



Appeal to fellow whites: correct atrocities of our forebears

It is not enough to simply not be a racist

EVERY year on June 16, South Africans celebrate Youth Day to commemorate the 1976 Soweto uprising.

But this day is not just about the Struggle of a generation past; it's also about the challenges and dreams of today's young people who are also eager for change.

This desire for change was expressed vociferously at Stellenbosch University (SU) recently, when the urinating and alleged racist incident laid bare the fact that so many students of colour, specifically black students, still face racial discrimination on our campuses daily. Unsurprisingly, students from various SU societies and leadership groups arranged protest actions the following week to increase the pressure on management for change.

This was not new pressure. This pressure was felt in 2015 when *Luister*, a documentary highlighting the experiences of students of colour at SU, was released.

It was felt in 2017 with the #FeesMustFall movement and again in 2019 with the Anti-Gender-Based Violence movement. In response to the immense pressure placed on the university each time, its management team capitulated to demands for change, in some big ways and some small ways, and in some performative ways.

Slowly, but painfully, some change was brought to SU.

Unfortunately, this push for change is dampened by the apathy of some white students and staff at SU.

COMMENT



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It's very easy to distance yourself and disconnect from the reality of racism at Stellenbosch when you're insulated from its painful lashings.

And it's very easy to resist calls for change when they're coming from only a section of your student body. During the week of May 16, 2022, we saw this apathy play out in real time.

When students mobilised on Monday to protest outside Huis Marais, white students and staff were absent.

They were also absent on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Late on Thursday it had become apparent that something had to be different this time around. We couldn't apply the same pressure as students had done in the past. It couldn't just be some students demanding change; it had to be all of us.

And so, the students' representative council retrospectively called on all student leaders to gather at 10pm on a Thursday. And perhaps more astonishing, they all came. Joining

this unprecedented meeting of student leaders were the student societies that had mobilised during the week to demand change.

As leaders of the student body, we decided on a collective course of action for Friday. We all pledged to stand united to demand change and show that this time things would be different.

To our surprise, students showed up on Friday en masse. It was a powerful moment in our institution's history, and it showed that students are tired of the status quo.

Bold promises were made during the week of May 16, and perhaps the boldest of all was the promise by the student body to stand in solidarity with black, coloured, Asian and indigenous students.

A promise to see their pain and work to heal it. A promise to no longer be apathetic.

At the risk of being reductionist, the issues we are faced with at SU are by no means unique to us. It's a sad truth that racism is still very much alive and well in South Africa.

We must work hard to remove it from the minds of our people and from the soul of our nation. As a white person, I would like to appeal to the white people of this beautiful country to pull their weight in this regard.

It's time that we fully acknowledge that we built a system predicated on the oppression of our fellow South Africans.

We benefited from that system for

centuries. There is not a sphere of our society that is unblemished by the stain of racism, and no amount of bleaching of our history will erase this.

So, I'm asking white people, young white people, to accept the facts of our past in order to work to correct the atrocities of our forebears.

It is not enough to simply not be a racist. Because the world that we live in is racist, we must be anti-racist. We must oppose it when we encounter it in a visceral form, like Stellenbosch University had to on the morning of May 15. More importantly, we must oppose it when it is covert, when it spreads its roots beneath the ground and shapes the way we think and act without us even realising it.

And it's certainly way past time that all white people in the country start to dismantle racism with the same vigour as their fellow South Africans have been trying to do.

When we commemorate Youth Day, let us not only remember the students of the Soweto uprising 46 years ago but also work together to deliver a nation that is equal, equitable, and just.

Let's work especially hard to honour the sacrifices that have been made to bring us to where we are today. And let's work to make future generations of young people proud.

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