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Has SA missed the moment for unity?

Charles Villa-Vicencio

TIMING, strategy and intent are crucial ingredients of any successful reconciliation process. Miss the moment or fail to address sequence and process, and the endeavour is likely to come to naught.

Fail to address the underlying cause of the conflict and the process is likely to blow up in the faces of everyone concerned.

The question is whether South Africa has missed the moment to be truly reconciled? Is it too late to achieve the reconciliation and social transformation that we yearned for, even though we had within our grasp, in the political transition of 1994?

The realistic argument goes something like this: reconciliation is a process. It takes time. We cannot expect to renew and heal a nation torn apart by 300 years of colonialism and 50 years of statutory apartheid overnight.

"Reconciliation" can, of course, be interpreted in many different ways. I mention only two: the one involves a sense of inner or spiritual purification – what GFW Hegel, the German philosopher, called "metaphysical solidarity" with one's enemies – "leaving no scar behind".

Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu regards reconciliation as an act of "grace" that draws us all into a "common humanity". This is wonderful, soul-uplifting (and important) stuff.

The problem is that few of us are able to reach the heights that Tutu has made part of his own life. The bar is simply too high. It is this that suggests the need for a more modest notion of reconciliation that makes its own set of demands – involving pardon, mercy, understanding and a willingness to seek ways to live with one's adversaries, despite past scars that refuse to go away.

It involves political common sense rather than religious magnanimity; clear-headedness rather than heroism; responsible living rather than monk-like self-denial. It involves treating others in the kind of way we would like them to treat

us. We do not necessarily have to forgive one another, love one another or hug and kiss one another, in order to live together in peaceful co-existence.

We do have to respect one another and establish certain economic, social and political ground rules that enable this to happen. This level of political realism may be the only realistic political option we have, short of what John Vorster once called "an alternative that is too ghastly to contemplate".

The response of the University of the Free State to the abuse of university workers by students in the Reitz residence in 2007 is a skilful example of this second-level reconciliation.

The university made a deliberate and conscious effort to steer a clear-headed, strategic and well-designed process through the minefields of South African, the Free State and campus politics, responding with moral integrity and legal clarity.

Then, having made its point, it opened the way for an out-of-court settlement, contending that the four students involved in the incident should not be held solely responsible for the sins of a society that shaped their values and in many ways determined their behaviour.

This, together with an agreement for the payment of reparations, led to an out-of-court settlement on the judgment of the Equality Court.

This led to a public apology by the university for its initial response to the situation and an apology by Roelf Malherbe, Schalk van der Merwe, Danie Grobler and Johnny Roberts, the students directly involved in the incident.

Both apologies were unconditional and offered with a level of sincerity that was rarely seen in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

They provide language and commitment worthy of emulation by others who may want to offer a creditable apology.

The university has committed itself to turn away from discriminatory practices which have characterised the milieu of many of the country's institutions of higher



REITZ FOUR: The apology offered by Schalk van der Merwe, Johnny Roberts, Roelf Malherbe and Danie Grobler is worthy of emulation, says the writer.

learning – including the so-called liberal universities where Reitz-like events can occur with the ease of students having a beer in the local pub.

A further hurdle facing the students involves their appeal against the judgment of the Bloemfontein Magistrate's Court, due to be heard in June.

The response of the university and the students to the Equality Court judgment is a helpful example

in a country that continues to face entrenched forms of racism that shape the behaviour, colour the supposedly harmless jokes, and influence the behaviour of its citizens.

The settlement would not have happened without the willingness and ability to rise above deep personal hurt by Emma Koko, Rebecca Adams, Mittah Ntlatleng, Naomi Phororo and David Molete, who bore the brunt of student abuse – or the willingness of the students to offer

an unqualified public apology.

Back to that troublesome word – reconciliation. It is a word that we often use too freely and too cheaply.

In so doing, we destroy its currency.

Settlements, compromises and deals, whether in the academy, business or politics, that are devoid of moral integrity, honesty and, above all, a willingness to deal with the fundamental issues at stake, have little to offer by way of healing.

It is not enough to *smeer toe* or spin-doctor a settlement, to assume the past is over, to revert to business as usual, and to hope for the best.

The nettle of economic disparity in South Africa was regarded as too barbed to handle at the time of the South African settlement in 1994.

Had it been faced head on, the chances are that the peace agreement would have been delayed, perhaps scuttled.

The hope of the majority of

South Africans at the time was that if a political settlement could be reached, and a sense of mutual respect realised, we would deal with economic disparity later.

Reconciliation involves more than good intent or a warm and fuzzy feeling.

In South Africa, reconciliation is about more than passing one another on opposite sides of the street, the rich on one side and the poor on the other.

The University of the Free State has taken a brave step in the direction of showing us what can be done in dealing with the past in a responsible manner.

Together with all institutions of higher learning, it now has an obligation to teach its students to reach beyond campus politics, in offering leadership in a country that is deeply divided along social and economic lines.

Reconciliation is ultimately about reaching out to one another in both confrontation and accommodation – and ultimately, growing into one another in a manner that enables the emergence of viable political and economic solutions to problems that have the capacity to plunge the nation into the kind of chaos that the 1994 settlement was intended to avoid.

If universities fail to equip students to address these hard realities, reconciliation is likely to be dismissed as self-deception, religious nonsense and political obscurantism by an increasing number of South Africans who continue to live in the squalor of exclusion.

South Africa is a very different place to Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

The recent events in these countries, nevertheless, remind us that the patience of the poor is not all-enduring.

● Professor Villa-Vicencio is a senior fellow in the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation. This is an edited version of a paper delivered at a seminar on reconciliation hosted by the University of the Free State and the South African Human Rights Commission.