Speech given at the Ceremony for an Award of an Honorary Doctorate by Rhodes University to Edward Webster on the 02nd April 2016.

THE PRESENT AS HISTORY; CONVERSATIONS WITH MY ANCESTORS.

Edward Webster,

Professor Emeritus

University of the Witwatersrand.

Mr Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, distinguished guests, and fellow graduates of this great University.

Let me begin by thanking the University for bestowing this honour on me. Let me also congratulate today’s graduates. This is a day of celebration for you; but it is also a day of celebration for your families and your teachers. So let us congratulate your families who have made such sacrifices to be here with you today ----- and your teachers, for their contribution to your successful graduation today.

I stand before you a proud graduate of Rhodes University, some one who also benefitted some fifty years ago from deeply committed teachers. I also stand before you as a member of three generations of Webster’s, all who are alumni of Rhodes, and are here with us today: my sister Jeni, my brother Trevor, his son Alan and Alan’s son, Simon. All of us members during our years at Rhodes of Cory House - except of course my sister!!!!

I stand before you then as a son of the Eastern Cape where I spent the first two decades of my life, in its villages and small towns. It is in the Eastern Cape where my ancestors settled on the left bank of the Kowie river in the early nineteenth century. It is here where they now lie in solitude in the graveyards of Cradock, of Graaff- Reneit, of Fort Beaufort, and , of course , Grahamstown.

I speak about my roots, because we are gathered here today, as a University and as a country, at the cross-roads. Who are we? What is our identity? And who amongst us are South Africans?

I raise these questions because the emergence last year of the “Rhodes must Fall Movement “, followed by the “Fees must Fall Movement”, brought to the fore the legacy of our settler colonial past and the sharp inequality between black and white that persists today in spite of the great triumph of our democratic struggle in 1994. Why, twenty two years into a democracy committed to non-racialism, has black consciousness re-emerged?

Forty years ago whites were asking themselves the same question with the emergence of the black consciousness movement under the charismatic leadership of Steve Biko. In 1973 I was asked by NUSAS, the national student organization of white students, to give a lecture on the origins of black consciousness and how whites were and should be responding to this challenge.

I argued that for whites to liberate themselves from racism will be a long and difficult intellectual and psychological process . It will involve, I said, a ‘critical self examination to understand the forces that have shaped us – this process of de-socialization and de-colonization is a total process as it involves re-discovering the history of our country and the culture of its peoples ” (Webster, 1973:8).

Needless to say the apartheid regime reacted in a very hostile way to my lecture. I was arrested two years later and charged in 1975 with, inter alia, promoting black consciousness. Re-reading this lecture forty three years later I would say much the same as I did then; as a community whites have made little progress in speaking local languages , with little knowledge of African history, art and music. Of course this is a broad generalization and there are many whites who have begun to confront this challenge , many of them are here at Rhodes, especially those doing pioneering work in the humanities and social sciences as well as in the physical sciences.

What turn are we to take at this historic cross- road? Let me share with you three propositions on how we could approach this challenge:

Firstly, as the leader of the PAC Robert Sobukwe used to say, there is only one race and that is the human race. UNESCO, somewhat belatedly, concluded fifty years ago that the peoples of the world appear to possess equal biological potentialities for attaining any civilization level. Differences in the achievements of different people must be attributed to their cultural history” ( UNESCO, in Baxter and Sansom, 1972. Pp71-72).

Secondly, our identities are socially constructed and they can be reconstructed to build a joint national culture (Mangcu, 2015) . As Steve Biko remarked : “Sure a joint culture will have European experiences because we have whites here who are descended from Europe . We don’t dispute that. But for God’s sake it must have African experiences as well” (Biko, 2004:148). The Cuban anthropologist, Fernando Ortiz, referred to this process of integration as transculturation, he called it tomorrows phase, “where cultures fuse and conflict ceases …., where mere racial factors have lost their discriminating power” ( Ortiz, 1995;55)

This leads to my third observation: there are two different ways of building greater social cohesion and collective solidarity. The first is value-based, defining solidarity as a “moral imperative that … is a fundamental value in all the major religions of the world: Do to the other what you would like her to do to you. Love your neighbour as yourself” ( Lindberg, 2014:136).

This is of course a fine goal but not always attainable. I want to propose a more pragmatic approach, one that sees solidarity as a constitutive element of mutual self-interest. It is best captured in the age-old trade union slogan, an injury to one is an injury to all. Solidarity in this context means moving from an individual self-interest, or the self-interest of a smaller group, to a broader self-interest. As Luli Callinicos shows in her book, The World that Made Mandela , Nelson Mandela broadened his idea of solidarity from the AbaThemba group, to the Xhosa people, then to black Africans in general and , as he interacted with the cosmopolitan peoples of Johannesburg in the forties and fifties, to solidarity between all those who live in South Africa.( Callinicos,2000)

This is the challenge we face: we need to realize that our long term interest lies in our common humanity as South Africans, rather than in short term individual gain or in racial populism. This can only be achieved if we remember our past. If we don’t remember how we got here, we won’t know how to fix it.

But the question, surely, is how do we remember this past? On the one hand, we have a past of conquest and violent dispossession of land. Indeed, the city where we now stand, named after Lieutenant-Colonel Graham, led the British forces in the violent expulsion of the Xhosa from the Zuurveld in January 1812 . It was to become the first successful dispossession of the land of the Xhosa people (Leggasick, 2010:13)

On the other hand, how different would our history sound if told’, writes Jacob Dhlamini in his award winning book Askari ‘ not as a story of a racial war, but of what we might call, after Njabulo Ndebele, a ‘fatal intimacy’ between black and white South Africans”. “To say,” Dhlamini continues,” that apartheid generated an unwanted intimacy between individuals, and to challenge the false claim that the struggle against apartheid was simply a race war , is not to say that race did not matter or that race thinking has no salience. Race obviously mattered a great deal. But it would be wrong to think that race determined the allegiances and loyalties of individuals in any simplistic way” (Dhlamini, 2014: 260)

Mr Chancellor, Vice-chancellor , distinguished guests, fellow graduates. Is naming our city after the victor in a war not a constant reminder of a painful past ? Is it not inconsistent with our commitment to reconciliation? But, and here is where Dhlamini’s approach is relevant. Many of the British troops in the expulsion of the Xhosa from the Zuurveld were of Khoi origins. After all the Khoi had been made vulnerable by prior dispossession . They became collaborators in the war of dispossession. ( Leggasick, 2010:14)

How do we reconcile these conflcting narratives ; the master narrative of racial dispossession and redemption that lies at the heart of South Africa’s struggle history, with the story of collaboration and betrayal as the Khoisan fought “old acquaintances and in some cases relatives” ? ( Elbourne, cited in Leggasick, 2010; 14)

Reconciliation of these two narratives, I suggest, is possible; paradoxically as Moeletsi Mbeki and Martin Leggasick argue in the Preface to the book The Struggle for the Eastern Cape , out of the subjugation of the Xhosa, the roots of our democracy emerged through the non-racial franchise introduced to the Cape colony in 1854. By the end of the nineteenth century the Eastern Cape had nurtured generations of African voters among whom were the founders of 20th century African nationalism and eventually the successful struggle for democracy against white minority rule. (Leggasick,2010:v) As Mandela observes is his autobiography on his education at the Methodist mission schools of Clarkebury and Healdtown, “ These schools have often been criticized for being colonialist in their attitudes and practices. Yet, even with such attitudes, I believe their benefits outweighed their disadvantages”. ( Mandela, 1994:42)

If we are to make the radical changes that we must make to become a truly great African university you , the new generation of graduates , will have to find a way of understanding our past in its profound complexity- not only the pain of racialised dispossession - but also our on-going struggle to discover our common humanity as South Africans .

It is a complex and difficult challenge but I know from my interaction with the students of 2015 that you will not fail us. In the memorable word of Frans Fanon, “ Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it.’ ( Fanon, 1965)

Thank you.

References.

Biko, S. 2004. I write what I like. Johannesburg: Picador.

Callinicos, L. 2000. The World that Made Mandela. Johannesburg: STE Publishers.

Dhlamini, J. 2014. Askari: A story of collaboration and betrayal in the late apartheid period. Auckland Park: Jacana Press.

Fanon, F. 1965 .The Wretched of the Earth. London: MacGibbon & Kie

Leggasick, M. 2010. The struggle for the Eastern Cape, 1800-1854: Subjugation and the roots of South African democracy. Johannesburg: KMM.

Lindberg, I. 2014. Unions and Trade: What Kind of Solidarity? *Globalizations* 11(1). February. pp131-141.

Maclennan, B. 1986. A proper degree of terror: John Graham and the Cape’s Eastern Frontier. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.

Mandela, N. 1994. Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela. Johannesburg: Macdonald Purnell.

Mangcu,X. 2015. What moving beyond race can actually mean: towards a joint culture’ in the Colour of our Future: Does race matter in post-apartheid South Africa, Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

Ortiz, F. 1995. Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and sugar. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

UNESCO, Proposals on the biological aspects of race” (eds) Baxter, P and Sansom, B., Race and social Difference , Penguin Books.

Webster, E. 1973. Black Consciousness and the White Left, Lecture given to a NUSAS seminar at Elgin Farm. 01 December, 1973.