

Conflict and Compassion in a Global Community

Excerpts from a plenary session at the
Authentic Leadership Summer Program

Halifax, Nova Scotia

June 19, 2003

1. TWO STORIES FROM SOUTH AFRICA: DAVID STEWARD AND SIBUSISIWE MLAMBO

David Steward: I come from Cape Town, South Africa, and I am involved with the FW De Klerk Foundation. Our objective is to build on the great progress we have already made in South Africa, to continue the miracle, and to continue to work towards improved relationships among our many, many groups in South Africa.

It is a great privilege for me to be here in Nova Scotia, and especially to meet so many people who are struggling with similar problems in other parts of the world. It is a learning experience, and I would like to thank the Shambhala Institute for making this possible.

One of the happiest days of my life was the tenth of May, 1994. That was the day on which the new government of National Unity was inaugurated in South Africa. It was a sunny winter day, with eggshell-blue skies over the Pretoria highveld and the Union Buildings—which had long been the seat and symbol of white power in South Africa.

For most of my career, I had served in the public service of that white power. For the latter part of my career, as Chief of Staff of President F. W. de Klerk, I had been involved in the process that was to transform our country. On the day of the inauguration of President Mandela, the whole spectrum of the South African population was there, in the Amphitheatre of the Union Buildings. People from the ANC who had been fighting a bitter war against people from our defense forces, were sitting beside one another. There were people from all over the world who came to watch this special moment in our history. The whole spectrum of our country was present. And it was as if an enormous burden had been lifted from our shoulders. After 350 years, we no longer had the burden of having to do all this alone; we now lived in a fully democratic country and society.

This was not only a liberation for black South Africans—for Sibusisiwe and 35 million other black South Africans—this was a liberation for me, as a white South African. It was the result of three-and-a-half years of long negotiations between parties that had been bitter enemies. All of our political parties—twenty-three in all—were part of a process that was characterized by violence and walkouts. But always we returned

to the conference table, until we had hammered out an interim constitution, which later gave rise to our final constitution—one of the finest and most liberal constitutions in the world.

So on the tenth of May, 1994, I felt liberated. We—all of the people of South Africa—had together created a miracle. But human relations don't allow time for a let-up. There is no stage in any human relationship when you can say, "Hey, I've solved the problem." All relationships between people—between families, husbands and wives, communities—require never-ending, ongoing care, nurturing, and communication. We need to continually unravel the problems that inevitably arise in any human relationship.

The objective of our Foundation is to continue working on the relationships between the different communities in our very complex and beautiful country. We do this by encouraging communication between leadership groups. Last year we organized two meetings which we called "Bush Conferences," between President Mbeki and top people from his government, and top people from our minority communities. These took place away from the bright lights of the media, at a place where we could really talk about the mutual problems that have arisen in our relationships.

Another Foundation program promotes and strengthens the constitution we negotiated in 1996, by concentrating on the rules of behavior and by making sure that all South Africans can claim their constitutional rights. We also have a program that promotes research into what works in societies like ours—and what doesn't. That is why it has been so interesting to come to the Institute and learn from people who come from Guatemala, Sri Lanka, Israel, and Palestine, about ways they are dealing with difficult relationships and ongoing conflicts in their societies.

So this has been a particularly enriching week for me, and I will remember it for a long time. I will go away with a lot to think about and a lot to be grateful for.

Sibusisiwe Mlambo: Good afternoon to you all. I am from Durban, South Africa, and I work for the Diakonia Council of Churches, in the Stress and Trauma Healing Program. Because of the history of our organization, we need to respond to what people experienced in the past.

The story I am going to tell is one of forgiveness and reconciliation, and it is about the role the Truth and Reconciliation Commission played in bringing back people's dignity and restoring relationships that were damaged during the times of Apartheid. South Africa has a history of divide and rule. People have been discriminated against because of their skin colour. People were killed, and there has been violence all over the country.

This particular story starts in 1989, when there was a lot of violence, mainly in black townships and communities. The violence we experienced in our province, KwaZulu-Natal, was different than in the rest of South Africa, because it was black on black. In the rest of South Africa it was black against white.

In 1989 I was still in school, in the community of Trustfeed. There was a police station nearby, and the station commander happened to be a white man. During those times, people from the area phoned the station commander, whose name was Brian Mitchell, saying, "We need your protection. People are coming to attack us. Please come and rescue us." Instead of going with his men to help them, they went to the area and started killing people. Eleven people died. I am talking about women who were on a night vigil and who were not armed. This was cold-blooded murder.

Around that time, the government of South Africa decided that enough was enough. They decided we needed to begin a dialogue among all the race groups of South Africa. In February 1990 political prisoners like Nelson Mandela were released from jail, and then a dialogue began at the World Trade Centre.

The dialogue led to the first democratic elections in South Africa, in 1994. Then in 1995 the Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC] process began, where all the parties that had been enemies were brought together in a process of dialogue. The TRC acted as a mediator or a facilitator in that process.

This station commander, Brian Mitchell, had been charged and was in jail, and he was brought before the TRC. He admitted all that he had done. He said to the community of Trustfeed, "I am so sorry. I didn't know what I was doing."

Brian Mitchell told his side of the story. The system under which he had been operating was oppressive. He had found himself in the middle of things, and he had taken instruction from the people who were his bosses.

The community was given an opportunity to talk about how they felt about what had happened. They understood why Brian Mitchell had done what he did. The people of Trustfeed said, "We understand you, and we feel sorry for you. There is no need to keep a person like you in jail." That is how Brian Mitchell got his amnesty.

On December 16 last year, the anniversary of reconciliation in South Africa, I went back to the community of Trustfeed. The community was celebrating this anniversary. Brian Mitchell was there with his wife, and he said, "I am here to meet the people of Trustfeed, and to repeat again what I said during the TRC process. I am here to say I am sorry to the community. I cannot bring back the people I killed in 1989, but I can help the community in the reconstruction and development process. What is the best we can do as a community? Can I help you in any way? Can I help you in fundraising? Can I help you in influencing the people of South Africa, black and white, to see what you need? I'm happy to help you start over again."

But the greatest story of all, the story which I am going to relate to my colleagues at work and to other people in South Africa, is taking place right here. I thank the Shambhala Institute for inviting me to come to this conference. This is a success story for me, again, because I am sitting here on this stage next to Dave Steward, one of the people who, as you know, was working for the Apartheid government. For the first time in my life, I am hearing someone who is saying, "I'm so sorry for whatever went wrong in South Africa."

For me, that is a very powerful statement, because everyone is usually saying, "I wasn't responsible—the government was expecting me to do what I did; it was the government of the day, and so there was nothing I could do." But David is saying, "I was involved." On Saturday, he said, "We knew we were riding a tiger, but it was so difficult for us to get off this tiger."

For me, I am so happy that Dave is here and there are people like him who are saying, "What can we do together?" People of South Africa, as diverse as we are, can help rebuild South Africa. There are future generations to come, and we don't want our children to grow up in a divided society where people are in conflict. Thanks very much.

[Applause].