

Rhodes University Human Rights awareness campaign march to Cathedral

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7 March 2008

This is the culmination of a week in which committed members of Rhodes University have sought to draw attention to the injustices and fissures that continue to afflict our society and the University. Courageous young people have provided us moving testimonies of the behaviours, conduct, actions, words and silences of fellow students and staff that cause hurt, anger and bitterness and a feeling of being let down by, as one student put it, 'my place of hope'.

The painful experiences that have been courageously expressed shame and challenge us to fulfil our constitutional obligations and ensure that conduct at Rhodes is in accordance with the values of our Constitution and the rights that it affirms and seeks to advance.

They challenge us to dedicate ourselves

1. First, to building an institutional culture of the assertion of human rights in which there is no accommodation of bigotry and intolerance or practices that are alienating, discomforting and exclusionary.
2. Second, to purposefully creating an open, vibrant, democratic and inclusive intellectual and institutional culture that embraces difference and diversity, rather than seeing as Michael Anderson so wonderfully put it 'difference as a disability'.
3. Third, to giving attention to how we get students and staff to think critically about tackling racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, sexual violence and illiberal views, traditions and practices in a way that liberates us and commits us to the 'cultivation of humanity'.

Jacob noted the other night that there is a popular notion that the issue of racism was settled in 1994. This is a dangerous myth, as is the self-comforting myth that we are a 'rainbow

nation', which confuses aspiration with reality. It is hardly possible that centuries of systemic institutionalised racism (or sexism and other kinds of prejudices and intolerance) can be eradicated in a short fourteen years of democracy.

It is crucial that we not confuse a commitment to non-racialism and non-sexism with a colour-blindness and gender-blindness that refuse to acknowledge that race and gender are still very much issues.

The paradox is that a serious commitment to non-racialism and non-sexism must accept the realities of race and gender and the privileges and disadvantages that continue to be associated with race and gender.

In the *Algebra of Infinite Justice*, Arundathi Roy writes

the only dream worth having ...is to dream that you will live while you're alive and only die when you're dead.

This means

..to love. To be loved. To never get used to the unspeakable violence and vulgar disparity of life around you. To respect strength, never power. Above all, to watch. To try and understand. To never look away. And never, never to forget.

Jacob also challenged us the other evening that we must be very careful of turning our faces away from human rights violations in order to 'avoid confrontation and keep the peace'. We must never 'get used to the unspeakable violence' of life around' us. Must 'never look away'. And never, never forget.

The measure of our social transformation, civility and liberation is ultimately how we think about, and the extent to which we respect, affirm, defend, promote and assert the rights of people that are different from ourselves – whether this difference is located in 'race', class, gender, culture, language, geography or sexual orientation.

One of our students states that

I live in hope that this campus will no longer merely indulge surface tolerance, but actively engage in change - of attitude, ideologies and value judgements.

Amen to that!

Let us live so that we can live while we're alive and only die when we're dead, and with out last breath say we lived and also gave all to the freedom of humanity.