

THE FUTURE IS YOURS TO CONQUER

An address by Kaizer M. Nyatumba at a function organised by the Education Opportunities Council in Johannesburg

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I have often been told by those who know better than I do that it takes one, two, three or, at best, a handful of people with the requisite leadership skills and determination to start a revolution. According to my interlocutors, it is these few individuals who motivate and inspire others to follow them in whatever course of action they have set their minds on.

It seems to me that if we look back in history we will be inclined to concur with this observation. After all, we all know only too well how individuals like Dr Martin Luther King Jr, Mahatma Ghandi, Nelson Mandela and, indeed, FW de Klerk helped change the course of history in their respective countries and eras. Their immense contributions, it occurs to me, bears testimony to the extent to which individuals, if they are so inclined, can and do make a difference.

Chairperson Ms Marianne Conradie, Educational Opportunities Council Executive Director Mrs Khoali McCarthy, EOC Board Members present here tonight Professor JR Seretlo and Mrs S Madonsela, United States Agency for International Development representative Mr Cachief Lombard, ladies and gentlemen: please allow me to make bold as to assume that there is a good chance that you will all agree with me not only that our beautiful country, South Africa, has been fortunate to be blessed with a number of such special individuals, but also that some of them were among those who had the foresight during the dark days of apartheid to

set up the organisation that has brought us all together today, the EOC. Among these wonderful individuals were Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who in 1985 became South Africa's second Nobel Peace Prize laureate, the afore-mentioned Professor Seretlo, Dr Nthato Motlana, Professor Peter Hunter and Mrs Hazel Moolman.

I'm sure you will agree, ladies and gentlemen, that we are all deeply indebted to these men and women. On this, the 24th anniversary of the EOC, I think it is appropriate that we acknowledge these people and express our gratitude to them.

As the chairperson has already pointed out, I am one of the many South Africans who have benefited from the work of the EOC during the era of Dr Mokhehi Mothlabi and Father Buti Tlhagale, who is today Bishop Tlhagale. Although I have no mandate from the many others who got EOC and EOC-organised scholarships in the past, I think it fair to assume that they would like me to convey our collective thanks to the organisation and its partners for the big difference that they have made in our lives.

This evening, though, chairperson, belongs to the young men and women in front of us. This is their big day. After a number of years' study and a subsequent placement with different companies, they have now come to the end of their internship programmes.

Congratulations and well done to all of you. You have worked hard to be where you are now in life, but you will need to work even harder in the months and years ahead to make an impact in your chosen fields.

Please do be assured that I am not unmindful of the fact that the young men and women present here this evening have far more important things in their minds than to sit here and listen to me. There are probably celebrations and parties lined up, while for

most there will no doubt be consideration being given to ways in which they can secure or fully settle into their respective jobs and grow into them. That is as it should be and, once again, you have my congratulations and best wishes.

The importance of education cannot be over-emphasised, as you will no doubt concur. In the fast-changing world in which we live, education is by far the best preparation for being able to adapt. Indeed, it is a *sine qua non* for success in life today. As the world shrinks and becomes even more of a global village, people and societies with a sound education tend to be the ones who excel. The premium that society pays for skills will continue to rise, and my advice to you is that you never stop learning. Acquire new interests and skills throughout your life and continue to keep an open mind as you grow up. After all, nothing could be more dangerous than complacency or a closed mind.

As Alexander Pope reminded us:

*A little learning is a dangerous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring;
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
And drinking largely sobers us up.*

Our beautiful country, which faces numerous challenges, needs educated men and women who will be able to run our economy and secure a successful and prosperous future for South Africa. That challenge, my dear friends, falls on you because *you* are the leaders of tomorrow.

However, I would imagine, ladies and gentlemen, that there would be a shared understanding in a group such as we have here this evening that education is much, much more than the piece of

paper that you were each given upon completion of your studies at your respective institutions. Indeed, education is the existence of an ever-enquiring mind that considers issues dispassionately instead of being given to dogmas and clichés.

I suggest further that we need to ask ourselves, very honestly, to what use we put the brains with which we have been so richly blessed. Are we content merely to use them for our own, selfish good, or do we also use them for the greater good of our country? Can we really say, and with a clear conscience, that our education has made or will make a difference to people other than ourselves and our immediate families in the areas in which we live and work, in our communities, in this province and, indeed, in the country? Can we look at ourselves in the mirror and say, honestly: “Yes, Abraham Ongkopotse Tiro, we do remember your exhortation to us at that graduation ceremony at the University of the North in 1972 for us to make sure that our education is of use and relevance to our communities, and that we should be there for our country at its hour of need?” I leave that question for each one of you to answer.

I supposed that a more immediate question for you is the following: “What do employers look for in those they employ today?” That is indeed a legitimate question. Obviously, in the case of a new graduate entering the job market without prior experience, your educational qualification is an important starting point, followed closely by your demonstrated ability to do the job for which you have applied. Perhaps above all else comes open-mindedness: you know, an inquisitive mind that is ever willing to learn new things. That, in my experience, is a far more important attribute that, sadly, happens to be in short supply. Unfortunately,

there are many graduates around today who walk with an air of self-importance and who create the impression that their newly-acquired degrees mean that they know everything there is to know and that they have no need to learn anything from anybody. There could not, I submit humbly to you this evening, ladies and gentlemen, be a more negative and self-destructive attitude than that one.

In conclusion, chairperson, I would like to leave our young men and women here with the following anecdotes. Many years ago there was an old man in Greece, that proud home of Aristotle and Plato, who was known for giving wise counsel. The man was very old and had not spoken to anybody for a long time and the people in his village were growing more and more concerned by the day. Some even believed that he could die any time, and so they stood around him under the tree where he sat and asked him to say something to them before he died. The old man looked at them, but said nothing.

Again they begged him. "Please say something," they begged, but he just looked at them. And so it went for a long time, and eventually he moved his dry and parched lips slowly. Excitement grew. "He is going to speak! He is going to speak!", the people shouted, calling other villagers to come closer. Then the old man spoke, very slowly, and said: "**NEVER BE AFRAID TO DO WHAT IS RIGHT. DECIDE ON WHAT YOU THINK IS RIGHT AND STICK TO IT.**" And then he died.

If you remember nothing else that I have said here this evening, I will be happy if, at the very least, you could remember at all times those pearls of wisdom which dropped from the old man's lips minutes before his death. For how many people are there among

us today who are too concerned about being popular or politically correct instead of doing or saying what they know is right? How many people are there in our country today who are more concerned about currying favour with those in power instead of speaking out on some vital issues when the need arises?

The last anecdote that I want to leave with you is about two young men who lived in a remote village. These young men were intrepid mountaineers, and one day they set out to climb the highest mountain in their area, much like Sibusiso Vilane did when he conquered Mount Everest about a fortnight ago. As they were climbing the mountain it suddenly became very windy and stormy, until one of them gave up and returned home. When his fellow villagers asked him about his friend, he replied: *“The last time I saw him he was still climbing the mountain, higher and higher. It was windy and heavy rain came down with hailstones, but on and on he went, climbing the mountain.”*

Now, may the same be said about you, ladies and gentlemen. May it be said about you that you never gave up in the face of any social storms or calamities. Let it not be said that you are the one who went only as far as half the mountain but turned back when real glory beckoned.

Once again, congratulations and best wishes to you all. Please remember that in the South Africa in which we live today, the future is yours to conquer.

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