

Presidential Address : Hazel Bowen

A WINNING NATION:

A question of attitude

South Africa is still struggling through the various phases of transformation. A study of political theory would reveal that, as could be expected, this is a time of great disturbance and imbalance.

Although the above seems obvious, the reality is tough to live through with any sense of understanding and composure. As a people, we are in a state of "crisis management" and it is becoming very clear that, as individuals, we generally lack sound coping skills. The pressure is high and the "solutions" often violent or aggressive. Rape, road rage, crime and family violence are all extreme expressions of this state of upheaval. A student, discussing her research on HIV/Aids recently, mentioned how many of the responses one comes across provide evidence of poor coping skills. This, on reflection, made much sense to me.

Equally, the opportunities provided by this state of transformation have also revealed weaknesses – one has only to refer to the high levels of corruption which are constantly being uncovered.

Globalization – recognised as offering both opportunities and threats to a society – hit South Africa in the midst of its own great transformation. External competition in the fields of business and education, economic speculation, and the rape of natural resources are further realities.

This period of history is termed "The Information Highway": it has also given rise to an "Instant" society. We expect all needs and wants to be gratified instantly, and we expect instant solutions. The *Tata ma chance* outlook!

Education can be the instrument which cools this volatile situation. Peace Education can provide the individual with a firmer sense of self, and a greater respect for others and our natural environment. In other words, peace education goes beyond "techniques" learnt to deal with conflict. It is a lifestyle centred on a win-win attitude, respectful communication and sound principles.

These principles must include ethics. "Ethic" is defined as "a set of moral values held by an individual" ; ethics "the philosophical study of the moral value of

human conduct and of the rules and principles that ought to govern it : a civil code of behaviour considered correct.” (Collins English Dictionary)

What is interesting to note is the growing number of projects expressly designed to achieve this change in attitude and life style. An example has been school projects providing peace education and stronger coping skills in situations of violence and gangsterism – of course, however, not enough of this type of project is being implemented. Another new development at tertiary level is the introduction of courses in ethics. The University of Natal now includes such a course in all undergraduate studies, and the University of Stellenbosch has a postgraduate course in Ethics as part of Environmental Studies.

As a society we need to propagate the values of non-violence. The strength of people such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jnr, and their achievements, should be emphasized to our youth instead of the violence which is their daily sense of reality. If not in the streets, then in their homes and through the media; especially television and movies. Advertisers are also at fault – the tone often used in the communication style is aggressive, “a put-down”. On our own doorstep we have a further role model in Nelson Mandela. These people lived with turmoil but developed a different set of coping skills. Can this be distilled and acquired by more of our people? Spirituality or religion universally centres on respect, love and care for others. “Ubuntu” stresses that we are human through our relationship with others. Yet these fundamental principles are buried under the pressure of retaliation and violence.

I noted the feelings expressed around the word “Peace” at a Conflict Resolution Workshop the National office hosted in 2000. What particularly impressed me was the realisation that **peace equals strength**. Yet the general perception is that violence and aggression are an expression of strength. **This realisation of the power of peace needs to be spread throughout our country, to young and old.**

Excessive control over people of any age is unproductive as it militates against the freedom to develop and grow; however, self-discipline allows one to reach for self-actualization. Goal setting and the management of the steps to reach goals need to be learned and applied. Positive action ensures a positive attitude. The undertaking to provide lifeskills as part of the school curriculum is commendable; one can only hope that it is truly and comprehensively implemented.

Individuals also need to understand how often they create the narrow boundaries for their own lives. This question comes to mind: *Imagine you are a drop of water afloat in a loving sea: now ask yourself, where are my boundaries?*¹

Another particularly apt homily is: *With every deed you are sowing a seed, though the harvest you may not see.*²

A winning attitude indeed!