

South Africa: The Quest for Belonging and Social Cohesion

Ladies and Gentlemen

What does that word “home” mean to you? When we hear that word, a variety of images may spring into our minds – a house, a neighbourhood, family, a country? It may also invoke certain tastes and smells perhaps?

Home has multiple meanings. Psychological research shows us that it is not merely about a physical place or location such as a house. Rather it is about the connection between the person and the place. How place becomes part of our sense of identity. The meaning of home is constituted by an interaction between place, community and person so that a physical place becomes part of who we are – it gives us a sense of belonging, a sense of community and a sense of identity.

South Africa is my home. South Africa is not just a physical place that I call home. It is part of who I am – a South African. It is in my accent, the way I speak, my body language and perhaps too in the way I see the world in general. So home is really about the interconnectedness of place and person.

In one of the first studies done on the meaning of home, it was noted that some places are always thought of as home, whereas others were never regarded as so even when people had lived in a place for fairly lengthy periods. For example, student residences and digs are never represented as home even though some

students may stay in the same residence or digs for more than five years. Interestingly, for many of us the family home remains home for many years after we have moved out physically. The family home where we grow up from child to adult creates a sense of rootedness that tends to remain with us psychologically over a lifetime. So even immigrants after living in their adopted country for several years, my still use the term 'home' to refer to the country of their birth and childhood.

From a psychological perspective, the concept of nation is considered to be an extension of the sense of family. Some of the terminology we use shows this psychological connection. For example, we often refer to the motherland or fatherland. Just as our families – our parents, aunts and uncles, sisters and brothers - can be annoying, embarrassing and infuriating but we love them deeply, countries can invoke the same sets of feelings.

South Africa is a country that can be frustrating, infuriating and despairing but it also invokes joy, a sense of possibility and hope. South Africa is a country of great contrasts. South Africa is a country of wealth and poverty, first class infrastructure with squatter camps, then there is the crime yet we are also highly religious, there are areas of grime and decay but then there is the sunshine, the wide open horizons with spectacular sunsets.

South Africa is also a country full of surprises; where the unexpected can happen. Think of the South Africa of the mid to late 1980s. There was a state of emergency, widespread protests,

no freedom of speech, international sanctions and spiralling inflation. Civil war with bloodshed was what everyone anticipated. Yet less than a decade later a settlement was negotiated without the bloodshed and war.

In 1994 – the year of the first democratic elections-was also a year in which we surprised ourselves and the world that was watching us. In the months running up to the elections, many of us stocked our grocery cupboards – tuna, baked-beans, candles-yet look what happened!

Then in 1995 after years of sporting isolation, we not only hosted the Rugby World Cup successfully we won it! Now we are counting down the days to hosting the FIFA Soccer World Cup. Again there are dire warnings from some quarters! I am confident that we will surprise the world once again by hosting the best world cup ever! Energetic, good food and beer, sunshine and loads of excitement. South Africa is a country of possibility and opportunity where the unexpected can happen. This theme has shaped my life.

I was born in 1961 - a year that marked the beginning of the apartheid in its most divisive and oppressive form. For a child of my race and gender, it was a time that did not hold promise at all. Rather, 1961 was a year of doom and despair for the majority of South Africans.

In 1980 I enrolled at the then University of Natal – one of very few black students who had been able to obtain a permit to attend a

white university. Job reservation was still firmly in place. Although I had been the top academic performer in my class throughout my schooling years, my choice of career was severely restricted. Teaching was one of the few options. Besides race, it was then also considered a suitable choice for girls who would marry and have children.

At the time, I would have laughingly dismissed outright, anyone who said that one day I would be the rector of Tukkies! At that time the University of Pretoria was an Afrikaans university exclusively for white students.

Yet in 2009 it happened. The University of Pretoria appointed as its Vice-Chancellor and Principal, a woman of colour from Durban. Moreover, she is a De la Rey! Die ander dag het iemand vir my gesê, “vir ’n De la Rey is jou Engels is baie goed!”

South Africa is a country of surprises and promise. This is because over the centuries we have learned to be an adaptable nation, spirited and innovative. As the saying goes, “dit is ’n plek waar ’n Boer ’n plan maak”

My appointment at Tukkies was made possible because of the adaptability and vision of the University and its leadership. In the 1990s the University of Pretoria admitted black students for the first time. Having started out in 1908 as an English language college, then becoming fully Afrikaans, we now conduct and teaching and research in both English and Afrikaans.

This year 2010 we have just over 42 000 full-time undergraduate and postgraduate students – both white and black. We have another 20 000 students enrolled in our open and distance learning programmes. These changes have occurred without any drop in standards or quality. Instead, we have improved our quality. The University of Pretoria is one of the very few South African universities to be included in the world ranking of universities. We have world class status in over six research areas. Our business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science in less than ten years after it was opened, was listed among the among the top 40 business schools globally for executive education. As Tuks graduates will know, a University of Pretoria qualification gives you a sound platform for success in meeting your career aspirations.

The University of Pretoria will be a focal point in the Soccer World Cup. Because of the quality of the campus infrastructure, we will be hosting the Argentinean Soccer team – not only on our sports fields but they will be staying in our accommodation. In January this year, Diego Maradona visited us to inspect the facilities. When asked about the quality, he responded to the international journalists by using a single word: Perfecto!

Ladies and gentlemen, there are many aspects of South Africa that are world class – several schools and universities, infrastructure, and climate of course. Yes, there are challenges. Our history shows that we have the adaptability, innovation and pioneering

spirit to overcome these. To do so, we need skilled and educated people.

Skills are needed not only to build the economy but also to overcome the challenges and build the social fabric of South Africa. University education is not only good for the individual in the form of benefits such as better employment prospects, income and quality of life; when a nation has a high proportion of educated citizens there are significant benefits for the society as a whole.

Educational attainment has been shown to be a significant effective lever for emerging economies like South Africa to increase social capital and social cohesion. Various cross-country studies have revealed that individuals with higher levels of education also have higher levels of entrepreneurial activity and that entrepreneurs who are more educated are more likely to create a greater number of jobs. Research comparing several countries has also found a positive correlation between tertiary education indices such as the absence of corruption, rule of law and public administration quality.

The South African government has recognised that the investment in higher education pays dividends in the form of benefits for both the individual and for society as a whole. Thus the education budget has been increased this year and we expect that there will be further increases in the years to come.

Yes, South Africa was affected by the global economic recession – but not as severely as many other countries and we are now showing signs of recovery. The recession had some positive aspects too – housing prices are at their lowest in many years and the bond rate is at its lowest in 30 years! There are jobs for skilled people and the remuneration levels allow us to enjoy a good quality of life – good quality housing with gardens and swimming pools and many of our schools and universities offer relatively affordable and good quality education.

What we do need is to build social cohesion in order to overcome the challenges that we currently face. Social cohesion is the willingness of members of a society to cooperate with one another in order to have peace and prosperity and thereby a general sense of well-being.ⁱⁱ Social cohesion involves a sense of belonging, and feelings of community. Through experiencing a sense of belonging and community individuals can act in ways that bring about positive social outcomes as problems are seen as shared responsibilities. It involves the willingness of people in a society to cooperate with one another in order to survive and prosper. In South Africa we have existing nodes of social cohesion from which we can build and extend throughout society. Borrowing from the neighbour, cake sales for school fundraising, the church bazaar are all examples of how we can cooperate for the good of purpose bigger than ourselves. Our challenge is to extend these experiences of social cooperation across the historical divides of race so that we can build a peaceful and prosperous South Africa.

Social cohesion does not depend on homogeneity or sameness or all of us conforming, rather it requires respect for difference and diversity so that we can live harmoniously in peaceful co-existence.

Educational institutions such as universities have a particularly important role to play in building social cohesion In South Africa. Therefore, as the University of Pretoria we recognise that as a public university in a developing democracy it is not enough for us to merely produce highly skilled graduates, but to also create an educational experience that will contribute to developing graduates who will be role models and leaders in building a better society.

Our first years all become involved in a number of programmes and activities that are designed to develop good citizenship. We have also embraced community engagement as a core component of our academic mission. Thus our engineering programme has been shortlisted for an international award that recognises best practices in how community engagement can be incorporated into professional education programmes.

Ladies and Gentlemen, discussions about South Africa as home often raise the question if there is a South African identity - after all, South Africa was so deeply divided for such a long time. I shall quote one interesting fact to answer that question – the Blue Bulls rugby team, home base Loftus Versveld, Pretoria - majority of the players white Afrikaans males. The fan base – 64% of Blue Bulls fans are black South Africans!!!

Ladies and Gentlemen, discussions about home whether about South Africa or elsewhere, engender feelings of belonging but then there are also practical considerations about jobs and houses. I remain living and working as a proud South African despite the challenges, because South Africa is a place where my need for belonging and connectedness as well as my need for prosperity are at one. Because we are a dynamic, rapidly changing society, there are opportunities to do what is less possible where tradition dominates. At the same time, through remaining at home I can on an everyday basis remain connected to my family and our traditions. Also important to my sense of self-worth is that I make a difference – in my community and society to make a contribution, however, small to building a better South Africa. You could say that South Africa is a home under renovation, to complete the project we need skills and we need skilled people to work together.

i Sixsmith, J. (1986) The meaning of home: An exploratory study of environmental experience. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 6, 281-298

ii Stanley, D (2003) What do we know about social cohesion: The research perspective of the Federal Government's social cohesion research network. *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 28(1) 5- 17

iii The Times 10 March 2010