**RECONCILIATION**

*Reconciling in a divided society*

By Fanie du Toit

Reconciliation obviously means different things to different people. This flexibility can be viewed as both a strength and weakness. When it draws people with different points of view into conversation, it is a strength. It is a weakness when it tolerates injustice.

Reconciliation often starts when farsighted leaders take a long, hard look at their divided communities and discover that both sides in fact need one another to realise their own hopes and dreams, not only materially, but also morally. When societies pretend that individuals and groups can live in isolation, as during apartheid and colonialism – everyone’s longer-term aspirations are undermined. This was true even for those who enjoyed unfair advantage during apartheid.

We are in fact interdependent, even if we remain unequal and divided. For a long time South Africans believed that they could live without one another, that they were better off “apart” than together. But this approach failed. Dismally. Today we ask how it was ever possible for apartheid beneficiaries to think they would somehow be able to lead peaceful and prosperous lives whilst simply ignoring the interests of those around them.

This idea – that we are interdependent with our enemies at every level of human existence – has radical implications. When taken seriously, it cannot help but change things dramatically. It propels us across divides and divisions that we never thought possible. It also motivates people to challenge the status quo with all its power structures and holy cows, as in fact South Africans began to do in the 1990’s. When we take our interdependence seriously, we are able to build truly inclusive and credible processes of change. We are willing to include enemies when we understand that, unless everyone is part of reconciliation, it cannot last. We are, in turn, able to include enemies when there is sufficient credibility built into the processes for all parties to feel respected. By acknowledging our interdependence we begin the hard work towards equality and long-term peace. Reconciliation processes last when they inclusively and fairly represent the interests of all, turning violent relationships into mutually-beneficial ones.

When interests clash head-on, as they almost always do at one point or another, the idea of interdependence reminds us there is no option but to press on, to remain focused and to keep talking. Others never go away. As President Mandela said to the mighty apartheid army’s top general, Constant Viljoen: “We cannot beat your army, but you cannot shoot us all. Sooner or later we will have to talk”. The result was a series of smart compromises that gave everyone something. If on the contrary, one is unwilling to compromise, it is a sure sign that one has not understood how profoundly entwined one’s interests are with those one is competing with. The alternative to compromise, however difficult, may well be losing everything.

Reconciliation based on the acknowledgment of interdependence often does not begin directly by dealing with the bad things that happened between people or groups of people. Rather they tend to begin by generating a shared belief in an interdependent future. Once we can believe in a shared future, and understand that we are moving towards this future together, we are both more motivated and better able to turn to the past to deal with unfinished business.

Dealing with the past is part of realising the future. Glancing backwards is a way of moving forward, or at least, this is what it ought to be. Obviously details of how to deal with the past will differ between contexts. Perpetrators and the victims, together, need to work this out. There are no rules, except that the inclusivity and fairness that motivated enemies to embrace reconciliation in the first place eventually become the hallmarks of the society they build together.

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