their basic needs and improve their lives and those of their children. Shortcomings and weaknesses in the provision of public services undermines their dignity, compromises the development of the potential and talent of their children, thwarts the realization of constitutionally and legally enshrined social imperatives and goals, and violates their human and social rights. In short, it perpetrates grave injustices on the poor.

- Yet another example is the injustice that we, but especially those who make political and economic

decisions and control huge resources, do to our environment and our natural world through our unrelenting pursuit of what we call 'progress' and 'development'.

Indian Americans have a saying that we inherit the earth in safe-keeping for future generations. We must reflect on what we are leaving for future generations given our reckless degradation of our environment and the climate change that we are causing globally in the names of 'progress' and 'development'.

4. There is a final form of injustice that I wish to note, which is very pertinent to our society. This is the injustice that stems from the refusal of institutions and individuals to openly and truthfully declare the perpetration of heinous crimes and wrongdoings, to apologise to survivors, and to show sincere remorse for the tragic consequences that these visited on their fellow humans.

Given our fractured and traumatic past, reconciliation is hugely important. But so is social justice! Various institutions and individuals were complicit in the dehumanisation of social groups, families and individuals under colonialism and apartheid, many of whom continue to bear pain and scars. Unless there is full acknowledgement of past wrongdoings we will continue to have festering sores and both reconciliation and justice will be that much more difficult to achieve.

Fighting Injustice

To fight injustice we must, first and foremost, recognise that injustice does indeed exist, that there are different kinds of injustices, that it takes many forms, and has various origins and roots.

Second, we must possess the commitment to critique all kinds and forms of injustice, recognising the oneness of humanity,

irrespective of whatever differences may exist between us as fellow humans.

Third, we must be willing to courageously and boldly confront, erode and eliminate the different kinds and forms of injustices that pervade and blight our society and cause suffering for millions of our fellow people.

Finally, to fight injustice we must possess an intellectual, ethical and social vision of a society based on the values of human dignity, equality, social equity, non-sexism and non-racialism, human rights, and economic and social rights and freedoms for all people.

We must commit ourselves to pursuing a substantive social justice agenda that seeks to make injustice history and liberate us all. For the truth is that none of us can be genuinely free unless all people possess not just political rights, but also the social, economic and human rights that are fundamental to living full, decent, productive, rich and rewarding lives; unless 'those who were (and continue to be marginalised and) disadvantaged can assume their place in society as equals with their fellow human beings without regard to colour, race, gender, age or geographic dispersal' (Mbeki, 1996).

For the sake of social justice and our humanity, we must refuse 'to accept the logic of inequality and the repression that it involves', and we must continue to 'search for human agency, for the means through which inequality can be undone' and an equitable, just, and humane society can be built (Hammami, 2006:32).

Or, as Jody Kollapen puts it, 'we need to be creative and bold...to challenge poverty and inequality, to reshape the way society is structured and does its business and, importantly, to ensure that the concept of the 'oneness of humanity'...comes to mean just that (2003:26).

As South Africans and Africans we must take great pride in the intellectual creativity, imagination, courage, purpose and

determination that we displayed to rid ourselves of tyranny and to fashion our new democracy.

The wonderful Constitution and Bill of Rights that we have created for ourselves says clearly that no one may 'unfairly discriminate...against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth'.

Through our Constitution we declared our intention to 'establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights'. If this is indeed so, then it is our responsibility to 'respect, protect, promote and fulfil the rights' embodied in our Constitution, and it is these rights that must guide our conduct and our relationships and existence.

How human we are, how free we are is shown by how we, think about, and the extent to which we respect, affirm, defend, promote and assert the rights of people that are different from us.

The unfortunate and harsh reality is that the rights of people continue to be violated on a daily basis. People continue to be ridiculed, ostracized, discriminated against, bullied, beaten, raped and murdered on account of their 'race', sex, nationality and sexual orientation. It is all too evident that the beliefs and practices that for decades have grounded and sustained injustice remain to be eradicated in democratic South Africa.

This must be matter of deep concern to us and calls for social action. Rights are *indivisible*, and any denial of rights to certain people and social groups, any failure to uphold and enforce the rights of people different to us, places us on the slippery slope that leads to an oppressive and unjust society.

In many oppressive and unjust societies, including ours, we hear the refrains "I didn't know" or "I was not involved". However, unless we assume responsibility for being informed and actively oppose injustice, then through our ignorance and silence we are in danger of conspiring to create an unjust

society. It is precisely apathy and indifference to attacks on particular social groups that Pastor Martin Niemöller who lived under the Nazis warns against in his poem:

*First they came for the Communists, and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a Communist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a Jew.
Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up, because I was a Protestant.
Then they came for me, and by that time there was no one left to speak up for me.*

About twelve years ago there was an incident at a prestigious university in the United States. A student from a wealthy family sexually molested a fellow student, a young woman from a poor working-class family in the mid-west who had won a scholarship to this university. It happened while she was cleaning his room, something that she also did for other students in order to fund her studies.

It so happens that the woman and the man who molested her attended a moral philosophy course together and were also among the top students. Following the incident, the woman confronted the professor of moral philosophy. Her question was: What is the point of readings, seminars, lectures and essays on goodness, and the concept of good? How do you teach goodness, teach people to be good?

We can point to many South Africans, men and women, black and white, who are magnificent symbols of good - Steve Biko, Ruth First, Lillian Ngoyi, Braam Fischer, Matthew Goniwe, Reggie September, Helen Joseph and many others. Their lives and deeds are powerful legacies of courageous commitment to social justice and a humane society, and action towards these goals irrespective of the costs to themselves.

If we are to make a difference in our society and to the lives of people, we have, both as individuals and institutions, to be committed to

- Valuing human life and human dignity
- Creating opportunities for people to realize their potential and talents through education, knowledge and the development of expertise and skills
- Ensuring that we don't ignore moral and ethical issues and that our educating and training is at the same time 'the cultivation of humanity' (Nussbaum, 2006:5).

This means we have to encourage the young people we work with to reason logically, we have to make them see themselves 'as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern'. And we have promote among the youth 'the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have' (ibid, 2006:6-7).

Conclusion

The Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore has written that 'We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy'. The Jewish sage Hillel says: 'If I am not for myself, who will be? But if I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?' We would all do well to embrace this wise counsel of Tagore and Hillel.

The contributions you make as volunteers on the President's Award for Youth Empowerment programmes makes it clear that you readily and already embrace these dictums.

Your selfless contributions illustrate your virtues of respect for human dignity and compassion. Your work demonstrates your empathy to create opportunities for other people.

You understand that only when *all* people possess the political, social, economic and human rights that are fundamental to living full, decent, productive, rich and rewarding lives, can we claim to live in a just and humane society and can we all be truly free.

In the *Algebra of Infinite Justice*, Arundathi Roy writes that

the only dream worth having ...is to dream
that you will live while you're alive and only
die when you're dead

This, she says, means

...to love. To be loved. To never get used
to the unspeakable violence and vulgar
disparity of life around you. To respect
strength, never power. Above all, to watch.
To try and understand. To never look
away. And never, never to forget.

Your work as volunteers is testimony that you 'never forget' or
'look away', from those in need, and that you refuse to 'get
used to' deprivation and injustice.

You volunteers are precious and vital forces for good. For the
great contribution you make to human and social development
and social justice, for trying to ensure that people "live while
they're alive and only die when they're dead", we applaud you
and we salute you.

Thank you.