**ACCEPTANCE SPEECH**

**Award of LLD *honoris causa,* Rhodes University**

**22 April 2017**

The Chancellor of Rhodes University, The Hon Judge Lex Mpati;

The Vice Chancellor, Dr Sizwe Mabizela,

Chairperson of Council, Mr Vuyo Khahla,

Members of the Council of Rhodes University, the Executive Management and Senate of the University;

My fellow Graduands, and Family members;

Staff, Students and Friends of the University,

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Many years ago I was an undergraduate student at the then University College of Fort Hare, Alice, not very far from here. Among my many memories of the university, to which I owe so much, are two episodes during my final year at the university in 1968, and shortly thereafter.

In August 1968 we staged a protest demonstration by way of a sit-in in front of the Administration Building at the university. The Rector of the university, Prof JM de Wet declined to address the student body and hear our demands. He demanded that we elect a delegation with whom he could have a discussion and receive our demands. We refused. We refused because we knew for certain that that was a sure way of exposing our student leaders to victimisation. Day after day, we occupied the grounds in front of the Admin Building. Daily we debated the strategy of non-cooperation with the university whereby we resolutely refused to send a delegation to meet with the Rector. I was among those who were vocal in proposing that we elect a delegation in the light of the fact that we had, since 1959, refused to elect an SRC. At one point I even volunteered to be a one-man delegation. I remember arguing fervently that there cannot be a struggle without pain or casualties. That is a matter of fact, otherwise we may as well pack our bags and go back to class. This was roundly rejected. A few of us persisted with this until on the Friday students relented, and I was elected to lead a delegation on behalf of the students.

We presented ourselves at the Rector’s Office at 1200 noon that day. The Rector received us only to tell us that he had decided to close the university and all of us were dismissed. You can imagine that we did not take kindly to what we regarded as breach of faith, and we told the Rector in no uncertain terms. The moment we left the Rector’s Office there was an announcement to the students assembled in protest. While we were debating our next move, a convoy of police and army appeared as if from nowhere. Armed police and soldiers, with fierce Alsatian dogs approached, surrounded us. The Commanding Officer declared that we were all under arrest for trespassing! One by one we were all herded into our rooms to pack, back to buses that were awaiting us, and to the trains, and that was the end of our time at the university. I have written elsewhere about the role of Fr Desmond (now Archbishop) Tutu and the late Revd (later Dr) TSN Gqubule, as well the support of the lecturers and staff at Rhodes University like Daantjie Oosthuizen, Basil Moore and James Moulder in their support of the Fort Hare students.

As was the custom those days, the university re-opened after a few weeks, but I was among a dozen students or so who were dismissed. In my case I was forbidden even to set foot on campus. As I was an activist in the national student movement, a few months later I made my way to Fort Hare to meet Fort Hare and FedSem student leaders. That evening there was a party on campus (I think it was a Friday). As we were partying word went out that Mr Malan, the Deputy Registrar who was known to be the resident security policeman, came in with Security Police led by Donald Card looking for me. I remember I jumped out of the window, over the fence and disappeared into the night. That was the last time till 1990 that I set foot on the campus. I was proud that I escaped from the clutches of the police, with their dogs et al. I knew that when we are united and determined we could never be defeated. Needless to say, I never graduated at Fort Hare.

I tell those two stories of my youth and student days not so much to evoke nostalgia. I tell the story only to acknowledge that every generation of students has its own stories to share unique to each generation and circumstance. However, none is so unique that there are no lessons to be learnt from each. You will be aware that no less by reason of my own experience as a student leader in my time, I have an interest in the struggles of students at universities in our time. This interest is both social and political learning and discovering, but never without critique. For me the critique is that while acknowledging the importance of student activism especially in a democratic society, it is important to both take account of context and be forever alive to what it would take to bring matters to a satisfactory solution. No struggle, as we all know in South Africa, is a zero-sum game. It is important that in the execution of struggle, we come to an understanding of the conditions and elements of resolution.

The French philosopher Michel Foucault has made this very pithy observation: “Our greatest political problem is a lack of imagination.” Foucault is a post-modernist theorist. Like so much of contemporary French philosophy from Jean-Paul Satre, Pierre Bourdieu, Emmanuel Levinas, Alain Badiou to Jean Baudrillard, and to Paul Ricoeur we are confronted with the claims of life and society on knowledge, being and the imagination. In essence it is about the exercise of the mind to transcend and transform, and to imagine beyond the present – in literature, science, linguistics and the humanities. In a Convocation Address at Harvard University in June 2008, the author of the popular *Harry Porter* children’s fairy-tale series of books, JK Rowling has this to say

… the imagination is arguably the most transformative and revelatory capacity, it is the power that enables us to empathise with humans whose experiences we have never shared.

She made the point that what higher education does is to cultivate the power of the imagination that is inherent in many of us. It makes one think beyond the possible, and to create a world of fantasy and a vision of the future. To do so requires that one should place oneself, if you like, in an out-of-body condition and to dare otherness. She takes the view that to the extent that we can stretch our imagination, then we can vision a better world. When we dare to vision we shall not be bound by the constraints that seek to confine and imprison.

On one of the many occasions that I spent in prison without trial not very far from here, the poem by Richard Lovelace, *To Althea, From Prison* came to mind, and it was of great inspiration:

Stone walls do not a prison make,

Nor iron bars a cage;

…

If I have freedom in my love,

And in my soul am free,

Angels alone, that soar above,

Enjoy such liberty.

It means that we can reach out to a world beyond our immediate experiences. Rowling then concludes

We do not need magic to change the world. We carry all the power we need inside ourselves already. We have the power to imagine better.

In my quiet moments I have bemoaned the fact that, as Foucault says, our politics in South Africa is bedeviled by a lack of the imagination. To that I wish to add the absence of a refined idealism. By that I mean that idea of imagining a better world than the one we have, and recognizing human agency in constructing a better world. What pulled us through the darkest dungeons of apartheid was at all times the knowledge that nothing could confine us to the limitations imposed by apartheid.

So too, I am of the view that the challenge of our times is to recognize that there can be no future without recognizing that we cannot live only for what we eat and drink at this moment in time. We cannot just live for ourselves. We cannot simply be party to sustaining the elite and privileged just because that is our aspiration for now. I believe that students of today must accept that to be a student at any of our universities today is to occupy a privileged space. That every year some 80 000 students who qualified for university entrance are left behind. Many who graduate from our universities, not just in social sciences, engineers as well, are struggling to find employment. Universal Free Higher Education is a Manifesto of the privileged, as long as there are children in our country who are without desks, or school text books, or walk miles to get to the nearest school, or are without qualified teachers, or whose teachers are not in front of class and teaching during school hours, or who attend school under the trees come rain or sunshine, or fall into a pit latrine to meet their untimely death. Those are not uncommon experiences of our time. We cannot close our eyes to the inhumanity that we stare in the eye-balls and stirs our conscience.

I believe that the best possible kind of activism for our country is one that seeks to help us to re-imagine a better future that combines both our social and intellectual activism for our world. Autocrats, even today, will that we may never will for the different or transcendent, or desire better than what is dished out to us. That, by the way, was Richard Lovelace’s message to Elizabethan England. Even today, we are told that it is good for us to remain as we are. I beg to differ. My imagination and idealism tell me so.

The university in my view has a very important role in that regard. It becomes the incubator for advanced ideas, and projects that advance the future of humankind. The university is a space of contemplation, socialization and idealism, and critical thought. In this context it is welcome to experiment and test ideas. With society at large, the university is a partner in the laboratory of life. In a recent article in the World Economic Forum newsletter (23 March 2017) Peter Salovey, the President of Yale University seeks to make a case for the essentiality of the humanities in any university curriculum. I would not go as far as he does in essentialising the humanities as the sine qua non for human progress. I do accept, however, his central premise that “we need leaders of imagination, understanding, and emotional intelligence – men and women who will move beyond polarizing debates and tackle the challenges we face.” The argument is that the humanities are the highway to understanding society, coming to terms with the emotions and cultures, to understand and to empathise, and to grapple with uncertainty.

I had a memorable experience recently when I visited the archives of Leopoldina, the German National Academy of Science, founded in Halle in 1652. I heard that Albert Einstein was a member of Leopoldina. I then asked to see his file. I was then presented with the CV of Einstein in 1932, in his own handwriting, and signed in his own hand. In it he gave, as a matter of fact, his biography in one paragraph, that he had published papers on Relativity, his contribution to theoretical physics, the universities he has taught at, and his travels etc. The reference to his Nobel Prize for Physics in 1921 is passed by without fanfare. At no stage does he mention the groundbreaking nature of the work that he did, and how it had become one of the pillars of modern theoretical physics, even forming the basis for the later emergence of quantum physics, some suggest. In a rather diffident manner, he even mentions the countries he visited, but hastens to add that many of his travels had nothing to do with his science scholarship. Now, that is the man who dwarfs all others in science. That was in 1932. As we all know, in 1933, Adolf Hitler became the Chancellor as Fuhrer of the Nazi Socialist Party. Einstein was of Jewish parentage. In 1933 he renounced his German citizenship and emigrated to the United States.

What struck me about this is the interrelationship in human affairs between the mind and society. In Einstein’s case it was his renunciation of Hitler and his activism against racism. In a sense as a theoretical physicist he was able to imagine life beyond the given and visible, to envision an organic world in matter. An active mind and a fascination about nature and its processes produced a fertile imagination and insight into human affairs. Sadly, we were not allowed to take a photo of his unique CV. It is too pricey. His letters and papers, for example, have been earning lots of money at auctions around the world. Most recently a letter Einstein had written in 1953 to an inquisitive science teacher at a school asking questions about Einstein’s Theory of Relativity fetched $54 000!

I am privileged to receive this award at a Graduation ceremony of the Faculty of Commerce and Administration. I welcome that. This at a time when our country’s economy has been consigned to Junk Status by S&P, and other agencies might follow suit. I welcome that at a time when we are bombarded so much by statistics and economic information. I welcome it at a time when the President can put at risk so much that we need for a better future, so as to secure a future for himself and his cronies. I welcome that at a time when the Constitutional Court has dramatised for us how important it is for the poor to be assured of their social grants, and that the government , the Minister, and the agencies of state must never be allowed to put such mere livelihoods at risk. That is the essence of humanity. At a time when most South Africans today live on borrowed resources in borrowed time, what is the worth of money, and how can this nation imagine a better and a more wholesome relationship with the economic products?

For me the solution is in that word, to cultivate a sense of the imagination.

Allow me, Sir, to thank the university for this honour. Such accolades are never deserved, but must always be appreciated. They are never possible without the love and support of may people, in my case, many no longer in the living world. They are about one’s home and family, church, school and teachers at all levels, and the community in which one is reared. Today I remember them all. In my own family, my wife Dimza, our daughter Loyiso and her family and her husband James are of incredible support. To my brothers, Lizo and Sipho and their families I owe so much more than I can describe. Thank you.

I wish all the graduates today the best and a bright future. Congratulations.

Thank you.

Grahamstown, 22 April 2017.