

Welcoming speech by Prof H Russel Botman, Rector and Vice Chancellor, Stellenbosch University on occasion of the first Stellenbosch Seboka on Higher Education and Ethical Leadership: Global Perspectives in a Southern African context.

23 April 2008

Ms Frances Hesselbein, Prof Betty Siegel, dr John Knapp, Ms Geneva Johnson, respected Vice Chancellors, learned representatives of institutions of higher learning, ladies and gentlemen ... it is an honour to welcome you all at this very first Stellenbosch Seboka on Higher Education and Ethical Leadership with the theme Global Perspectives in a Southern African context.

I take it that you are aware that this occasion is a continuation of the think tank approach known as the Oxford Conclave where leaders from various parts of the world are invited to share and pool their thoughts on issues that confronts the world community. The essence of these gatherings is deep, open, honest and courageous dialogue on issues that goes to the heart of our society and social fabric.

It is significant that formidable thinkers and leaders from 20 leading institutions of higher learning are gathered in Stellenbosch at this juncture of our country's history to confront issues such as ethical leadership and the role and contribution that institutions of higher learning ought to play in establishing, inculcating and nurturing a culture of ethics, fostering a lifestyle firmly embedded in values and morals that are cherished and shared not only by leaders but by society at large.

We are all too familiar with the international debate about dwindling ethics and lack of ethical behavior, moral degeneration and the need for moral regeneration. Corruption, fraud, nepotism, racism, sexism and all sorts of other -isms are tearing the fabric of our society apart.

As a country, South Africa has gone from the miracle nation to a nation that needs a miracle to make our hard earned democracy work. We are blessed with one of the best constitutions in the world – one that engenders values such as justice, equality and fairness. We

have a Bill of Rights that serves to bolster these cherished values, and the transition from the apartheid to democracy can justifiably be described as a moral revolution. I do not have to dwell on the immoral nature of the laws and structures of apartheid. Suffice it to say that the new leaders of our democracy represented a higher moral standing, their cause was just and to the majority of the South African people the new order represented a victory of right over wrong.

So why has the euphoria of 14 years ago made way for disillusionment? Are we indeed faced by what one can call a democracy gone wrong? I do not purport to have all the answers, but from my personal analysis much of the current malaise has to do with the multiple ethical challenges that we as a nation has to face and that our leaders are ill-equipped to deal with. I think one of the stark realities of the break from apartheid was that the new people in government who were internationally celebrated as the people who did the right thing, was now confronted by many right things to do and the question was how to choose between multiple right things in a manner that will serve the best interest of the people.

This is in essence what the sociologists would call an ethical dilemma. In literature about ethics one often comes across the phrase: ethics is not about doing things right, it is more about doing the right thing. In the South Africa of 1994 and beyond, I think this represented a bit of an ethical conundrum because the new political leaders were not only faced with choosing the right thing to do, but also doing the right things right. Let me explain by way of example: the clear dichotomy in health services for the affluent and the poor that the new leaders inherited begged the decision to do the right thing. Hence the shift of focus and resources to primary health care with the intention of making health care more accessible at day hospitals in the townships. In the process funds were reallocated resulting in provincial and general hospitals getting a smaller slice of the cake. The outcry that followed was chronicled in big bold letters in our newspapers. But the reallocation of resources was ethically and morally the right thing to do. But doing the right thing right, posed more of a challenge. We are all too familiar with the reports of corruption, fraud and unethical behavior that are so common to some of these centres nowadays. And one will find this situation in other sectors of public service and enterprise, from education (in all its

forms: primary, secondary and tertiary), to housing, to local and regional government.

Things went horribly wrong when it came to doing the right thing right. But what seems to be the problem? The quick answer is that people who lack the required skills and expertise have been appointed to do the job. This is the one side of the coin. The flipside in my contention, is that there is a clear absence of the necessary ethical reflection among people in leadership positions, not to mention the resultant lack of the required ethical climate in organizations and to my mind there is still too much of ethical relativism in South Africa which only serves as a convenient refuge when people are confronted by choosing the right thing to do. The normal reaction is “right for who? And right according to whose culture or value system?”

What is needed in our country and the world is that we interrogate and challenge these issues rigorously and vigorously. We as the leaders in higher education should lead by example, we should be the embodiment of ethics and morality that will serve as behavior-guiding and behavior-inspiring models for the students that we educate and train so that they in turn can inspire others to the extent that ethical leadership and ethical reflection permeate everything we do. Only then will we be able to say that we are realizing and giving true meaning to the values of justice, freedom, equality and fairness that are so desperately needed across the world.

And I guess that is the significance of this gathering: bringing leaders in pedagogy together to initiate difficult discussion about difficult topics in difficult times. I welcome you to this first Stellenbosch Seboka on Ethical Leadership with the words of the well known American scholar, Gary Edwards:

“When people accept responsibility for their own conduct and for the well being of others, ethics serve to stabilize society. Ethical leadership is the antidote to despair and cynicism that is crushing our spirit and clouding our future. Ethics is our hope.”

Put another way by a man that is revered throughout the world for his sense of fairness and humanity: Nelson Mandela referred to the RDP of the soul [the reconstruction and development of the soul of the

nation] in other words the need for a value-based society in the attainment of our development objectives. Central to this approach and philosophy are ethics and ethical leadership in institutions of higher learning. And I think the time has come for us as leaders in education to take up the challenge to do the groundwork for the reconstruction of the soul of our nation. And looking at the themes that will be covered and interrogated over the next few days, I think that we are well poised to do exactly that.

I wish you well in your deliberations over the next few days and may this Stellenbosch Seboka and the hope it will bring, indeed serve as an antidote to despair.

May I utilize this opportunity to sincerely thank our partners at Kennesaw and George State Universities of the United States of America for their support and the manner in which they have embraced the idea of recreating the platform of cutting edge thinking here under the auspices and stewardship of Stellenbosch University. We see this conference as the first step in a long walk to reconstructing our society. My sincere thanks also, to our sponsors, Absa Bank and Coca Cola, for providing the bulk of the funding for this significant event.

Welcome once again and may your discussions be incredibly successful. I thank you for your attention.