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reconciliation: facing the future together*

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I remain convinced that Black education is our first line of national defence, that it is neglected in terms of the resources made available to it and that even in times of economic stringency it is deserving of the highest national priority. I believe that in spite of the present crisis in which it finds itself, and the difficulties with which it has had to contend in the past, those who have been engaged in it, both Black and White, have made a contribution to our country which has largely gone unrecognised, and in which, of their own choice, the English-speaking community in the last twenty years has had little direct part. They have watched and criticised from the sidelines, but have largely avoided direct involvement or getting any "mud on their boots". To the small group of English-speaking teachers and educationists who have made it their commitment, and who are now retired or near retiring, I paid tribute last year at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Important as it is, however, I do not propose to speak today in any specific way about Black education. There are even larger issues at stake and I think I would be failing in my duty to you if I were to avoid them by confining myself to an academic analysis of educational problems. I speak to you rather out of deep concern as a fellow-countryman who has had the privilege for nearly forty years, of personal and professional involvement in the education of Black youth. Eleven of those years were spent as Inspector of Education for Soweto. You will understand then that what has happened there in recent months is not something that I have been able to dismiss from my mind and heart. As a man and a teacher I must speak to you on these deeper issues: the times demand it. As a civil servant I accept responsibility for what I am saying, but I am an educationist first and therefore must put people before policies.

In practice Black education will not be restored to health until we have faced these wider issues. Education never exists in a vacuum but in the context of constitutional, political, social and economic development. It also reflects what is going on in the hearts and minds of people, and perhaps most of all the extent to which they "care'. Charity is a much-debased word, perhaps because it has become linked to paternalism, condescension, to the sins of those who think they are the only ones who have something to give, and have forgotten how to listen, and to receive, with graciousness. But in its original meaning of "caritas" — of care and compassion — there is the essence of a truth that we need as we face the future.

As teachers we deal in futures. The future is in every child we teach. Without faith in the future how can we go on with our profession? It is the driving power of all true education.

I realise that the events of the last few months have been a very severe test of this faith, perhaps more particularly in the case of young people in the threshold of the profession. By conviction I am an optimist and I have been told on a number of occasions that I am over-optimistic, but my faith and hopes for the future have taken some hard knocks in this time of crisis. I am reaching the end of my career; **you,** at the beginning of yours, have so much more to lose, but also so much more to gain.

I have wondered what is going on in your minds, how you are reacting to this test of your faith.

* Many people are hiding away from unpalatable facts and continuing to sweep problems "under the carpet" They are going on with their own concerns, worthy as some of these may be, as though nothing has happened.

There is nothing to worry about, it is "business as usual". They would like to think that history has passed us by.

* Then there are the many, too many, who are reacting by a hardening of attitudes towards Black people and who seek solutions in force. This has shown up in strange places, often in the stripping of the veneer from a superficially-held, vague goodwill. Here too, there in "naught for our comfort".

* There are those who seek refuge in flight, either because they do not want to be involved in difficult situations or because they have given up hope and cannot see any solution.

* Perhaps the greatest number are concerned, confused, feeling somewhat helpless as to what can be done, ready to accept change but not sure what this entails, and above all looking for leadership.

Behind all these attitudes there is some measure of fear. There is nothing to be ashamed of in being afraid, as long as we do not let fear govern our actions. We have good reason to be afraid for the "beloved country" The cancer of violence is eating at its very soul and we **should** be afraid of the consequences if this should continue. We must support a return to law and order, we must support just decisions and actions designed to accomplish this, but these in themselves are not solutions to our present troubles.

We must now seek **reconciliation,** and this is something much different and much deeper than making concessions or producing conciliatory noises. It means bringing people together to become friends after they have quarrelled (which implies an acceptance of the fact that they **have** quarrelled); it means settling differences of opinion, bringing people into harmony with one another. True, it must be sought honestly from both sides. It means admitting mistakes and accepting responsibility for them, it means forgetting about saving face. Above all it demands a readiness to talk with one another, no matter what the difficulties. The hurts have gone deep and will not easily be forgotten, so that we must not expect the processes of reconciliation to be without setbacks, pain and even rejection. We have a long, up-hill road ahead of us if we seek the best for our country. But is not that what partiotism is about, not our country right or wrong, but the vision of what it might be, and then harnessing all our energies to achieve this.

If we seek reconciliation we do not begin by searching for the other man's mistakes; we look first into our own hearts and minds. Nor in the first place should we seek scapegoats to ease our own consciences: we are all to blame. Do not try to find comfort in the fact that you are English-speaking and "not as other men are": there is no avoiding responsibility. Perhaps we should begin by listening, a more difficult exercise than most people imagine. In the editorials of "The World" in recent weeks there has been a cry from the heart under the caption, "Why don't they learn to listen to us?" If you can't speak to Black people easily use "The World" as your listening post: it would be a beginning. It would help to start the breakdown of what its editor, Mr Percy Qoboza, has called the "they and us" syndrome which threatens our country with disaster. There is only one way of facing the future, and that is together.

Because the teacher's concern is with the future, her contribution to the processes of reconciliation is a very special one. What are we to say to the conservative, moderate Black principal who says:

> "White parents have a duty to eradicate the spirit of superiority from their children and teach them the spirit of brotherhood.
>
> "People must show their children that they accept Blacks in this country as first-class citizens because it is the land of our birth.'

Is this not also the duty of the teacher of White children? Are we in the kind of situation in which the teacher can be "neutral"?

Let me be clearly understood when I say this. **Ideologies** have no place in the classroom — an "ideology" is a specific manner of thinking about the basis of the economic or social system, and it is not the job of the teacher to propagate this among the pupils placed in her care. But what she does need is a **philosophy,** a way of looking at life, a concern for people, positive attitudes towards the problems of life and the meaning of existence, which will influence her pupils as they grow up in her care. We are the inheritors of a great tradition, a liberal tradition, with roots in the Jewish, Graeco-Roman, Christian world, and it is our duty to preserve its values in a violent, destructive, power-seeking period of hsitory.

Let me remind you that two of these values have been the rule of law or the idea of justice, and the importance of the individual in community with others. If these are values in which we believe then we must also believe in them for other people. If you say to me, "Now you are being idealistic", then I would say "Yes, indeed. Not only is it right and proper for those of us concerned with education to be idealistic, but under present circumstances it is imperative that we be so if we are all to survive."

The children who will be in your charge next year will be in the prime of their lives at the turn of the century. Much has already been said about the knowledge explosion they will experience and the technological developments that will take place in the next twenty-five years, but I doubt that we have given sufficient attention to considering the kind of people they will need to be to cope with the world that lies ahead of them.

One thing is sure, change will be endemic: it is with us for good whether we like it or not. It is both an immediate and a long-term challenge. Two years ago in speaking to the inspectorate of my department, I said:

> "Change is always most effective when it is based on need, develops out of an essential stability, arises in an atmosphere of free discussion and happens before it is forced."

If we drag our feet, events will overtake us: what we must do is to retain the initiative in facing up to change ,to act graciously, with imagination and boldness, with faith not only in ourselves but in other people.

It would seem to me then that the spiritual and social education of children is going to be of greater importance than the acquisition of knowledge. I realise that this has been said many times and may sound hackneyed to you, but perhaps we could look at it again in the light of our present situation, and indicate briefly some of the equipment that we and the children we teach are going to need now and in the future. ...

* The ability to listen, to understand, to communicate with others.
* The ability to put ourselves in the place of other people and to be sensitive to their needs.
* The ability to be flexible in our thinking, not to be set in our ways so that we cannot adjust to new circumstances.
* The ability to stand up for what we believe in, but to recognise in ourselves prejudice and cultural arrogance when these ugly beasts raise their heads.
* Perhaps most of all a warm and sympathetic respect for and acceptance of other human beings, the ability to see them as persons, to recognise the similarities as our common inheritance, the differences as an enrichment of the community we share.

It will not be easy to translate these into the classroom situation: it will require considerable imagination to breathe this kind of spirit into the dry bones of syllabuses: our faith in what we are doing will have to be tough and tenacious. In the end it will be the man or woman behind the teacher that will count. Children are not deceived by words but can be won by the quality of life they share in the classroom.

A teacher, if she is true to what she pro-

fesses, cannot be a prophet of doom or a cynic. There are many of these at the moment in the larger community, but they have no answer for the crisis in which we find ourselves. I am still not pessimistic about the future, provided that we all realise that we **are** at the crossroads, that this country will never be the same again.

It is as though a boil on the body politic has burst. If we are honest with ourselves we shall admit that we are suffering from shock, and one of the effects of shock is an inability to act. There has been a real danger of a paralysis of the spirit in many quarters, but now we are beginning to see hopeful stirrings, particularly among the women of our community. It has been a traumatic experience for many of us, but it is often this kind of tension which affords society the opportunity of rebirth. It will be painful, as the lancing of a boil can be painful, but from it can still come healing.

Ours is a country with tremendous possibilities and rich promise, not only in its material resources but even more in the richness and variety of its peoples. In spite of the divisions and hurts there is still a fund of goodwill and readiness to face change waiting to be harnessed.

While we may regret a lack of boldness at present in the political establishment, do not let us use this as an excuse for indifference ourselves. Let us at least make it clear where we stand, that we seek reconciliation, that we care about what has happened, that there are many things that have to be put right. Let us give some hope to those Black parents, teachers, ordinary men and women who stand in the middle, who deep down love this country as we do, who abhor violence but know only too well the frustrations that have led to its use. What have we to offer them? Are we prepared to share our vision of the future with them, work together with them to provide an answer that they can give their young people. Do we care enough to admit that we have made mistakes, mainly because of our national sin of deciding what is good for other people.

There are terrorists on the border but there are also saboteurs in our own hearts, in our thinking and our attitudes — are we prepared to root them out? Caring for people (caritas) is not a soft, sentimental feeling: it is an attitde of mind and heart that is not only patient and gentle but also tough and resilient. Reconciliation is not going to be easily won but we either face the future together, all the people of this land, or we have no future, none of us.