

Address to School Assembly on Friday 23 October 2015

Mr Reeler, members of the teaching and administration staff, boys, class mates of '75 and all our very supportive wives/partners

It is an honour to stand here in this beautiful new hall, especially as the first 40 years on reunion group privileged to do so.

Reminiscing, 40 years ago, a poem by John Donne often quoted in a Friday assembly speech by Mr Abernethy, the Boss, was:

**No man is an island entire of itself; every man
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;**

I do not remember much of the rest of his speech, other than that it made an impression. So let me use it as a theme today.

Forty years ago we, class of '75, were sitting in this hall, contemplating our future. Were we optimistic? Pessimistic? What did our future hold?

Imagine South Africa in 1975. We had the now infamous Apartheid colour barriers: Black, Indian, Coloured, White.

It was in 1975 a crime, punishable by imprisonment, with the threat and the consequences of a lifelong criminal record, to:

- Kiss someone from the other race group (Immorality Act)
- Marry across the colour barrier (Mixed marriages Act)
- Go to school with someone from the other colour group (Separate Amenities Act)
- Live in the same area (Group Areas Act)
- Certain jobs and positions were reserved for whites (Job Reservation Act)
- A state of emergency was about to be declared in South Africa, making gathering of more than 10 people illegal
- To have in your possession a Playboy magazine was a crime
- To go to the movies on a Sunday was a crime

And then:

- The postal service was a monopoly (DHL, Fedex parcel and post services were not allowed)
- Our bicycles had to display licence tokens, renewable each year
- International sanctions were on the horizon

Life after matric, we were facing 4 years of military service. Two years of continuous duty, and then followed by 10 years of two months each year.

During this military engagement, there existed the distinct possibility of internal deployment – in plain speak – to suppress uprisings, protests and strikes, with real ammunition. Just imagine, if next year you were to, with machine gun in your hands, face your fellow South Africans, waiting for instruction to shoot with real ammunition.

Our country was broken in 1975. I was embarrassed to admit that I was a South African. There was little to be proud of.

Only a handful of South Africans have the opportunity or ability to rise above the swamp to make a noticeable and lasting difference on the society. I think here of Mahatma Ghandi, Helen Suzman, Nelson Mandela, de Klerk, Arch Bishop Desmond Tutu.

To the rest of us remains the influencing of our immediate sphere - our parents, our children, our friends, colleagues, relatives, employees, bosses, strangers in the street, waiters in the restaurant.

I think not one of our class of '75 made a huge difference in the change from the dark days of the 70's to today. We have compiled a booklet this year consisting of the abridged life stories of the class of '75. From the various submissions, it is however apparent that many of us contributed to the environment that allowed the peaceful changes of the early 1990's to take place in South Africa.

Jumping forward today, if I look around me:

The multiplier effect of the individual spheres of influence of the 1,500 people sitting here - multiplied by 40 years - is significant. I put it to you that each of you will affect, to a greater or lesser degree, at least 1,000 people in your lives, some even significantly more. This group sitting here today can and will thus influence some 1 to 2 million people over the next 40 years. It is up to you if your influence is positive or negative, builds up or breaks down.

What do I see when I look at the future through your eyes?

I have no doubt that the socio-political challenges that you face are surmountable. South Africa has a progressive, robust constitution, a strong judiciary, awesome infrastructure, all making a strong foundation to build a future. The opportunities that South Africa offers you today are extensive and varied.

However, I regret that there is only one major challenge that we as outgoing generation are leaving you, one that we (collectively with the previous generations) have caused, one that cannot easily be changed by a single person like Nelson Mandela, or even by Government intervention. It is one that requires the concerted effort and influence of the majority of individuals. This challenge is the environment. We have been and are continuing to slowly poison our world with carbon dioxide. We are not using our resources sparingly, especially water. We are not adequately recycling our waste. I am sorry to say we as outgoing generation were wasteful. You, as classes of 2015 to 2019, can and will have to not only live with our mess, you will have to fix it and do so as a collective, person by person, sphere by sphere. You need to see this as an opportunity, as a challenge, as "it needs doing, let's get on with it".

The message I leave you :

You have one life. Make it count. You are not an island. Leave a positive impact in your sphere of influence. As part of the collective you contribute to the whole, to the mainland that is our beautiful country, South Africa.

So, in the words of John Donne –

**No man is an island entire of itself; every man
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;**

**And therefore never send to know for whom
the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.**

Walter Ringlemann (Deputy Head Boy of '1975)