Roots, metaphors and values in our storytelling

- Chancellor, Deputy Chief Justice Dikgang Moseneke;
- Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Professor Tawana Kupe;
- Other Deputy Vice Chancellors present;
- University Registrar;
- President of Convocation;
- Parents; and
- Distinguished Graduands,

For me, this is truly a humbling occasion.

Even in my wildest imagination, I never conjured up a moment like this, where the august University of the Witwatersrand would honour me for the small decisions I made from one moment to the next as I tried to live my life as well as I could.

Today’s scene wasn’t in my mind as I was growing up in the dust of Orlando East or played in the squalor, smells, screams and laughter of James Sofasonke Mpanza’s Number 2 Shelters, where my father had a dry cleaning depot.

It wasn’t there as I languished in police cells and nursed tortured body and soul after police interrogations.

It wasn’t there through my long apprenticeship in the craft of storytelling – a never-ending apprenticeship that I continue to enjoy.

Thank you for this honour. Thank you, particularly to my colleagues in the School of Journalism.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to congratulate my fellow graduands, who are today receiving well-deserved rewards for their hard work.

Congratulations.

Your achievements today are not mere garments you nonchalantly slip into before you move on to greater challenges. They are also recognition of the efforts of the many people in your lives – your parents, your siblings, your playmates, your teachers throughout life, and in a funny fashion, even the enemies you encountered along the journey.

Talking about this recognition reminds me of the Setswana saying, Motho ke motho ka batho – which you might loosely translate into a person is a person because of
As you celebrate today and prepare to move on to even greater heights, don’t ever forget where you come from, the roots, the bruises and the metaphors that shaped you and your values.

As you go out into the world, now or in future, you will be applying for jobs and will be interviewed by would-be employers eager to meet their obligations under the Employment Equity Act.

They will be eager to eliminate “unfair discrimination” and they really want to implement “affirmative action measures to redress the disadvantages in employment experienced by designated groups, to ensure their equitable representation in all occupational categories and levels in the workforce”.

Tears always well up when I think of these interview panels trying to translate their pious commitments into actual practice: in their interviews they search for clones of themselves – men and women who dress like them, who were educated at the institutions where they were educated, who speak with the same Model C accents that they use, who think like they do. I have seen them replicate themselves in boardrooms and other workplaces across the country.

In these boardrooms and workplaces you will find white men and black men who are white inside, as well as tough women who could be wearing pants and moustaches. I’m often left wondering: Whatever happened to caring and nurturing women and their soft tones, what happened to the metaphors from the location and the villages of Inkandla or Kgabalatsane, what happened to the metaphors that should be enriching South African business, creating the new in the same way an Abdullah Ibrahim has enriched the world’s culture by asserting the swagger of the Kaapse klopse, the s’camto of our locations and the recitation of the attributes of God in his music?

South Africa should be the richer precisely because of what we have endured over the centuries.

I for one will never forget the Thloloes, Bakwena ba Mmatau, bo-Modimosana. I will never forget the Mpolos – abo Mwelase – who brought me up. I will always have my late father and mother, Letebele and Nokuthula, in the stands, cheering me on in this journey of life.

There are other people who came into my life later, people that also helped pummel me into shape – my sisters, Motlapele and Sibongile, my partner Thunyelwa, my
children, and other relatives in the family, and my colleagues – many of them are in the hall here today.

I remember the late Matthew Nkoana, Drum and Golden City Post journalist, who patiently taught me the five Ws and an H of storytelling – Who did What, Where, When, Why and How – as we sat on folded blankets on sisal mats in the Stoneyard Prison in Boksburg and in other prisons in 1960. We scribbled our exercises on toilet paper with pencil stubs we had smuggled into the prison.

I remember the long queue of mentors in various newsrooms – Boy Gumede, Doc Bikitsha, Lesley Sehume, Molaudi Mosielele, Casey Motsisi, Stan Motjuwadi, Phillip Selwyn-Smith, Dave Hazelhurst, Aggrey Klaaste, Percy Qoboza, Can Themba, Juby Mayet, Jill Chisholm, Ameen Akhalwaya, etc., etc.

My political mentors also live in me: Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, with his wide and white smile and who once taught at this university, Rolihlahla Mandela, Mwalimu Nyerere, Peter Molotsi, AP Mda, Steve Biko, Zwelakhe Sisulu….These hammered into me that the other always comes first – the voiceless, the weak, the downtrodden, the vulnerable and that it is their stories I should tell, ahead of any other. They immersed me in the values that liberated this country politically in 1994 and that will ultimately liberate it from the other scourges ravaging it.

True liberation will dawn when we wake up from our amnesia, an amnesia deepened by the purr of huge German engines under our feet on the accelerator pedals and the aroma of expensive whisky and cigars.

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to divert a little and tell you about two men – they have to be men – that I find seated in a room. There is a litre bottle of brandy between them and the liquid is down to 500 ml. I ask them how much liquor they have. One says the bottle is half-full and the other that it is half-empty.

They are both giving me the same information, that there is 500 ml of brandy left, AND they are telling me something about themselves.

The one who says it is half-empty is probably a social drinker, who drinks when the liquor is available, but can live without it if it is not.

The other could be an alcoholic, already panicking about where he will find his next bottle.

Their statements are much more than just statements about the quantity of brandy left in the bottle – they tell me about their values, about what is important to them.

Wait. My question also says something about me: Why do I want to know about the brandy? Am I going to replenish the supplies? Do I want to join them and reduce the quantity of liquor available for each? Or am I preparing to get rid of them?
The three of us together tell a complex story that reflects the values of the group, our community, or our nation.

In the same way, the media produced by a community give us much more than factual information; they tell us about the values of the owners, the journalists working on them, and the society that consumes them.

The readers dip their hands into their pockets to buy the publications and thus keep them alive – nobody puts a gun to their heads - and the broadcast audiences switch on voluntarily.

As storytellers, however, we also have to bear some responsibility – a duty of care, as one of my favourite writing mentors has elegantly described it. In his book, *Writing Well – The Essential Guide*, Mark Tredinnick says writers have a duty of care that they owe to their readers, to the cause or purpose of their writing, to their societies, to their people and to their language.


This duty is often betrayed, for example, in a newspaper I picked up this week, where the caption of a picture on its third page proclaimed:

X and Y are spotted leaving the complex where they live in the footballer’s Range Rover.

What the newspaper was trying to tell me was that X and Y were spotted leaving in the footballer’s Range Rover – not that they live in it.

Did the reporter who wrote the caption care about his craft or about the reader who was paying precious money for this story? Did the news editor care? The sub-editor? Did the editor who signed off on this page care?

On the opposite page, page 2 of that newspaper, another sentence assaulted my eyes: “The family feud ensued at X Hospital last Sunday.”

Is this carelessness or is it the result of inadequate training?

These lapses range from the examples I have given to serious breaches of journalistic ethics.

Last year – 2013 – the Press Council of South Africa received 537 complaints against newspapers and magazines. That number over a year would not, on its own, bother me – 537 against the millions of words that journalists churn out every day is like a
bottle full drawn out of the vast Atlantic. What does bother me, however, is that two-thirds of the complaints are adjudicated in favour of the complainants.

We should also remember that society has a way of forgetting the good, but will always stubbornly remember the bad and the ugly.

What galls me is that these errors can be avoided very easily. All it takes is for storytellers to keep a simple checklist that would magnify ethical or other problems for them before they press the “send” button:

- Why do we need to tell this story?
- Who will benefit from the telling: my ego, my boss’s ego, my readers, or my community and society in general?
- Who will be hurt by the telling?
- Are we telling it well - using the right words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs?
- Will we sleep peacefully at bedtime after we've told the story?

If we ask these questions we will be discharging our duty of care.

If we don’t, we abdicate the authority to question those in power when they plunder our State purse or when they misuse power.

As storytellers and as educators of storytellers, we need to get back to basics, draw deeply from our roots and feel our scars afresh to justify our place in this democracy.

It is particularly important that we do this as technology has broadened democracy by putting the tools of communication, of storytelling, in the hands of every citizen.

My next-door neighbour, Zodwa, is now her own reporter, cameraperson, copy taster, sub-editor, and publisher. She can now tell her story to the world at the click of a button on her cell phone, without having to go through an intermediary.

Thank you for listening to me.

Joe Thloloe
Chair of the Board of the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism and the South African Press Ombudsman