

Horizons

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Why do we learn some lessons more easily than others – indeed with alacrity and enthusiasm? Often these are not of the most attractive sort. It seems so frequently as if there is a sheer perversity in us.

During the awful days of apartheid's repression and injustice, the Government of the day had a particular way of dealing with its opponents and those who dared to criticize their evil policies. They showed scant tolerance of opposing views. Apartheid's critics were most often vilified and pilloried in both the print and electronic media – the latter being, without too much embarrassment on their part, propagated by agencies of the Government, sycophantic echoes of their master's voice, when the objects of their venom were hardly ever accorded the right to rebut whatever had been said about them or even the opportunity of stating their side of the story reasonably fairly. The equally lick-spittle sycophantic print media projected the Government's critics as enemies of the nation, misrepresenting their views and caricaturing them mercilessly. That was one way in which the apartheid Government operated. Goebbels would have been in his element. This way of operation did have the advantage for its victim that it did not pose much of a physical threat. It was generally really no skin off the victim's nose, apart I suppose for the pain of being depicted as an ogre who most loved to hate and apart from the danger of building up an atmosphere which made it something that could be contemplated that such "enemies" enemies be eliminated, that made assassination possible.

There were other ways in which the apartheid Government were not nearly as innocuous. Its opponents were often detained without trial for arbitrary periods usually without access to a doctor or lawyer of their choice and almost always without contact with their families and loved ones. Many such detainees were subjected to torture and some died mysteriously in detention, e.g.

Steve Biko. Other Government opponents were placed under banning orders which reduced them to a twilight existence when they might not attend a gathering – which was defined as one other person. It meant they could not go on holiday, or to a picnic, or the movies and might not leave the magisterial area to which they had been confined – and all this without due process of law. They were condemned to be prisoners at their own expense.

And now with the revelations being made before the TRC it is coming to light that the apartheid authorities used even hit squads to assassinate those who were identified as *enemies*.

What is the lesson that most of us learned so easily and often so eagerly? We copied a very bad example set us by our apartheid overlords, that someone who disagreed with you was your enemy and the best kind of enemy was the enemy you had shut up or better still whom you had eliminated.

We did not, by and large, say everyone is entitled to their point of view, even a wrong point of view. We did not live by the dictum “I may disagree with you, but I will defend to the death your right to your view point.” We refused to give people who might differ from us a fair hearing. We shouted them down; we intimidated them but what is worse, we even killed them if they did not change after physical assault.

And so we saw violence becoming endemic especially in Kwa-Zulu-Natal. People spoke of black on black violence with some glee. Some of us pointed out that most of the violence was being fueled and manipulated by a sinister third force. At the time we were ridiculed and pooh-poohed. We are now being vindicated by the evidence before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. But that still does not exonerate us. We were willing to be manipulated because we acquiesced in shutting up those who differed to the point of even killing them.

What is so obvious seemed to elude us – that using force, intimidation or whatever to shut up someone who differed from you or who disagreed with you was already to concede that your case was not strong enough to stand on its own to persuade your opponent.

We tried to persuade our people to change and be more tolerant, not to regard opponents as foes but as potential friends and supporters just waiting to be converted.

I have often used a saying my father was very fond of, "Don't raise your voice – improve your argument." But we have learned a bad lesson only too well. It is taking a while to make people realize that each of us is entitled to space – emotional, intellectual, physical space in order to be human. *Diversity is of the Essence.*

We have sought to point out that a rainbow is a rainbow precisely because it has different colors. We are a rainbow nation because of our diversity. We should celebrate our differences, we should affirm them because they make us need one another since it is clear none of us is self-sufficient. We need others in order to be human. Hence our African idiom – a person is a person through other persons – and each person is unique and entitled to that uniqueness, including having a peculiar point of view.

Intolerance can be fatal.