

**BUILDING COMMUNITY BY DESIGN:
WHAT THE U.S CAN LEARN FROM SOUTH AFRICA
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Every day in America, in communities around the nation, we are reminded that we are a divided people in a divided world; that the commitment of the framers of the American constitution to “forming a more perfect union” is at risk. I want, therefore, to use the experience of the new South Africa as the lens for looking at what it means to engage differences, eliminate inequities and promote reconciliation at a time in which our society is integrating and fragmenting at the same. The more interdependent we become, the more people are turning inward to smaller communities of meaning and memory.

Twelve years ago, Nelson Mandela and a group of former political prisoners, former exiles and other leaders of the liberation struggle set out to build a new and different form of community. Many of us supported them because we believed that if they succeeded they would demonstrate to the world that diversity need not divide, that pluralism rightly understood and rightly practiced is a benefit and not a burden, that the fear of difference is a fear of the future. And that is why many Americans who want to address issues of equity and inclusion in the United States now ask, “What can we learn from the South Africans?” That is a fair question, and one that I am pleased to address by offering five observations.

1. The South Africans began with a particular vision of community that affirmed and acknowledged their connectedness.

For more than a decade, I have been living full or part time in South Africa and I have watched its leaders struggle to retain some portion of a traditional concept of community once imbedded in their culture. It is called “ubuntu” and described best by the Xhosa proverb “People are people through other people.” The elders believed that it is through others that one attains selfhood. It is in reference to the community that a person is defined. The hallmark of ubuntu is the statement, “I am because we are and, and since we are, therefore I am.” There was also the saying, “Your pain is my pain, my wealth is your wealth and your salvation is my salvation.” It follows then that if I damage the dignity or diminish the humanity of another person, my own dignity and humanity are damaged and diminished in the process. To understand ubuntu is to understand why an aging group of exiles and former political prisoners could emerge from the devastation of apartheid and not only affirm, but practice forgiveness and reconciliation.

The American vision of community is reflected in our notion of the commons and the vision of a city on the hill. But the problem with the American concept of community is that we confuse the sense of community we share in a crisis with the sense of community we need when the crisis is over. After 9/11, pollsters and pundits suggested that we were more united as a people than at almost any time in our history. I worried then, however, as I do now that we were lulled into a sense of community that was not sustainable. We were clearly united in our pain and grief and we were both healed and bound together by our many acts of generosity toward those who

were the victims. But we were so busy celebrating the new spirit of community that we did not think much about how we sustain it. In this post Katrina era, we are reminded of the outrage Americans felt by what they saw but how difficult it was to retain both the outrage and the generosity in the aftermath.

We Americans are good at charity, especially in responding to high profile displays of disease and disaster, but we have little patience or staying power when it comes to long- term development. In response to the disaster on the Gulf, for example, private donors provided billions of dollars for relief and the government is providing billions for recovery, but there are very few dollars available for reform. While a sense of civic responsibility can be easily aroused during disasters and for the neighbor living nearby, concern for the distant neighbor often dissipates with distance; both geographical and demographic.

This was precisely the caution offered some years ago by the eminent psychiatrist and writer Scott Peck who wrote that we build community out of crisis and we build community by accident, but we do not know how to build community by design. He went on to suggest that the problem with building community out of crisis is that once the crisis is over, so usually is the spirit of community.

If we are to successfully cope with communities that are integrating and fragmenting at the same time, we may need to begin with the principle offered to us some years ago by the black mystic, poet and theologian Howard Thurman who was fond of saying “I want to be without making it difficult for you to be you.” Can you imagine how different our world would be if more Americans were able to say “I want to be an American without making it difficult for Arabs to be Arabs, Africans to be Africans and Asians to be Asians?” Can you imagine how different our communities would be if more Christians were able to say “I want to be a Christian without making it difficult for a Jew to be a Jew, a Muslim to be a Muslim, a Buddhist to be a Buddhist or a Hindu to be a Hindu?”

So how do we build community by design? It has been my experience that when neighbors help neighbors, and even when strangers help strangers, both those who help and those who are helped are not only transformed, but they experience a new sense of connectedness. Getting involved in the needs of the neighbor provides a new perspective, a new way of seeing ourselves, a new understanding of the purpose of the human journey. When that which was “their” problem becomes “our” problem, the transaction transforms a mere association into a relationship that has the potential for new communities of meaning and belonging.

In other words, getting people to do something for someone else – what John Winthrop called making the condition of others our own – is a powerful force in building community. When they experience the problems of the poor or troubled, when they help someone to find cultural meaning in a museum or creative expression in a painting, when they help to dispel prejudices or fight bigotry directed at their neighbor, they are far more likely to find common ground, and they are likely to find that in serving others they discover the genesis of community.

- 2. The South Africans recognized that eliminating the many inequities that restrict opportunity could not be seen as simply a humanitarian gesture or even a civic or moral imperative. They understood the need to make the case that creating a new social and economic order was in the self-interest of both those seeking to acquire new wealth and those seeking to retain old wealth.**

What are the lessons for the United States? Those of us who continue the effort to form a more perfect union need to make it clear that the deficits in our democracy the American people now tolerate are not only distracting from our national ideals, they are sapping our national strength. We need also to make the case that the best way to demonstrate the efficacy of our democracy to critics abroad is to demonstrate that it can work equitably for all of our citizens at home.

I serve as Chair of the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation and I am stunned each day as I continue to learn more about how Katrina was an avoidable catastrophe, more the fault of man than nature. All Americans ought to be shamed each day by the images beamed around the world of poverty and powerlessness in a nation founded on the principle of establishing justice and forming a more perfect union. Those concerned about rebuilding our declining image abroad must be made to understand that changing world opinion of us as a nation will not come from how much money we put into rebuilding Beirut, as we most certainly will, but in how we go about rebuilding New Orleans and revitalizing neighborhoods in great American cities like Detroit.

The New Orleans experience reminds us how compassion is being redefined and limited in both the way we think and the way we act in helping those in need. I like to use the parable of the Good Samaritan to make this point. As we remember the story, a traveler stopped and gave assistance to a man badly beaten on the side of the road. But suppose for each day of a full week, the traveler found someone beaten at the same spot on the road. Wouldn't he be obliged to ask, "Who has responsibility for policing the road?" The compassion that started out as an act of charitable relief leads to questions about public policy. The problem for many good people who care deeply about those in distress is that the paradigm of compassion starts and ends with the parable of the Good Samaritan. Meanwhile, there are many policy impediments, both private and public, that must be removed if those of low wealth are to have half a chance to climb the economic ladder.

A recent study by the Brookings Institution has called these impediments a "ghetto tax." Like earlier studies by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and others, the researchers at Brookings found that a person who is poor must struggle against not only the conditions that cause him/her to be poor, but against impediments that keep them poor. Your own studies and investigations here in Detroit document what we know to be true in many other communities. The poor pay a higher cost for credit. They pay a higher cost for home ownership, health care and medical debt. They pay a higher cost when shopping, a higher cost in banking and the list goes on.

I know it has become popular in some quarters to blame the victim, but while there is much that we must do internally to motivate and encourage life style changes, to affirm and uphold values and to develop new visions of what is possible, we have simply got to use our intellectual capital to educate the public on why it is critical for us to remove some of these structural impediments if any advances made by our fellow citizens who are less wealthy are to be enduring.

3. The South Africans understood that there could be no reconciliation without reconstruction and development.

It is important to remember that the work of reconciliation is not some cozy glossing over what has divided people. The South African leaders understand that reconciliation that seeks only an apology and confession from those who have benefited from a wrong doing, and forgiveness from those who have been victimized

by it, is empty and incomplete. Archbishop Desmond Tutu argues in his book *No Future Without Forgiveness* that confession by the wrongdoer and forgiveness by the victim is not the end of the process. Confession and forgiveness are part of a continuum that must also include reparation.

In South Africa, Tutu contends, the whole process of reconciliation has been placed in considerable jeopardy by the enormous disparities that remain between the rich and the poor. And it is this gap between the haves and the have-nots that poses the greatest threat to authentic reconciliation and enduring stability. The former Archbishop, who is affectionately referred to as “The Arch,” uses every public opportunity to warn that unless houses replace the hovels and shacks in which most blacks continue to live, unless blacks gain access to clean water, electricity, affordable health care, decent education, good jobs and a safe environment – things which a vast majority of whites and a small black elite have – South Africans, despite the painstaking work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, can just as well kiss reconciliation goodbye.

These are not the words we tend to hear about South Africa from those seeking reconciliation in this country. There is increasing talk of the potential of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in the United States. Can they bring us closer together? Can they help us build and sustain a sense of community among the diverse groups that populate the nation? When Desmond Tutu posed a Truth and Reconciliation Commission for the United States, the response of many African American leaders was that what we need is a justice and reconciliation commission; that even those who wrote the American constitution understood that if they were to finally form a more perfect union, they would have to first establish justice.

The South Africans also debated whether they should form simply an amnesty commission, a truth commission or a justice and reconciliation commission. They chose truth and reconciliation because they recognized that they also had to reconcile conflicting images of the past. The United States has a different problem. It may be necessary to first reconcile conflicting images of the present. When Ralph Ellison wrote *The Invisible Man*, he pointed out how we had made the poor invisible, but today every white family knows, or knows about, at least one black family that is doing well, so they tend to live in psychological exile. They refuse to accept the reality that so many other blacks are doing badly; and where they accept it, they tend to reject any claim that this is somehow attributable to the legacy of slavery or segregation.

The idea of truth and reconciliation commissions that simply allow people to tell their story may have some short-term therapeutic value, but if they are to contribute to long-term healing and reconciliation that can endure, they must seek not only forgiveness but restitution as well.

4. The wild card in the future of both South Africa and the United States is not simply the role of reconciliation, but the role of race.

South Africa’s new politics is a novel practice of non-racialism. Having ended legal apartheid, the ANC government is committed to nation building that goes beyond racial to national claims. This vision of non-racialism is uniquely South African and should not be confused with what is often called multi-racialism or color-blindness in the American context. For black South Africans, apartheid was multi-racial. It brought racial distinctiveness to new heights. Even the term multi-cultural was a euphemism for apartheid’s notion of separate development.

It is hard to find anyone in South Africa who will admit to supporting apartheid and its corollary of separate development. It would seem that everyone was either supporting or actively working for a new dispensation. Since this is totally unlikely, we obviously need a new language of race to communicate about race; but the debate about how to eliminate racial inequalities is beginning to echo the debate in the United States. The ANC acknowledges that the deracialization of South African society will require race-specific remedies that take race into account. Some white South Africans argue that this is inconsistent with the ideal of a non-racial society. They call instead for race-neutral approaches, but, as the then Speaker of the South African Parliament Frene Ginwala reminded a Cape Town audience, “This is manifestly not possible.” “To deracialize,” she argued, “We have to focus on race. Together with the racially based inequalities we inherited, we find that the very instruments we must use to manage society and to overcome the legacy are themselves shaped by racism and designed to perpetuate unequal relations.” Black South Africans are arguing that they cannot go beyond race until they have removed the barriers created because of race. The government’s approach is increasingly called corrective action.

The full flowering of democracy in South Africa may, thus, require a new language of non-racialism and corrective action, but for the immediate future it will sound very much like affirmative action, diversity and inclusion in the United States. It is as true in South Africa as it is in the United States that no well-intentioned engagement of differences can be successful without acknowledgement of differences. If it was group identity that created a problem, group identity will have to be considered in resolving it. You cannot break a man’s leg, then put him on the starting line of a 100 yard dash and seriously suggest that he has an equal opportunity.

You are probably led to ask at this point “What is unique about South Africa that argues for success where so many have failed?” First of all, South Africans began their new democracy under the tutelage of leaders like Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. Rarely has a nation been blessed with the presence of two cultural icons of their stature in the same generation, and with such a strong commitment to reconciliation and community. They seem to instinctually understand the tensions not only between white and black, but traditionalism and modernity as well. The implication for the United States is that the process of reconciliation, reconstruction and renewal requires highly committed, competent and respected leadership.

Second, while it is right and appropriate that we give due credit to Nelson Mandela, he constantly reminded us that very little could have been accomplished without a cadre of committed and competent colleagues from all sides of the political spectrum. Transformation, reconstruction, and reconciliation are the product of a national will to create a different future. Of course, there are some high profile dissenters, but the road on which the country is now traveling was carved out of a national consensus. The implication for the United States is that reconciliation requires a national will. We can sit around and lament the absence of such a will or we can set out to help shape it.

Third, race continues to be a problem in South Africa but it is on the table, under the lens of a public microscope. People are talking about it and many are doing something about it. The lesson here is that we cannot solve the problems created by race unless we take race into account in developing solutions.

Fourth, South Africans like being engaged with the rest of the world. As one white South African said to me, “When I traveled abroad in the past I was reluctant to admit that I was a South African. Now I can do so with pride. Whereas people once

vilified us as the world's pariah, they now praise us for what we have done." Even the Afrikaner wine maker who was very skeptical about the wisdom of the changes made in 1994 is now grateful that he can sell his wines throughout the world. It makes it easier to move beyond race when it is profitable to do so. The implication for those of us who want to promote reconciliation is that we must convey the message that engaging differences is not simply a good thing to do, a moral thing to do. It is in our national self-interest.

Fifth, black South Africans are a majority in South Africa. Their notion of community expressed many years ago in the first paragraph of the ANC's Freedom Charter and again in the national constitution claimed that South Africa belongs to all who live in it. The lesson here is that our nation should belong to all of our citizens without regard to race, religion or wealth. Democracy is almost always defined as a system of government in which the people have the power, but for many it has come to mean a system of government in which the people have the vote, which is not always the same as having the power. We will need to take our democracy back if we are serious about engaging differences and eliminating inequities.

Finally, there is the reality of a South Africa that has its feet firmly planted in both the first and third worlds. It is those first world elements that are being put to work in the development of a national economy that works for all South Africans. In the United States, the reverse is true. In a *Washington Post* article last month (September 27, 2006), Robert Samuelson, who is certainly no flaming liberal, looked at the growing inequalities in our nation and argued that trickle up economics, with most gains flowing to the top, seems un-American. Engaging differences, like "forming a more perfect union," must mean engaging the policies that perpetuate economic inequality.

5. We need signs and symbols of hope for the many who are threatened by a new culture of hopelessness.

There was a time in the sixties in which optimism was high. We saw it after the march on Washington in 1963 and even now polls indicate that many of the people displaced by Hurricanes and Rita in Louisiana believe that the region and its special qualities can come back. Yet, there are others who despite their resilience will need to have their hope restored. And here it is important to make a distinction between optimism and hope.

Optimism is based on what you can infer from what you know or see. Hope allows us to see beyond what is and to imagine what can and ought to be. It is not so much an act of memory as it is an act of imagination and courage. It is an acknowledgement that what you can imagine you can probably create. This must have been the kind of hope that Vaclav Havel had in mind when he wrote: "I am not an optimist because I do not believe that everything ends well. Nor am I a pessimist because I do not believe that everything ends badly, but I could not accomplish anything if I did not carry hope within me. For the gift of hope is as big a gift as life itself." When this forum is over and you are back in your communities promoting equity and trying to eliminate racial and cultural tensions and you begin to wonder whether your work is making a difference, please remember that you provide hope as well as help; and the gift of hope is as big a gift as the gift of life itself.