

# Stuck in the past or heading for flourishing people in their diversity?

In helping people, psychiatrists and other mental health workers are often struck by how stuck patients are in their difficulties and their past – without hope for the future and/or unable to take up purpose. I notice that, in similar ways, some of our fellow-South Africans are stuck in the socio-political past, whereas so much of recovery is about embracing and chasing a future with most of one's time and efforts.

Being occupied with the future rather than being preoccupied with the past, I advocate a worthwhile pursuit for South Africans: the flourishing of people in their diversity. This pursuit is as appropriate to our patients as it is to our colleagues and fellow-citizens. It is, moreover, supported by South Africa's strengths – her people and their diversity.

Pursuing the flourishing of people is supported by the leading principle of '*batho pele*' – translated from seSotho as 'people first'. *Batho pele* is, congruently, the overarching governmental vision for service delivery, formulated as 'to continually improve the lives of the people of South Africa by a transformed public service, which is representative, coherent, transparent, efficient, effective, accountable and responsive to the needs of all'. *Batho pele* is described further as being a way of life, and not an 'add-on' activity. It puts citizens at the centre of public service planning and operations, seeking to achieve a better life for all through services, products, and programmes of a democratic dispensation. It is underpinned by three aphorisms: *we belong*; *we care*; and *we serve*.<sup>1-3</sup>

The flourishing of people is steered, furthermore, by the principle of '*ubuntu*' – freely translated as 'in [human] existence with and through others'. *Ubuntu* is expressed in the maxim '*Unmuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*', translated as 'I am because you are; you are because we are'. Laureate of the Nobel prize for peace, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, offered the following description: 'A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.'<sup>4</sup>

Both *ubuntu* and *batho pele* give thrust to the idea that the flourishing of people is a worthwhile pursuit. A connection between the flourishing of people and diversity may be drawn by

virtue of that context-driven necessity in which people are known to be diverse, like the South African situation. I contend, however, that there is a more profound necessity to couple the flourishing of people with diversity: that is, it may very well be considered a resourceful asset that people are inevitably diverse in at least some respects notwithstanding their shared values.

The strength and potential that our diversity holds, are epitomised in the motto expressed in South Africa's National Coat of Arms as '*Ike e: /xarra //ke*'. Written in the Khoisan language, this literally means '*Diverse people unite*'. The motto espouses the diversities of various kinds among the citizens and at the same time calls for the nation to unite in a common sense of belonging and national pride – unity in diversity.<sup>5</sup> It defies, however, the confusion between unity and uniformity. Seeing the strength and potential of diversity brought Mr Nelson Mandela together with Mr F W de Klerk the Nobel prize for peace following their work in achieving a political revolution without the extensive violence and destruction that are known to go with such – at the heart of which was the replacement of racism with a core value of respect for diversity.

## Diversity: Points of departure

Creating a proper place for diversity in pursuit of flourishing people may incur the risk of conflict between people or groups of people. The risk of conflict may even deflate enthusiasm for embracing diversity in this pursuit. However, clarity on the point of departure in dealing with diversity and leadership skills in dealing with the potential conflict arising from diversity may help to vanquish such risk and deflation.

There are number of possible points of departure in approaching diversity in pursuit of flourishing people. These have to do with what the diversity is about and how respect comes into the approach.

One may say that diversity is about values of various kinds: cultural, ethnic, spiritual, religious, societal, institutional, organisational, prescriptive, normative, legal, scientific, and aesthetic values, also values of right and wrong, good (better, best) and bad (worse, worst), etc.<sup>6</sup> On opposite sides of a continuum, some values are convergent in almost all respects, whereas other values are anything but shared, even being in direct conflict with another. We share some values, and for those there is little if any

dispute – for example, the value that murder is wrong. About other values, we will never agree and neither should we – for example, the aesthetic values that one attaches to a particular musical composition or a painting.

An important distinction is that conflict between values should not be equated with conflict between people. Espousing diversity implies that conflict between values should be expected, but that does not necessarily mean conflict between the bearers of the conflicting values. The challenge is to maintain this distinction. To do so, the call is usually for respect of some kind.

Respect is indeed an issue in dealing with diversity of values, most markedly in case of conflict between values. I distinguish three critical options. These are: (i) that (all) *values* be respected; (ii) that the *person or group of people* bearing the values be respected; and/or (iii) that the *diversity* of values be respected.

Regarding (i), it is little challenge, if any, to respect those *values* that you share. It is rather impossible, however, to respect those values with which one totally disagrees or, for example, those one finds revolting. For example, many Christians would not be prepared to respect the religious value that someone other than Christ be the redeemer. They would also not respect the value that all values are equal. They would call that syncretism, which is not compatible to their core beliefs. Similarly, other religions may not be prepared to respect values that oppose theirs. This very difficulty arose, for example, in the debate about provision for religion in schools in South Africa.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, some may still want to defend the need for respecting the values of others, saying that they may respect those values even when disagreeing with them. This is unconvincing, however, for the substance of such 'respect' is rather elusive, if not merely paying lip-service to the idea. Advocating that all values are equal, moreover, is akin to ethical relativism and does not account for the diversity in perspectives on the relative importance that people ascribe to the relevant values.

Regarding (ii), respecting *people* even when their values are in direct conflict with yours seems more feasible than the former point of departure, even if it may prove very difficult in practice. Many people and religions ascribe to respecting people, even unconditionally. Personally, I value this point of departure profoundly and advocate it. However, two problems with it should not be ignored: when values are in conflict, they are not always personal values, but may be institutional or organisational values. That means there is no obligation to respect that institution or organisation in which the values reside in the same way

one would respect a (natural) person when there is a conflict of personal values. Second, even in the personal domain, it may just be too tall an order for some people to respect their opposition, their enemies or that person whom they consider not worthy of respect (for example, the murderer, the child molester, the perpetrator to whom they have fallen victim currently or in the past, etc.).

The third option is much more modest and practically more feasible: to respect the *diversity* of values. That requires neither that you respect a value that you find unacceptable, nor that you respect the person you (might) find unrespectable. However, respecting diversity of values does not preclude one from respecting someone's values or respecting even the person unworthy of respect. Respecting diversity of values, moreover, adds particular benefit: that is, taking diversity *per se* as a resource to treasure and to pursue. Respect for diversity of values takes the differences seriously, yet it does not preclude taking account of the shared values too. Furthermore, unlike option (i) mentioned above, it excludes those values that are incongruent with respecting the diversity of values. Racism, for example, underscores differences but is devoid of respect and of treasuring diversity as a resourceful asset.

Having respect for diversity in pursuit of flourishing people, if of a substantive kind, is more than a mere attitude – as admirable an attitude as I consider it to be. It has to involve action in which skills are deployed to unleash the potential it holds.<sup>8</sup> The skills include an awareness of and sensitivity for the values underpinning actions; a sharp eye to recognise the values at play; creating a space inviting pertinent values to be revealed; and, critically, communication skills.

Getting the values that matter of all the role-players on the table takes communication skills. It takes communication skills to create the space and spontaneity necessary for the values to surface. It takes communication skills to uncover the relative importance of values in making plans and decisions. It takes the communication skill of reasoning to uncover the values and the ways they relate to making plans and decisions. The fears, the needs, the threats, the fantasies, the aspirations, the anger, the ignorance, the reasoning all may be laid bare with communication skills.

Once the values are on the table, including the conflicting values, it takes communication skills to deal with them in collaborative spirit. Here the distinction between substantive and executive communication may be helpful. For executive communication, communication is merely the means to an end. For substantive

communication, communication is a critical end in itself. The latter then brings about joint plans and decisions – meaning that it is also going somewhere – but the journey there is of critical importance. By deploying substantive communication, the substance of future flourishing is built through the building of reciprocal understanding.

It takes skill to generate involvement of all the role-players whereby the pervasive attitude is invoking the establishment of partnerships in making and executing plans and decisions. Thus, even in the face of clashing values, the stance is that we may approach the differences between the values in partnership. The opposition between the values need not go with an opposition between the bearers of those values. Rather, the benefits of an apposition (i.e. being on the same side) between the role players instead would speak of leadership even in the midst of their conflicting values. Thereby, 'we' versus 'them' is turned into 'us' – battles are turned into alliances in which the variety of contributions is valued.

In conclusion, rather than being stuck in the socio-political past, I advocate that our occupation be with the flourishing of people in their diversity – a skilful occupation that takes the diversity of values as a resourceful asset in the flourishing of people in individual and group contexts.

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#### Editor

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