

**RACE AND RECONCILIATION:
WHAT THE U.S CAN LEARN FROM SOUTH AFRICA
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I am pleased to be able to join in your conversation on engaging differences. Rarely in the history of our world has there been a greater need for people across the globe to understand 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. I want, therefore, to use the experience of the new South Africa as the lens for looking at what it means to engage differences and to prevent or manage conflict in a world that is integrating and fragmenting at the same time; a world in which the more interdependent we become the more people are turning inward toward smaller communities of meaning and belonging.

While some see this as reason for despair, it may be that remembering and even regrouping are part of the first stage of the search for common ground. As I travel around the world, I hear more and more people saying that until there is respect for their primary community of identity, they will find it difficult to embrace the larger community in which they function.

We are grateful to the South Africans for introducing a model of engaging differences that reminds us of the potential of the human spirit. It emphasizes the importance of reconciliation as both a public value and a public process. Many Americans who want to continue their own efforts to form a more perfect union now ask, "What can we learn from the South Africans?" That is a fair question, and one that I am pleased to address.

The South Africans have introduced us to four different forms or dimensions of reconciliation. The first is **individual**, a kind of existential rebalancing of the self. Kada Asmal, an architect of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, describes this bringing back into balance as undoing historical illusions, deceptions and misteachings. To make this point, he likes to quote William Wordsworth who said, "To be mistaught is worse than to be untaught – no errors are so difficult to root out as those which the understanding has pledged to uphold." When past prejudices, stereotypes and conflicts are carried from one generation to another, the act of reconciliation has much to do with softening or eliminating old memories; not simply reducing them to a level that seems to condone or forget past actions, but remembering them in such a way as to reduce the desire for revenge.

Forgiveness research in the field of clinical psychology provides clinical evidence to support the South African emphasis on forgiveness as a necessary part of individual and communal health. Forgiveness works in two ways: 1) it reduces the stress that comes from anger, hostility, bitterness, hatred and resentment, all of which lead to high blood pressure and impaired neurological function; 2) people with strong networks of friends are often healthier than loners. Researchers have identified two kinds of forgiveness. The first is decisional forgiveness, a commitment to move on, just letting go of whatever has caused the alienation. The second is emotional forgiveness, an internal state of ease and relief from one's own suffering. Long before

forgiveness researchers, Confucius seems to have anticipated their scientific work when he warned, “If you devote your life to seeking revenge, first dig two graves.”

The second dimension of reconciliation is **communal**. It is based on the natural urge toward bonding and community. The South Africans have a special word for this form of community. They call it “ubuntu,” an understanding of the human connection that is best expressed by the Xhosa proverb “People are people through other people.” It follows that to deny the dignity or damage the humanity of another person is to damage or destroy one’s own. Ubuntu provides an alternative to revenge, an opportunity for forgiveness. It does not mean that the victim forgets, but it does mean that without forgiveness sustainable reconciliation is very unlikely.

This will to include everyone in the circle is the deeper motive for reconciliation. It creates a context for learning to live together, to deal with disputes, opposing ideas and even violent conflicts. The notion of embracing others has deep roots in the South African experience. Some of the early warring tribes had “war-healers,” individuals on each side who sought after combat to engage the other side in the construction of a relationship that recognized the dignity and humanity of the former adversary.

Communal reconciliation is also about creating a caring space for communication, providing opportunities for careful listening and deep conversations that enable people with profound differences to hear each other, respect each other and begin the difficult work of building new relationships. The agreement to talk to the adversary is often the first step in finding solutions to what once seemed to be an intractable alienation. Charles de Vincencio, Director of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation who served previously on the staff of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, calls this “negotiating with one’s memory and deciding which is to have the last word.”

The third form or dimension of reconciliation is cosmic or **spiritual**, the claim common to all religions that we are not here alone, that each of us is a part of something bigger and more mysterious than the self. It is to say that the search for a higher level of being, the urge toward a universal connectedness, is a reflection of the human condition. But it may be that it is in our common search rather than our different answers that we find common ground.

The religions of the world may define and address holiness from different perspectives, but they are one in their recognition that because of our spiritual kinship with the larger universe, prejudice and discrimination should have no place among people of faith. That was the message of Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Native Americans, Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox Christians and others who came together at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. to declare that “Racism is a sin, a matter of the heart.”

One of the Rabbis highlighted this ecumenical claim when he said, “Jews are taught that God formed Adam out of the dust from all the world; yellow clay, white sand, black loam and red soil to remind us that we are all of this earth, that we are all equal, and that no one race can put itself above others.” The Chief of the Mohawk Nation and a leader of the American Muslim Council both argued that we diminish the preciousness and sacredness of life when we denigrate, disrespect or oppress people based on the color of their skin, their ethnicity or culture. To deny the dignity or humanity of another, they said, is to dishonor the sacred in the world, in one’s self, and in others.

For all of our oneness in spirit, the touchstone of human interaction begins with the human community. And that is why the fourth dimension of reconciliation is

political. Different kinds of conflict require different forms and ways of reconciliation. Political reconciliation is not dependent on the kind of intimacy that other forms of reconciliation may demand. Rather statecraft and politics require peaceful co-existence. Forgiveness may come later, after the creation of confidence and the building of trust. Vincenzo likes to tell the story of a Dinka elder who in reflecting on the Sudanese conflict said “Reconciliation begins by agreeing to sit under the same tree with your enemy, to find a way of addressing the conflict.” At one level, this may mean simply to stop killing one another. On another level, it involves a willingness to work together with one’s enemies and adversaries in pursuit of a solution that is not yet at hand. Although this sense of reconciliation is incomplete, it does interrupt cycles of conflict and lay the groundwork for something deeper and different. It is in Nelson Mandela’s words an attempt to resolve conflicts by the use of our brains rather than our blood.

Long before Joseph Nye started to write about the important distinction between soft power and hard power, Nelson Mandela was demonstrating that while the use of military and economic muscle could prevent or inflict pain, soft power, the respect for differences, public diplomacy and exemplary behavior were much more likely to create influence and attraction that is enduring. The former is hard power and it is based on coercion. The latter is soft power and it is based on attraction and seduction.

Mandela is the prototype of soft power. His influence comes from the attractiveness of his ideals, the elegance of his humanity and the power of his personal story. He reminds us that despite the prevailing dominance of hard power, the ability to engage differences in the future may well depend on a moral ecology that cannot be found in hard power alone. To be sure, hard power can be used to inflict or even prevent significant pain, but it can rarely ensure long-term goodwill.

Reconciliation as a Public Process

Reconciliation in South Africa is, thus, more than simply a highly prized public value. It involves a deliberate public process. Under the leadership of Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission spent several years calling South Africans to a moral high ground. Tutu, who is a Nobel Prize winner and the former Secretary General of the South African Council of Churches, is a national icon, who along with Nelson Mandela, embodies the spirit of reconciliation. Tutu likes to speak of “the miracle that is South Africa,” but the miracle he has in mind is not simply the decision by whites to share political power, but the decision by blacks to seek reconciliation rather than retribution.

The South Africans understood that reconciliation could not be reduced to a neat set of rules or strategies; yet, it was more than a theory or even a set of values. And while there are no simple “how to” steps involved, increasing numbers of Americans want to know how they did it. Can it work here? It is important to remember that the work of reconciliation is not some cozy glossing over what has divided people. 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 argument

here is not over whether or not there should be some national effort to empower those who have been rendered powerless, but over how it should take place. 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 the United States. 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 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.

Non-racialism

The wild card in the South African future then 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 multiculturalism and affirmative action. 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 requires highly respected leadership.

Second, while it is right and appropriate that we give due credit to President 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, however, 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. Those who have seen the worst of racism are determined to write a new history where South Africans in all their diversity can say to each other, in the words of the old charter of the African National Congress, “South Africa belongs to all who live in 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 today's *Washington Post* (September 27, 2006), Robert Samuelson, who is certainly no flaming liberal, looks at the growing inequalities in our nation and argues 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.

When I first visited South Africa in 1973, I got into trouble for describing apartheid in a widely published press interview as a "pigmentocracy" where rights and resources were apportioned in accordance with the pigmentation of the skin. The old pigmentocracy is gone, but a new form of "pigmentology" has emerged. Intentional under development is no longer public policy in either South Africa or the United States, but there is an enduring pigmentology that still divides us.

Let me, thus, conclude with a word about the question raised by the framers of the American constitution when they set out to form a more perfect union. They wrote into the preamble that in order to form a more perfect union we would have to establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility and promote the general welfare. They also wrote that we would have to provide for the common defense, but we now know that the best way to defend our democracy to critics abroad is to demonstrate that it can work equitable for all of our citizens at home. So how shall we engage our differences in ways that allow us to form a more perfect union?

There is the sense of community we share in crisis and 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. However, I worried then, as I do now that we may have been 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 in New York and Washington. 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, I am reminded of the caution offered some years ago by the 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.

Building community by design requires an understanding of community much like that the South African's called ubuntu. The American concept of community has been probably best reflected in both the notion of the commons and the vision of a

city on a hill. But if we are to successfully cope with a world that is integrating and fragmenting at the same time, we may need to commit ourselves to 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 an American 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?”

That, in my experience, is how best to engage differences. I hope, therefore, that each of you will leave this assembly saying “I want to be an American without making it difficult for you to be you.” Thank you.