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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young professionals to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. An exempt operating foundation endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

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Ubuntu: The Virtue of Being Fully Human

BY SHARON F. GRIFFIN

DURBAN, South Africa

October 1995

The walk from my grade school to the house in which my mother's oldest sister lives takes less than 15 minutes. I considered myself a Big Girl when on occasion my parents allowed me, along with my brothers and cousins, to walk from St. Benedict's to Aunt Sister's house after school. If we had pennies, nickels or dimes among us, we'd "sneak" by a corner store run by Uncle Jay and Aunt Rose, who actually were not related to me. I say "sneak" because we thought we were getting away with something, eating Tootsie Rolls, Squirrel Nuts, Blow Pops, Moon Pies, oatmeal cookies and other sweets before dinner. In actual fact, Uncle Jay and Aunt Rose were "spies," "commissioned" by our parents to keep watch over us as we made our way home.

Mr. Pouncy was a "spy," too. He was one of my father's cop friends. When I reached my teen years, I liked to go with friends to dance parties at the downtown convention center in my North Carolina hometown. By this time I thought I was grown, as teenagers are apt to imagine. Inevitably, I'd run into Mr. Pouncy or some other police friend of my father's. It wasn't until years later that I learned my father often phoned his friends in advance of the parties to find out if they were assigned to work there. If so, he'd tell them to keep an eye on us, his children.

Mr. Pouncy's eyes were among many that watched over me in my youth. There were also many hands, visible and invisible, that guided me along the right path. It is by virtue of these and other people that today I am able to pursue the fullness of life, to realize the promise of being fully human.

Ubuntu is a word of Zulu/Sotho origin used to describe the philosophy that humans are human by virtue of other humans. *Ubuntu/Botho* actually means "the art of virtue of being human." It is a non-racial, non-sexist philosophy that implies a recognition of interdependence. Unity, tolerance, compassion, generosity, respect, open communication, closeness, genuineness, empathy and sharing are the values and virtues that constitute *ubuntu*, or African humanism. It espouses communitarian ideas, with an emphasis on social responsibility.

Ubuntu is considered an indigenous, purely African philosophy of life, imported from neither the East nor West. *Ubuntu's* contemporary meaning is traceable to Pan-Africanism and the works of African philosophers such as John S. Mbiti and L.S. Senghor's *Negritude*. Oscar Dhlomo, who served as Minister of Education and

Sharon F. Griffin is an ICWA fellow studying the language, culture and politics of the Zulu people of KwaZulu-Natal.

Culture in the former KwaZulu government as well as secretary-general of the Inkatha Freedom Party, has described *ubuntu* as "something out of Africa. All African languages throughout the continent do have a word that defines the person (*umuntu*). Therefore, if we develop this philosophy of *ubuntu* and give it a respectable theoretical framework, we will, for a change, be developing and perfecting our own indigenous product..." In its purest form, *ubuntu* is about caring for your fellow brother and sister. The scriptural adage goes, "Love your neighbor as yourself." And Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "an individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individual concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity."

Zulu proverb: *Ikhoth' eyikhothayo* (It licks the one which licks it). Cattle may be seen standing licking one another. The idea of reciprocity is illustrated. One helps the one who helps him.

I've read and heard a great deal about *ubuntu* during my time here. The philosophy is periodically discussed on radio and television talk shows, and often is the subject of local press features. "Aristotle and *Ubuntu*," "Adopting *Ubuntu* Provides the Answer to Old-Age Care," "The Enemy of Self," "*Ubuntu* and Faith," and "*Ubuntu* and the Workforce" are just a few headlines that have topped newspaper stories. The Constitutional Court considered *ubuntu* when deciding to strike down the death penalty here. In a *Sunday Times* article in June, a headline read, "The Gallows Makes Way for *Ubuntu*." In his remarks, Judge Johann Kriegler quoted the constitution, which urges that society move from "victimization to *ubuntu* (humanness)." Judge Thole Madala also discussed *ubuntu*, arguing that while a murderer might not have shown his or her victim mercy, society should not take its values from the murderer. Instead, it should "impose" its *ubuntu* on him. (*Sunday Times*, June 11, 1995:23)

There's even a book out titled, "*Ubuntu — The Spirit of African Transformation Management*," which suggests that *ubuntu* could prove an effective management strategy, like the Japanese, German and Australian models for management. Conceivably, managers could harness *ubuntu* for greater productivity, author Lovemore Mbigi maintains.

A journalist friend, Khaba Mkhize, writes a twice-weekly column on the "Quest for *Ubuntu*" in the *Natal*

Witness, a daily based in Pietermaritzburg. The last time I saw Khaba we had lunch with Mazisi Kunene, who has written and lectured extensively on *ubuntu*. Kunene is a professor in the Department of Zulu Language and Literature at the University of Natal.

I've also learned about *ubuntu* from black South African university students, who like to engage me in conversations about "self-indulgent, self-centered Western individualism" versus African humanism. Listening to some of their ideas about the "West," I'm sometimes left with the impression that we're seen as people without any sense of community. We're born, raise ourselves, shun relationships with others and live to satisfy our individual needs, without the slightest regard for the betterment of family, friends or society. It's usually at this juncture in a conversation that I tell students about Uncle Jay, Aunt Rose, Mr. Pouncy and others.

Something Old, Something New...Borrowed and Blue

There's little worth arguing about when it comes to *ubuntu* as a life philosophy although I do understand why Victor Bredenkamp, professor emeritus at the University of Natal, wrote, "it is virtually impossible to become fully human if one lives in an informal squatter settlement, or if one cannot find employment or if one is illiterate in a sophisticated society."¹ However, he fails to understand that while circumstances affect the way in which we live, circumstances do not determine humanity. My mother once lived on a school bus with her 12 brothers and sisters, along with the family cow. When her father, a farmer, sought employment at a local factory he was told, "Mr. Hannon, we don't even let niggers sweep our floors." While they lived in a sophisticated society — a society that at the time legally denied them certain rights — they were fully human. Consider President Nelson Mandela. Apartheid affected his life, not his humanity.

Umlom' udl' okushisayo, udl' okubandayo (The mouth eats the hot and the cold). Just as the mouth will eat hot and cold food, so in life one should expect the bitter and the sweet.

While the concept of *ubuntu* embraces positive connotations, it has been "resuscitated" through the years to "justify all shades of ideologies and political practices."² Apartheid ideology, for example, fed into

1. Bredenkamp, Victor. "Aristotle and Ubuntu" *The Natal Witness*, 1 July 1995: 6

2. Mdluli, Praisley. "Ubuntu-botho: Inkatha's People's Education" *Transformation* 1987 (5).

mine management practices that sought to replicate hierarchical relations within black ethnic groups by using chiefs and indunas to control mine workers and, by extension, the interests of mine bosses. This style of ethnic managerial control, or colonial/apartheid management, proved a useful way to argue away worker rights, namely the rights to better working and living conditions as well as wages.

African intellectuals of yesteryear and now use the concept of *ubuntu* to promote a universal brotherhood among black Africans, especially as a means of countering colonial exploitation and domination. Except, as one scholar put it, *ubuntu* "has been treated as a transhistorical concept, whose meaning remains the same regardless of particular historical conjunctures."³

The former KwaZulu government reclaimed and reinterpreted the concept of *ubuntu* to suit its own peculiar political aims. In 1978, the KwaZulu government mandated that all schools falling within its jurisdiction teach *Ubuntu-Botho* as a subject from the first year of school up to matriculation (high school). *Ubuntu-Botho* was the name of the syllabus introduced by Inkatha, and in all the books the first chapter was on Inkatha history, policies, strategies, organizational structure, philosophy and leadership.

While the stated aim of *Ubuntu-Botho* was to teach pupils good citizenship, a 1978 memorandum sent to principals, circuit inspectors and teachers in the KwaZulu Department of Education and Culture stated otherwise:

"The syllabus is based on the aims and objectives of the National Cultural Liberation Movement (Inkatha) as found in the Constitution... In drawing up this syllabus the committee was influenced by...the need to develop in our youth the whole person within the ambit of Inkatha constitution... [and] that many adults seem to hold divergent views and beliefs about Inkatha... These are passed to the young and cloud the youths' minds. It is thus hoped that this syllabus together with its guide will clear many doubts and thus create unified ideas to match with the goals of Inkatha."

Inkatha defined the essence of *ubuntu* as *ukuhloni-pha* (respect), which embraced a number of customary rules that governed relationships at different levels of society — elder over younger people, parents over children, leaders over followers, men over women.

In 1991, Blade Nzimande, today vice-chairperson

of the South African Communist Party, published "Schooling in the Context of Violence," in which he predicted that *Ubuntu-Botho* was likely to produce "a highly docile" and "easily controllable" Inkatha following. Moreover, he maintained that the syllabus turned education into an instrument for propagating the ideas of Inkatha and narrow Zulu nationalism.

Isikhundla nguzenzele (One prepares for oneself a place). If one stays with strangers, he tries in every way to please them. He tries to be useful so that his presence is appreciated. It is what one does which determines his relationship with other people. Everyone is the architect of his own fortune.

The Bottom Line

There's no denying that *ubuntu* captures a philosophy, a world-view, that is unique to African societies. *Ubuntu* is sitting on a public bus beside a stranger who, after learning that you're American, invites you home for Christmas. The invitation is extended in June. The woman recalls that South Africans attending universities in the U.S. lamented that Christmas was their loneliest time there. "I don't want you to be lonely," she says, before freely giving her name, address and telephone number. Generally speaking, the African view of life is characterized by participation and belonging to a group. Individuals belong not only to huge families with fathers and mothers and brothers, but extended families and clans. Here in KwaZulu-Natal, often there is also a headman or chief and a nation under a king. Add to this mix the "living departed," believed to be in "the realm of the spirit."

Ukuph' ukuziphakela (Giving is to dish out for oneself). The emphasis of this proverb is on reciprocity of kindness. When one gives another, it is like dishing out for oneself because when in need, the person who has been done a kindness will reciprocate.

Evidence of how *ubuntu* once permeated nearly all relationships — work and otherwise — is well documented. "The Moon is Dead! Give Us Our Money!" is a book that suggests black workers in nineteenth century Natal were guided by corporate values, structural practices and a work culture unique to African ethics and customs. Author Keletso Atkins, whose book is subtitled, "The Cultural Origins of an

3. *Ibid.*

African Work Ethic, Natal, South Africa, 1843-1900" defined *ubuntu* as hospitality.

Her research found that African workers in Durban and Pietermaritzburg adhered firmly to an undismissable code of ethical conduct. (119) What is more, she wrote that they brought sanctions to bear against anyone who infringed upon the moral norm. In other words, through direct and collective use of their power, these nineteenth-century black workmen extracted hospitality from the European inhabitants of the towns. (102)

Atkins further wrote, and her words are worth citing at length, that "One single cohesive idea seemed to underlie much of (worker's) actions: the concept of *ubuntu* defined their moral culture, and provided inviolate rules about the proper treatment of fellow human beings.

"These workers honored mutual obligation, and I think it was their deeply offended moral conscience that first brought these people together to demand in one voice the right to extend back civility to friends and relations who had come to town on official business, to shop or to visit loved ones working there. Out of these initial struggles, there emerged a recognition of their collective experience as workers, an awareness that they were part of a community of fellows sharing a unique set of problems, interests, and objectives. The ability of these workmen to link tradition with present realities in order to deal with contemporary problems imparted a sense of strength, continuity, and direction to their lives. Judged by any standards this was an era of African worker power! (128)."

Current circumstances have transformed not only traditional Zulu customs but the meaning of *ubuntu*. Urbanization, changing lifestyles, economic independence, migration and fighting, political and otherwise, have altered the way people relate to one another. When industries pay starvation wages, when political parties discriminate against each other, when township gangs kill indiscriminately, it's understandable that a person in his interaction with other people has yet to evolve to that desirable state of being human.

Akulunyawo lungakhubekiyo (There is no foot which does not stumble). There is no one who is infallible.

West Street in the central business district of Durban is crowded with street vendors selling everything from mealies (corn on the cob) and peaches to sandals and umbrellas. For most, this is their only income. Last year almost 1.6 million people, or 15.4 percent of all workers in South Africa, participated in the informal sector. They accounted for 6.7 percent of the official estimate of the GDP, and purchases by blacks amounted to R5.2 billion. This compares favorably with Pick 'n Pay's R6.7 billion turnover for the financial year which ended in February of this year. (Pick 'n Pay is a national food chain.) ⁴

In his compact 123-page book, management consultant Mbigi wrote in the introduction that "*ubuntu* is a metaphor that describes the significance of group solidarity, on survival issues, that are so central to the survival of African communities, who as a result of poverty and deprivation have to survive through brotherly group care and not individual self-reliance." He further stated that "Africa's achievements and genius do not lie in technology but in social and spiritual spheres. If Africa is going to enter and win in the global economic arena, it will have to draw on its spiritual and social heritage." (P.4)

While Mbigi doesn't dismiss Western and Eastern management approaches, he suggests a return to "our African roots," and a need "to harness the community spirit that lies dormant in our companies." That community spirit stems from the African tribal village community, which, according to Mbigi, functioned through "a process of grass-roots democracy in the form of open discussion forums on key issues that affect the village." In Zulu, these forums are called "*indabas*." In effect, Mbigi believes in joint decision-making powers between management and labor on strategic matters such as production planning and investment decisions.⁵

Mbigi also wrote about "soothsayers" or, to use what he described as a Western equivalent, "change agents." He made the case for involving "spiritual mediums" to create "a new spirit" in an organization. In Afrocentric religion, no idea or situation can be transformed into reality unless there is a totally transformed human being driving it, he wrote. If the human beings have particular faults themselves, no operating system in the world can work. (P. 73).

I don't always agree with Mbigi's particular use of the concept of *ubuntu*. It fails to contextualize certain realities, namely that cheap labor is the foundation on which South Africa was built and stands. Moreover,

4. The University of South Africa's Bureau for Market Research.

5. Khoz, Vusi and Eddie Koch. "Spirits Strike at Labour Relations." *Weekly Mail & Guardian*. Jan. 27 to Feb. 2, 1995: 11.

his notions of transformation ignore a worldwide trend to down-size, reduce costs and retrench, not too mention moves toward performance-related pay, and a shift to less labor-intensive production.

Additionally, job security is tenuous in a rapidly changing competitive and technological environment. Last year 41,300 jobs were cut in South Africa. (*Business Times*, September 24, 1995) The South African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union is bracing itself for job losses of more than 20,000 next year from 12,000 this year. The clothing and textile sectors account for 13.9 percent of overall manufacturing employment nationwide and more than 27 percent of employment in KwaZulu-Natal. It's feared that the clothing industry in KwaZulu-Natal could be reduced by as much as 50 percent next year, even if productivity improve and companies becomes globally competitive.

There's also the grim reality that South Africa faces systemic inequality, a situation made worse by millions of unskilled, illiterate workers crippled by Bantu education. It has been estimated that only about 10 percent of this year's high school graduates will secure jobs in the formal sector.

While Mbigi doesn't focus on specifics — he offers no suggestions on how to narrow the wage gap dramatically between management and workers — his ideas capture the essence of the need for harmony between labor and management. The use of soothsayers (*sangomas*), for example, sounds dubious. However, consider this: The management of a coffee plantation and a local chief agreed that the only way to end a labor dispute was for workers to consult a herbalist after a driver died in a motor vehicle accident. The 150-strong workforce went on strike and demanded consultation with a *sangoma* to sniff out the witches among them who caused the death. Eventually, two busloads of workers visited a *sangoma* in a mountain village near the Swaziland border, and paid him R20,000 (about \$5,500). The witch detector sniffed out three supervisors believed to have killed people so that their friends and relatives could get jobs. Management dismissed the supervisors after workers staged go-slows, demonstrations and threats of industrial action.

Ithemba kalibulali (Hope does not kill). A person may be very hopeful that something is going to happen, but his hopes may not materialize. One does not die because of that. If people died because their hopes did not come true, then the number of deaths would be tremendous.

Ubuntu has (re)emerged as a management strategy for three reasons, social scientist, poet and trade union worker Ari Sitas believes. One, the concept provides a way for black personnel in corporations to be empowered, he said. They find themselves in a position to tell white managers that they don't know how to deal with black workers. Black managers can argue that they have distinct ways of understanding blacks, causing white managers to back-pedal. Secondly, consultants are carving out a niche for themselves with this concept. Thirdly, multiculturalism is fashionable management, not only here and in the U.S. but in other parts of the world. Of course some believe, myself included, in the possibility that corporate managers see *ubuntu* as a way to tame a militant and highly politicized workforce.

The situation reminds me of multicultural consultants in the U.S. Hired to host high-priced workshops, they instruct management on how to "embrace" and "celebrate" diversity in the workplace. I once sat through three days of such training; ours was a diverse bunch in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, creed, sexual orientation, position and title. However, at the end of the session no new jobs were created, and working conditions remained unchanged. All that happened, maybe, was that the well-educated, Mercedes-driving advertising executive had a little more empathy for the near-illiterate maintenance worker who emptied the trash can by his desk.

Kuhlonishwana kabili (Respect is mutual). When a person respects another, that respect should be reciprocated.

Random Acts of Kindness

I once wrote a feature story for *The San Diego Union-Tribune* about random acts of kindness. The newspaper solicited the stories of people on the receiving end of such random acts. I recall a story about a couple whose dinner bill was paid by a stranger seated at a nearby table. An elderly man who fell while taking a morning walk was picked up by a couple that took him to the hospital and stayed with him until his release. Two movie goers forgot to turn off the lights on their car. When they returned, they found a man waiting to recharge their battery. He told them, "I figured you'd need help."

The random-acts-of-kindness movement, if I may call it that, was an attempt to encourage the philosophy that we are truly human in partnership with others — *ubuntu*. No doubt the movement also intended

to counteract such things as random shootings, car hijackings, crime in general and other negatives that serve to make people afraid to trust one another.

Columnist Khaba Mkhize tries to counter similar negatives. Twice a week, for the past year, he has led readers on a "Quest for *Ubuntu*," which is needed because South Africa faces the daunting challenge of restoring people's humanity after decades of dehumanizing policies. Moreover, the country is plagued with problems of violence (Khaba and his son were the injured victims of a car hijacking this summer), and violence undermines economic development.

Nearly every day I awaken to a news radio program on some aspect of economic growth in South Africa. Depending on the economist interviewed, you might hear that economic growth hasn't had the desired impact on employment levels — a trend that could undermine economic, social and political stability. Or, you might hear that the economy is the healthiest it has been since the gold boom of the early 1980s — a recovery supported by strong business confidence, a fairly stable political environment, the

return of foreign investors and record low inflation.

Neither interpretation matters much to the rotund, clean-shaven black man buffing the lobby of the floor of my immaculate apartment building. Usually, he stops his morning chores, monotonous as they are, long enough to open the door for me. "Morning," he says. "Have a good day." How we treat one another is essential. In the final analysis, it determines our common destiny as a society.

Inkom' ehambayo kayiqedi tshani(A beast that is passing finishes no grass.) Cattle may be driven from place to place, whilst being driven, and they may pick up some grass as they go. However, because they do not stop long, the amount of grass which they consume is negligible. The same is true of strangers. A stranger is not likely to ruin anybody who treats him well. His is there only for a short while. So strangers should be treated with kindness and consideration.



SOURCE:

Nyembezi, C.L.S. *Zulu Proverbs*. 1954. Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter, 1990.

Current Fellows & Their Activities

Hisham Ahmed. Born blind in the Palestinian Dheisheh Refugee Camp near Bethlehem, Hisham finished his A-levels with the fifth highest score out of 13,000 students throughout Israel. He received a B.A. in political science on a scholarship from Illinois State University and his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of California in Santa Barbara. Back in East Jerusalem and still blind, Hisham plans to gather oral histories from a broad selection of Palestinians to produce a "Portrait of Palestine" at this crucial point in Middle Eastern history. [MIDEAST/N. AFRICA]

Adam Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is spending two years studying and writing about Turkey's regional role and growing importance as an actor in the Balkans, the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Cynthia Caron. With a Masters degree in Forest Science from the Yale School of Forestry and Environment, Cynthia is spending two years in South Asia as ICWA's first John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow. She is studying and writing about the impact of forest-preservation projects on the lives (and land-tenure) of indigenous peoples and local farmers who live on their fringes. Her fellowship includes stays in Bhutan, India and Sri Lanka. [SOUTH ASIA/Forest & Society]

William F. Foote. Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the Buenos Aires Herald from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

Sharon Griffin. A feature writer and contributing columnist on African affairs at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Sharon is spending two years in southern Africa studying Zulu and the KwaZulu kingdom and writing about the role of nongovernmental organizations as fulfillment centers for national needs in developing countries where governments are still feeling their way toward effective administration. She plans to travel and live in Namibia and Zimbabwe as well as South Africa. [sub-SAHARA]

Pramila Jayapal. Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber and an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators, but most recently managed a \$7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is spending two years in India tracing her roots and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

Cheng Li. An Assistant Professor of Government at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY, Cheng Li is studying the growth of technocracy and its impact on the economy of the southeastern coast of China. He began his academic life with a Medical Degree from Jing An Medical School in Shanghai, but then did graduate work in Asian Studies and Political Science in the United States, with an M.A. from Berkeley in 1987 and a Ph.D. from Princeton in 1992. [EAST ASIA]

Teresa C. Yates. A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a *juris doctor* from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. While with the ACLU, she also conducted a Seminar on Women in the Law at Fordham Law School in New York. [sub-SAHARA]

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