

Eulogy ***Christof Heyns***

16th April 2021

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Dean of the Faculty of Law, Professor Elsabe Schoeman
Colleagues in the Faculty of Law
All other University of Pretoria Colleagues as well as
Colleagues from other Institutions
Friends

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Firstly, allow me to express my sincere gratitude for the opportunity afforded me to participate in this event aimed at reflecting on, paying tribute to, and celebrating the life of Professor Christof Heyns. And, of course, given the stature of Professor Heyns, I am profoundly honoured to present this eulogy.

Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen:

In Part 1 of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, Sogyal Rinpoche introduces the frequently quoted statement, which reads as follows: "**Death is a mirror in which the entire meaning of life is reflected.**" Perhaps this is what the function of a eulogy is... to use dying, this important life event, which all of us will experience, as one of the opportunities afforded those who had been close to us to affirm and celebrate life, particularly a life well lived, a life lived to the fullest.

Reading Sogyal Rinpoche's statement certainly brings Christof's life, his life contributions and the value of his contributions to society into vivid relief ...

Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Let me indicate here that I will only speak of Christof's contributions to the University of Pretoria and broader society that I am familiar with. I am sure that his very significant contributions that I will not speak of will be broached by others participating in this event..

First, how did I come to know Christof Heyns? Well, many years ago, while I was still teaching at the University of Venda, I collaborated on various initiatives with someone who became a very close colleague and friend, namely Dr Murray Hofmeyr. When we first met (I think that

we were working on a volume of race and racism at the time), Murray Hofmeyr spoke constantly of his close friend, Christof Heyns, and about his work for the Centre for Human Rights and his inspiring work for the Southern African Student Volunteer Organisation (SASVO), an organisation that he had established. Murray impressed upon me that Christof was an academic that I simply had to meet. Well, as impressed as I was with Christof's academic work and the various civic initiatives in which he was involved, a few years passed before I eventually had the opportunity to meet Christof, first on a telephone call about a critical matter that was being debated at UP at the time, and then later in person when I joined the University of Pretoria.

When I first met Christof, I realised that Murray had not exaggerated. I realised that I was engaging with, first and foremost a critical scholar of note. And of course, his extensive scholarly output or rather, his scholarly legacy, attests to this. In our first meeting, I also realised that, above all, I was in conversation with a person with boundless energy for initiating new ventures aimed at improving the learning opportunities provided to students; ventures aimed at advancing the interests of academia more broadly, as well as ventures involving international human rights and many other causes close to his heart.

During the course of our friendship, Christof drew me into various initiatives in which he was involved (as he did with many others, I know). For today's occasion, I single out three of these initiatives, because of their significance to me and my work, on the one hand, and what they illustrate about Christof, the scholar, academic activist and benefactor, on the other hand:

- The first of these initiatives relates to a task assigned to me by the Executive in 2016. At the time, various student formations made it known that they were unhappy about the absence of a policy on homophobia at the University of Pretoria. I immediately approached Christof for his assistance. In our subsequent discussions, we agreed that developing a policy dealing only with homophobia and then to add it to the University's policy on racial discrimination would result in the University ending up with a patchwork of anti-discrimination policies. It was then agreed that we should rather develop an omnibus anti-discrimination policy that would address all forms of discrimination at UP. Professor Heyns immediately set to work on this project, with the assistance of Professor Anton Kok and various others. The current UP Anti-discrimination policy is a result of Christof's initial conceptualisation and input.

- A second initiative in which I was involved with Christof is a reading group of sorts (Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee's the *Second Machine Age*, various books by Yuval Harari and most recently, the book, *Humankind* written by Rutger Bregman). It was our discussions on the implications of the arguments proposed by Brynjolfsson and McAfee as well as Harari that influenced many of my endeavours in relation to my Teaching and Learning portfolio at the University of Pretoria... Our discussions certainly inspired me to encourage a greater future directedness in our teaching and learning programmes...
- The third initiative was an internship project aimed at offering UP students an opportunity to be exposed to the work of the AU, UN and metropolitan governance structures. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this initiative has not yet come to full fruition... I am, however, committed to lending whatever support I can to the realisation of this venture in the year ahead...

Of course, I am keenly aware of Christof's many other important contributions to academia and society more broadly, including his contributions to the University of Pretoria, as the Director of the Centre for Human Rights, then the Dean of the Faculty of Law, and most recently, as the Director of the Institute for International and Comparative Law in Africa (ICLA). I am also aware of and here wish to acknowledge his signally influential role in the African Human Rights Moot Court Competition and his role in the establishment of the Nelson Mandela World Human Rights Moot Court Competition and the South African National Schools Moot Court Competition.

Christof's exceptional and seminal contributions to Human Rights internationally have been written about extensively and I will consequently not detail these at this point. Suffice it to state that, as Amnesty International recently put it [and I quote]:

Christof Heyns was "a baobab in the human rights world. A giant in his field [who] fought hard for a just world"

On a more personal note, with the passage of time, I also realised that Christoff did not only care deeply for the issues that I mentioned, but that he also cared deeply about his family and friends. And anyone who spent any significant period of time with Christof would also have realised that he was remarkably caring and humble ... a 'mensch' as Adv. Thuli Madonsela recently described him. One of his former students, Patrick Eba, the current UNAIDS Country Director for the Central African Republic recently said of Christof:

“He was a thought leader who embodied the values of excellence with ubuntu”

As most of us know, especially those of us who work in the field of psychology, that authentically caring for others in the way that Christof did, is very frequently reciprocated by a similar engagement on the part of those at whom this caring is directed. So, those who knew Christof invariably cared deeply for him.

Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen:

This event is meant to be a celebratory occasion. And while I fully agree with this laudable intention on the part of the Faculty of Law, it will be remiss of me if I do not also acknowledge that celebrating the life of Christof Heyns comes on the back of a sense of intense loss on the part of those who cared deeply for him, including his family and close friends ...

And it is in acknowledgment of this sense of loss (and perhaps in an effort to assuage it) that I wish to read a few lines from Maya Angelou’s poem, *When Great Trees Fall...*

Earlier I quoted Amnesty International’s reference to Christof as a baobab tree. It was when I read this quote that I was reminded of Angelou’s poem, *When Great Trees Fall...*

I will read from the first, second and fourth stanzas of the poem.

When Great Trees Fall
by Maya Angelou

First stanza

When great trees fall,
rocks on distant hills shudder...

Second stanza

When great souls die, the air around us becomes light, rare, sterile. We breathe, briefly. Our eyes, briefly, see with a hurtful clarity.
Our memory, suddenly sharpened, examines, gnaws on kind words unsaid, promised walks never taken.

Fourth and final stanza

And when great souls die, after a period, peace blooms, slowly and always irregularly.
Spaces fill with a kind of soothing electric vibration.
Our senses, restored, never to be the same, whisper to us.
They existed. They existed. We can be. Be and be better. For they existed.

Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen:

With your indulgence, I want to adapt the last line in the poem as follows for this occasion:

“People like Christof Heyns existed. They existed. We can be. Be and be better. For people like Christof Heyns existed.”