

Commemorating RFK's 1966 Historic Visit to South Africa

Speech delivered by Gita Pather, Director of the Wits Theatre

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Thank you and good evening. It is an honor to be sharing the stage with this esteemed group of panelists to commemorate Robert F Kennedy's inspirational visit to SA in 1966. A recurrent theme in his addresses was the immorality of racial discrimination and the moral responsibility for all thinking, rational beings to oppose discrimination at every turn. As a writer and idealist ... I love words especially those that manage to talk to the soul about the soul and the lofty principles that should unite us all as human beings.

50 years ago, SA and the United States faced similar challenges: institutionalized racism that denied and dispossessed people of their human rights on the basis of their skin colour. Racial discrimination in South Africa was entrenched and policed by law, preached from pulpits and the idea of White supremacy, a lived experience for both Black and White. The circumstances of Black people in both countries were not that different: an Apartheid slavery imposed by the White Colonialist on a native population here and in the States, a people unable to escape their enslaved past long after the abolition of slavery.

In 2016, we are no longer debating the equality of all races and so we have come a long way. In SA with democracy, our Constitution that enshrines the values of the Freedom Charter, no-one can be discriminated against on the basis of race. And so it is in America.

But have we truly internalized that truth or do we mouth words that mask long and deep-seated prejudices? Both our countries continue to deal with racism despite laws that make discrimination illegal. Prejudice stems from ignorance, a value system so deeply ingrained that it is unconscious. We assume that an education is a guarantee of an illuminated shackle-free mind. That the scales of ignorance and prejudice shall fall away replaced by respect, a true acknowledgement that our blood runs red, that we all have a common ancestor and that any surface difference is purely evolution.

Right now in South Africa, we are talking about racism and almost shocked by the fact that it exists despite 27 April 1994. But in the context of freedom we need to remember that despite African Americans securing the vote with the 15th Amendment of 1870, many southern states prevented African Americans from voting until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In 1994, when many of voted for the first time, we made a number of naïve assumptions including that our leadership would rise to the challenge of being a government that could resist the snare of power, and that Mandela's rainbow nation would erase the blood stains of apartheid.

As an activist, it was hard to envisage freedom in my lifetime but it came to pass with the unbanning of the ANC, the freeing of Nelson Mandela and the 27 April 1994. Tonight, there are no special branch agents in the audience (I hope), none of us will be detained or imprisoned or placed under the infamous house arrest that Albert Luthuli was, when Robert Kennedy paid him a visit in 1966. Yes, we both: SA and the USA have walked a long road and our freedoms were hard won.

So where to now?

To use Robert Kennedy's words... *What is the battle to which we are all summoned?* Here today in 2016. It is to endorse his words... *a battle for the future.*

Bernie Sanders in a recent campaign speech said and I quote,

"The issue of wealth and income inequality is the great moral issue of our time. It is the great economic issue of our time and the great political issue of our time. Truthfully there is something profoundly wrong when the richest 80 people of the world own more wealth than the bottom half of the global population: 3, 5 billion people".

Even more astounding is that it is actually 62 individuals who earn more than the combined wealth of 3.5 billion people. Robert Kennedy was a passionate advocate for global human rights and I wonder what he would have made of this world we live in today? A profit bottom-line driven business ethic of the winner takes all prevails, dividing our world between the very rich and the very poor, an unbridled global consumerist society creating environmental havoc, driven by avarice, blind to inhumanity, led by the morally bankrupt where the lives of ordinary men and women, whole countries even are traded like the slave markets of old. The cold war has been replaced by another, more insidious one waged across boardroom tables by multinationals, accountants and compromised governments, negotiated with criminal intent, fueled by hatred and fostered by fear.

Our battle for the future is a battle for decency, for good to prevail, less about money, more about people, less about preserving borders and more about acknowledging our common humanity. In South Africa you would think that we would learn from our history but history also reveals that for some reason, we never do.

Freedom and democracy are inextricably linked to the material wellbeing of people. A hungry man has no need for the vote. According to an Oxfam global inequality report, South Africa remains the most unequal country in the world with the two richest South Africans (Johann Rupert and Nicky Oppenheimer, having wealth equal to the poorest 50 percent (i.e. 26.5-million people). The Oxfam report makes further damning claims including:

- Inequality in South Africa is worse today than at the end of Apartheid.
- R350-billion flows out of South Africa illegally through corporations.

- Unemployment is biggest driver of poverty in South Africa.
- 8.3 million South Africans are unemployed and more than 50% of them are young people including university graduates.
- One in four South Africans right now will go to bed on an empty stomach.

How? Why has this happened? Part of the answer lies in endemic state corruption aided and abetted by big business. In the last 20 years we have lost R700 billion to the pockets of corrupt government officials, money that could enable quality education, deliver health care and houses that are more than a shelter over a head. The Marikana Massacre was the direct result of the collusion of government with big business, 37 miners who died at the hands of police and no one is held responsible.

The Fees Must Fall campaign and the student unrest are but symptoms of a society in deep trouble. That campaign began here at Wits and spread across the country forcing us all to confront uncomfortable issues. Those strident angry young voices are echoes of the Soweto Uprising, young people saying no to the past, no to the lack of transformation in education that perpetuates an intellectual world view that denies Blackness, no to a government that has stopped listening to its people.

The Statistician General has articulated that it is a moot point that this generation is now less educated than their parents. This month Africa Month: 30 schools were vandalized or torched.

Robert Kennedy prophetically said I quote:

“In the long run we can master change not through force or fear, but only through the free work of an understanding mind – through an openness to new knowledge and fresh outlooks which can only strengthen the most fragile and the most powerful human gifts – the gift of reason.” Unquote

Education, true education is one that is not a veneer, a shiny Armani suit cloaking the same old ways of thinking and being, an unquestioning voice. The gift of reason is a powerful thing, one that governments all over the world fear...when “the people” become “the citizens”, not loyal cadre, an engaged citizenry that are not blindly loyal, who unbundle tradition with its unswerving adherence to authority, patriarchy, chiefdom, tribalism, false nationalism. True knowledge and reason is freedom: freedom to speak, to oppose, to question.

It is an act of sedition.

Robert Kennedy warned when he said:

Those who cut themselves off from ideas and clashing convictions....encourage the forces of violence and passion which are the only alternatives to reason ...

The violence we are witnessing in our communities, the burning of universities and schools may be acts of frustration but they also speak to the lack of thought and reason. Our only hope lies in education, the education of each and every South African not as a token matriculation certificate or university degree but one that allows the individual to see beyond the conformist framework of traditional learning to a transformative state of an analytic, uncompromising moral mind..

As Africa month draws to a close, our State broadcaster has announced that it will not show images of the daily service protests across our country because it needs to tell a good story. We are exhorted to embrace our African-ness and we should but we should also reject the dictators, the regimes across Africa that silence dissenting voices, treat women as the spoils of war, and turn children into soldiers. We must: Black and White isolate those who oppress, imprison, murder and maim: we cannot protect the Mugabe's and Al Bashir's because they are "African". For if we do, we deny our humanity, we are asserting then that our race is more important than morality, we dehumanize ourselves in the quest to be seen as Africans.

In conclusion, it is time once again as Merton Shill, a student and the Transvaal Regional Director of NUSAS said in his Vote of thanks that 8th day of June 1966 :

I quote:

To cast off all self-protective timidity ...to willfully and deliberately descend into the arena of danger to preserve the independence of thought, and conscience and action which is our civilized heritage. We must now set ourselves against an unjustifiable social order and strive, energetically and selflessly for its reform.

Freedom and the fight for freedom is a continuum, a journey and it never stops... there will always be those who wish to subvert justice and so we must be vigilant, we cannot relax and we cannot give our power away to government, any government.

Thank you