



We can be human only together

Reflections on adopting an Ubuntu way of life

Ubuntu is a way of being in the world, a means by which we live, work, and relate to one another. Through Ubuntu we recognise and value our common humanity, acknowledging the potential of every single one of us for both good and harm.

Ubuntu finds its full expression when we live in harmony, treating one another with the respect and dignity with which we would have them treat us. It also acknowledges that all too often we fall short of that ideal but that to do so need not have irreversible consequences. In Ubuntu there is place for forgiveness and reconciliation, though the process may be long and painful, through patient listening, honest truth telling and wise mediation.

Ubuntu was the glue which held together traditional societies in Southern Africa, and which undergirded the remarkably peaceful transition in South Africa from apartheid to democracy. Ubuntu recognises that no person can exist in isolation but that we are all interdependent through a complex network of relationships. Thus when one person is hurt he does not suffer alone but his pain affects those around him.

In a similar way, when one person harms another, the offender loses something of his humanity in the process. But when his victim chooses to rise above the temptation for revenge and retaliation, choosing instead the path of forgiveness, then not only do they discover freedom for themselves but they also thereby open the way to their offender discovering a fuller humanity that does not involve harming others.

It was during his long years of incarceration in prison that Nelson Mandela declared 'I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed.... For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.'

The principles of Ubuntu are not based on any one religion or creed, and yet are fundamental to all the great religions and humanist movements of our world. By working together across all religious or cultural divides, we can together restore the richness of our humanity and make our nation a safer, healthier, happier place in which to live.

How could our society change if we all lived according to the principles of Ubuntu?



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Where is Ubuntu needed?

Families

Our primary experience of living in an interdependent community is found in our families. A child will be influenced for life by his earliest experiences at the hands of his parents or carers. When that experience is good, when the child is nurtured, valued and loved unconditionally, then a secure sense of self-worth is built, creating a strong foundation from which to resist adversity and to reach out to others generously.

However, where such conditions are lacking then often self-worth is attained only by seeking to destroy the value of others. This leads to breakdown in relationships in families, communities and nations.

By working with families to encourage an Ubuntu way of life, then communities can be transformed at the most fundamental level.

Schools

Beyond his family experiences, the second most influential time of a child's life is his years in formal education at school. Teachers and other school staff have an awesome opportunity to influence how a child will develop in later years. Education is much more than the simple imparting of knowledge that enables a child to pass exams or a school to rise in the league tables.

When his experiences at school are positive, a child will learn skills as diverse as dealing with adversity, building friendships, coping with failure, valuing diversity. Teachers (and others with significant influence on young people) who model an Ubuntu way of life in the context of their work, are rewarded not only with an improvement in achievement levels (which are directly affected by a child's sense of worth), but also with the satisfaction of having helped to enable their children to develop and grow into mature, responsible young people.

Probation service / Police and others with authority over young people

Ubuntu does not envisage a perfect society and traditional African communities were not without their wrong-doers. All societies have to develop the means by which those who transgress the laws of the community or the land are held to account. Exactly what this looks like will vary from tradition to tradition, but *how* it happens is crucial. If violence and aggression are responded to with humiliation and degradation, then anger and resentment grow and the cycle of destruction continues.

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Molobi, a black South African who had suffered for years under apartheid and was jailed after he became a political activist grew to hate all white people. One day in prison when feeling particularly hopeless, he began to whistle to himself the Christmas carol 'Silent Night, Holy Night'. "A white prison warden heard him and said with gentleness and kindness, 'my son, this is not the end. Have faith.' Molobi was deeply touched by this warden's humanity. 'This man doesn't know it, but he changed me. Previously I had clubbed all whites altogether. He called me, 'my son'! He understood what I was feeling and he comforted me.' The compassion of this prison warden began a profound transformation in Molobi's attitude toward white people." (from Nussbaum, Barbara; 'Ubuntu: Reflections of a South African on Our Common Humanity' in *Reflections* Vol 4 No. 4)

Business

In recent years the business world has begun to recognise that putting profit before people may appear to have short term gains but ultimately can have a detrimental effect on their overall success. Even from a purely economic perspective it makes good business sense to value each member of the team and seek to promote Ubuntu values. In such an environment where staff are treated with value and respect, they are happier at work, take less time off sick and are more productive.

Where there is greater satisfaction and fulfillment at work, frustration and resentment are reduced and other relationships outside of work are also enhanced. Thus the practice of Ubuntu in the workplace can have an influence far beyond its immediate sphere.

An Ubuntu revolution

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has said that Ubuntu is "one of the gifts of Africa to the rest of the world." If we truly value this gift we have to work hard to make sure it directly influences the way that our society operates. It is clear that we cannot see any one group in our communities in isolation. If we are seeking to transform the lives of say, so called 'hard to reach' or 'hard to engage' young people we have to work with them in their social context. What is needed is nothing more or less than an Ubuntu revolution, the effects of which need to become embedded at every level of policy and community life. Every sector, every agency and even every individual has a role to play in this revolution of hospitality, caring, respect and compassion. The Tutu Foundation UK is calling for such a revolution in our society *today*.