



WILL UBUNTU PREVAIL?

After the tough year we have had, living with the Covid-19 pandemic, how we proceed and what we achieve will depend on what we focus on as a country and as individuals, writes **Thuli Madonsela**

Yesterday I received a video clip. It was one of those that are randomly passed on by friends, family members and colleagues on WhatsApp and other social media platforms. In the video, a man is speaking at what appeared to be a gathering of investors or businesspeople.

He starts by asking members of the audience to imagine themselves being an alien on planet Earth with a huge investment fund. How much would they allocate to South Africa, he asks. Looking self-satisfied, he provides the answer himself.

"Zero," he triumphantly announces.

He then goes on to explain why he thought South Africa was not worth investing in. The "wrongs" he mentioned included the diversity requirements, environmental, social and governance issues, and BEE. He mentioned that he had been overseas and had returned to invest in South Africa, which he thought was ill-advised.

He went on and on about how stupid virtually everyone in government was. He advised people in the room to get their children overseas passports, gleefully announcing that he expected his kids to go overseas until South Africa was fixed.

At the end of the video, I surmised that this was one person who thought there was nothing wrong with keeping the socioeconomic legacy of apartheid regarding social stratification in South Africa, and that all we needed was unbridled power for capital to invest so the rest of the citizens may get jobs.

He reminded me of Jordan Peterson's characterisation of Cain in the book *12 Rules For Life*. Peterson takes us through Cain's mind as he concluded that killing Abel was justified because his efforts at goodness had not been rewarded.

A few weeks earlier, I had witnessed a different response to South Africa's challenges from Jerry Mabena, founder of the Kruger Shalati Train on The Bridge in the Kruger National Park.

In the middle of the veld is a magnificent train suspended on a bridge. Inside the train is a five-star hotel. In what many saw as a decommissioned bridge in the veld, Mabena saw a perfect location for an innovative hotel. And what most saw as a train wreck, as the Kruger Shalati managing director called it, Mabena saw as a perfect upcycling project.

His vision included an opportunity for varied income streams and work opportunities for the locals, most of whom had never had jobs.

Like me, you probably wonder why the same adversity brings out the best and the worst in humanity. Why is it that when some people are faced with adversity, they become murderous like Cain in the Bible, while others such as Charlotte Maxeke, whose legacy we celebrate this year, mine the duality of adversity as change agents for the common good?

The parents of Amy Biehl, a US exchange student who was murdered while helping out at an impoverished local township in 1993, turned the misfortune of her callous murder into an opportunity to help.

They established the Amy Biehl Foundation to help disadvantaged children and young people transcend the legacy of apartheid in the interplay between education and economic racial asymmetries.

When the foundation floundered, Kevin Chaplin, who founded the Ubuntu Foundation, came to the rescue. Speeches and performances by the young people from the Amy Biehl Foundation recently showed that it is moving the needle in improving lives and bridging the racial divide.

Earlier this year, I wrote about my friend Amanda's courageous and generous response to being accidentally



left alone at a forlorn garage in Tanzania as our bus rushed for an early start in our four-day quest to summit Mount Kilimanjaro on Mandela Day.

Not only did she cut her losses by hiring a motorcycle to help her catch up with our bus, she held no grudge, understanding that there had been a human error.

Her belief that if you want to achieve a particular outcome, the next move is always yours, is the same as that of Mama Thandwe Boli, a stokvel member who recently announced: "Young people should not look for jobs, but focus on looking for work as there is always work."

The self-sufficiency and collaboration mentality has allowed the stokvel members to renovate their homes and start companies. We see different things from the same situation depending on our mind maps or paradigms, as Stephen Covey calls them in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

From the Thuma Foundation's EPIC Leadership resources, particularly Esko Schuitema's book *The Two Sandals*, I discovered that your view depends on your intent, which informs your attention.

One thing is for sure: those who take responsibility instead of blaming and berating others not only move the needle, they tend to drive win-win rather than win-lose or zero sum breakthroughs.

This takes me to our current inflection point as we look back at this year and seek a way out of the Covid-19 pandemic: on the one hand and look to shake off the legacy of apartheid on the other. Old wounds were laid bare as we grappled with the recent passing of FW de Klerk, the man who pulled the switch on apartheid.

Compounding our challenges is the aftermath of state capture and the pervasiveness of the culture of violence, particularly violence against women and children.

Charles Dickens' immortalised observation in his epic classic *A Tale of Two Cities* is apposite as we reflect on the year that was. Dickens says: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair."

You may wonder what part of this year could be legitimately described as the best of times. Firstly, for the richest 1% of people in South Africa and the world, their wealth increased immensely, while the poor not only got poorer, but those in the margins of the middle class fell into the ranks of the poor.

We saw an increase in consciousness, particularly among global leaders, that our shared humanity imposes a collective duty on all of us to advance equality and end poverty. There were a few among us, though, even top politicians, who took up public platforms to announce that equality should not be government's concern - service delivery should be.

It was the year in which many companies shifted their corporate social investment lens to meaningful and impactful development of communities. We also saw the meagre R350 Covid-19 distress grant for those without income stopped and people forced to reapply for it. Some greedy public servants saw an opportunity to augment their steady income with the Covid-19 grant.

How we proceed and what we achieve will depend on what we focus on. Will each narcissist focus on their own woundedness or will we dig into the adversity and find positive aspects we can leverage to pull through together in a manner that nurtures our shared humanity and peace? In other words, will ubuntu prevail?

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