The Ubuntu spirit in African communities

Kevin Chaplin¹

How do we rebuild the moral fabric of society that has degenerated so much and where values have disappeared? A very real challenge facing nations all over the world. The social challenges prevailing in society require urgent and real attention. Where do we start? Let’s go back to basics and instil the spirit of Ubuntu.

Ubuntu

Ubuntu is an African word for a universal concept. Ubuntu is the potential for being human, to value the good of the community above self interest. Ubuntu is to strive to help people in the spirit of service, to show respect to others and to be honest and trustworthy.

Ubuntu regards humanity as an integral part of the eco-systems that lead to a communal responsibility to sustain life. Ubuntu shares natural resources on a principle of equity among and between generations. Ubuntu is fair to all, is compassionate, is a collective respect for human dignity. Ubuntu refers to people and is one of those things that you recognize when you experience it.

The cardinal spirit of Ubuntu is expressed in Xhosa, one of South Africa’s eleven official languages, as *Umntu ngumntu ngabanye abantu* understood in English as “People are people through other people” and “I am human because I belong to the human community and I view and treat others accordingly.”

In Zulu, another official language in South Africa, the word Ubuntu embodies a distinctive worldview of the human community and the identities, values, rights, and responsibilities of its members. It is about “we” – not “me.”

There are several definitions for Ubuntu. From manners to humanity, to this definition given in *The South African White Paper on Welfare*, where Ubuntu is officially

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recognized as: “the principle of caring for each other’s well-being and as a spirit of mutual support. Each individual’s humanity is ideally expressed through his or her relationship with others and theirs in turn through a recognition of the individual’s humanity. Ubuntu means that people are people through other people. It also acknowledges both the right and the responsibilities of every citizen in promoting individual and societal well-being”.

An African expression of Ubuntu says: “Your pain is my pain, My wealth is your wealth, Your salvation is my salvation.” It is about the individual being so rooted in the community that your personal identity is defined by what you give to the community.

An example of a greeting in Shona, another of South Africa’s official languages: “Good morning, did you sleep well?” “I slept well if you slept well.” “How has your day been?” “My day has been good if your day has been good.” In other words, we are so connected that if you don’t sleep well, or if you were not having a good day, how could I sleep well or have a good day? This kind of greeting would apply to a stranger one met on the road as well as a friend or family.

More simply put: “I am what I am because of you.” This phrase communicates a basic respect, empathy and compassion for others.

The phrase ‘an injury to one is an injury to all’ reinforces this community sentiment. Ubuntu inspires us to open ourselves to others, to learn of others as we learn of ourselves.

A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirms and respects others, does not feel threatened by others’ strengths or abilities, because he or she recognises that we all belong to a greater whole.

However, a growing rift between new structures and traditional values has seen the erosion of the spirit of Ubuntu, and made it difficult for people to interact openly in certain instances.

If the concept of Ubuntu is consciously harnessed, it has the power to bring about increased harmony within society, promoting a new patriotism among the people of its nation. Ubuntu calls for unity and mutual co-operation among people who live in a particular area with honesty and reliability being important.

**Community building**

The concept of Ubuntu is crucial to community building, for example, urban renewal in the ghetto or inner cities of the West as well as community development in rural and peri-urban situations in developing countries. It is universal because it can be applied to the challenge of empowering marginalised minorities. Now, too many people look only to government for all the solutions but it is government, business, individuals and Non Profit organizations all doing their bit that will see the challenges we face all around the world being tackled and addressed.

The *South African Ubuntu Foundation* and *Amy Biehl Foundation* are two such

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2 *South African Government Gazette*, 02/02/1996.
organizations working to address the challenges prevalent in society today. In order to fully realise the spirit of Ubuntu, it is crucial to engage members of our communities and the workplace in dialogue. This is the first step towards achieving a caring nation, with recognised democratic values and a social justice system that is based on equality, non-racism, non-sexism and human dignity.

A lovely old Chinese proverb says it all: *When a man is at peace with himself, he will be at peace with his family. When the families are at peace there will be peace in the villages. When the villages are at peace there will be peace in the country. When all the countries are at peace there will be peace in the world. Then man can be at peace.*

South Africa is emerging from a long period of severely constrained and constraining social, political, economic, cultural, and religious thinking and behaviour. One result is the climate of conformity, control, interpersonal caution, and subversive and aversive racism and non acceptance of other religions that still persists among many of its citizens and in nations all around the world – a psychological fear of stepping outside the bounds of social convention, ignorance and many times people just simply being in a comfort zone.

This climate of “self-imposed limitation” is a huge barrier to social, political, economic, and educational progress, to the spirit of entrepreneurship and innovation that the modern global economy demands, and to the essence of what a true rainbow nation requires and embodies.

**Socialisation into racism**

Racism is socially constructed and is not innate. The sociological implications of this are that human beings are socialised into racism, and grow up with acquired and racist stereotypes that are learnt from birth.

The fact that racism is a social construct means that if we all exert efforts, we can eradicate or minimise racism to an acceptable and tolerable level, so as to consolidate the spirit of Ubuntu. “Equality might require us to accept people who are different, non-sexism and non-racism might require us to rectify the inequities of the past”. But Ubuntu emphasises the notion of mutual understanding and the active appreciation of the value of human difference. It requires us to know and understand others within a multicultural environment.

Multiculturalism teaches us to respect other cultures because we may not know what we can learn from other people whose views might be different from ours. That is why cultural diversity teaches us to even learn other people’s languages. For reconciliation to occur in our country, we have to put our differences aside in order to rebuild the nation. People should learn to be conciliatory. The efforts of corporate cultural transformation must encourage acceptance of our differences and the discovery of our similarities, avoiding emphasizing differences.

**South African Ubuntu Foundation**
The *South African Ubuntu Foundation* is committed to overcoming and breaking down these barriers, both within and between individuals and their racial/cultural groupings. The Foundation aims to promote and foster a truly prosperous and harmonious rainbow nation in which all people openly transcend, bridge, and collaborate across the racial, cultural, political, economic, and religious barriers and divisions of the past, fully embrace the opportunities available to them to elevate and express their full intellectual, social, economic, and spiritual potential, creatively develop and express their entrepreneurial spirit, dreams, and skills and deeply experience more abundant and fulfilling lives.

The *SA Ubuntu Foundation* has developed and implemented an integrated set of far-reaching initiatives and interventions that directly promote and embody the enlightened, humanistic values of *SA’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, break down and eliminate traditional racial and cultural barriers to togetherness and cooperation through workplace interventions and dynamic networking events, improve the financial success of small and large companies by strengthening the Ubuntu-grounded values, teamwork, and leadership skills of all their people, expand and improve the entrepreneurial opportunities, skills, spirit, and successes of those seeking to enter the modern business world, contribute to strong economic growth and a significant reduction in unemployment in the country and bring innovative, empowering ideas and strategies to education, business, and community leaders and organisations.

The Foundation’s work is deeply infused with uplifting, inspiring, and deeply empowering values and orientations. These are reflected in our beliefs about, and commitment to, two mutually elevating aspects of human development and functioning.

One is widely known as *Ubuntu* and the other *Personal Empowerment*. Everything that the *SA Ubuntu Foundation* carries out and represents both promotes and reflects a framework of uplifting, humanistic beliefs of personal empowerment that:

- There exists in every human being an enormous wellspring of potential.
- Within that wellspring of potential lie five fundamental sources of personal empowerment and social harmony: human consciousness, compassion, creativity, collaboration, and competence.
- These five human qualities (or capacities) are universal – they are attributes of all individuals and cultures everywhere – and express themselves in all areas of human functioning.
- Activating and expanding these five qualities within individuals, teams, groups, and organisations are the keys to humanity’s ultimate unity, prosperity, well-being, and survival.

**Legacy of seperatism**

At its core Ubuntu reflects the deep spiritual truth that “We Are All One” – one spiritual essence, one planetary life system, one human race, and one inter-dependent human community. Hence, our spiritual, moral, mental, social, physical, and economic bonds and mutual
inter-dependence with others and the creatures in our environment are inherently deep and tangible – even though centuries of painful history and divisive ideologies have emphasised and magnified our differences, rather than our commonalities.

Unfortunately, our generation has inherited this divisive cultural legacy and historical worldview, and we are in serious danger of allowing their inertia to continue. Together they foster and reinforce competition more than cooperation, individualism more than collaboration, acquisition more than sharing, exploitation more than preservation, advantage more than compassion, scarcity more than abundance, differences more than similarities, status more than belonging, and fear more than love.

If allowed to continue unchecked, this philosophy of separatism and advantage will eventually undermine the capacity of South Africa, its neighbours and nations all around the world to function with any measure of cohesion and stability.

The **South African Ubuntu Foundation** was established to address and reverse these divisive trends. Its Ubuntu-grounded philosophy and programmes are designed to break this legacy of separatism and advantage and to bridge the highly visible, inhumane, counter-productive, and unnecessary boundaries that now divide large groups of South African society and societies all around the world from each other.

The **South African Ubuntu Foundation** operates in a time of enormous challenge in the country:

- An overall unemployment rate above 26%, and 18-35 age group rate of 40%;
- The in-migration of up to 80 000 mostly un-skilled people annually into the Western Cape from other regions in South Africa and Africa stimulating increases in poverty rates, which offset economic growth and place severe pressures on its economy, infrastructure, and ecosystem;
- Massive numbers of young people neither in formal education, training, or jobs – an open invitation to gangsterism and crime;
- A widening gap between rich and poor, linked strongly to huge differences in education levels across racial lines;
- A major “second economy” of poor women which could have rich potential for entrepreneurial training and development;
- A polarization of modern/Western and traditional/African cultural orientations to work, individual achievement & social relationships that must be bridged if the Country and Provinces are to progress harmoniously.

**Business Networking and Festival**

This unique initiative brings business people of different colours, cultures and religions from different businesses and interests around the table to develop lasting Ubuntu-grounded friendships, business connections and business partnerships. It also provides them with emerging business insights, offers cutting-edge leadership perspectives, stimulates collaborative opportunities, and models new and open ways
for trusting partnerships across racial, cultural and religious backgrounds to emerge within South Africa’s economic sector. Ubuntu Business Networking enables members to hear and discuss presentations by influential business, political, and cultural figures at monthly breakfasts in a setting that encourages people of all backgrounds to become well acquainted and truly embrace one other.

The Ubuntu Festivals had broad and diverse appeal. Through music, dance and food experiences the Festival changed cultural and entertainment stereotypes, broke down the barriers that exist and got people to truly embrace one another. With nearly 20 000 people attending in two days it was a huge success. It is now an annual event in the middle of July every year featuring musicians, dancers, folklore and performing groups representing a cross-section of South African and International traditions, arts and craft, and every imaginable kind of food stall from African to Cape Malay to Indian, Dutch, British, Portuguese, Jewish and every kind of nationality and culture represented in South Africa.

The Amy Biehl Foundation

Amy Biehl was a gifted and dynamic young woman from Stanford University in the USA, committed to making a difference. After extensive work and service throughout the continent, which included working with the Namibian President on the Namibian Peace Treaty, she chose to dedicate her 1993 Fulbright Scholarship to the establishment of a multiracial democracy in South Africa. Amy worked tirelessly with members of the ANC at the UWC Community Law Centre, worked on the new Constitution, Women’s Rights as well as helped register voters for the country’s first free elections.

On August 25th, 1993, Amy Biehl’s life was tragically cut short in an act of political mob violence in the Guguletu Township outside of Cape Town. Four young men were convicted and sentenced to 18 years imprisonment for her murder. When the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established, the young men applied for amnesty. Determined to honour Amy’s love of South Africa and her belief in the truth and reconciliation process, Amy’s parents participated in the Commission’s hearings and supported amnesty for the youths; the four were granted amnesty and released from prison in 1998.

In 1997 the Amy Biehl Foundation in South Africa was born. Over the years the Foundation has flourished in its mission to ‘Weave a Barrier Against Violence’ by emphasizing social, cultural and economic empowerment through its programmes. Currently, two of the young men who were convicted of Amy’s murder and granted amnesty work for the Foundation to make these programmes a success. They are a living embodiment of values, such as forgiveness, reconciliation and tolerance, which we strive to teach the youth of Cape Town through our work.

The Amy Biehl Foundation is a non-profit organisation based in Cape Town whose programmes are designed to develop and empower 5-18 year old youth in the
impoverished and poverty-stricken townships, contribute to community building efforts and give children hope and a brighter future. This is achieved by providing educational and cultural activities that offer students healthy alternatives to all the negative influences of violence, gangs crime, drugs, sex, idleness and unlocks their creative talent with the aim of giving them opportunities to become future leaders, entrepreneurs and well rounded citizens in a global society.

Objectives

The Amy Biehl Foundation Youth Education, Development and Empowerment Programmes, have the following objectives:

- To reduce the levels of crime, gangs and violence prevalent in the townships of South Africa by developing and empowering 5-18 year old youths and providing opportunities for them to become well rounded, creative citizens, role models, future leaders and entrepreneurs with strong values who become employable and contribute to their family’s household income to help alleviate poverty;
- To provide a beacon of hope for disadvantaged youth and create a future healthy society of emotionally equipped and well rounded individuals who complete their schooling and focus on healthy positive activities;
- To reduce the alarming rate of high school students dropping out of school;
- To enable South African youth to reach their full potential, regardless of current economic standing;
- To contribute to community building efforts and ensure a healthy, vibrant society free of abuse, crime, HIV/AIDS and violence;
- To keep youth off the streets between 3pm and 6pm every afternoon, 10am to 1pm on Saturdays, and all school holidays, keeping them away from negative influences and able to ward off the temptations of crime, drugs, gangs, and unsafe sex;
- To provide lessons for the new generation on reconciliation, forgiveness and restorative justice;
- To be a catalyst in bridging the gaps between old and young members of the community and between schools and the local community, and to strive to involve community members in programmes;
- To produce vegetables for the schools and community, provide opportunities for health and nutrition in the townships and alleviate the burden of hungry children on the community;
- To beautify the community and schools and create a sense of pride, well-being and hope;
- To grow awareness and understanding of the spread of HIV/AIDS & reduce the number of people affected and infected.

Our success is measured by the children staying away from drugs, not engaging in sex and getting HIV Aids or pregnant, completing their schooling, doing better at school, becoming employable, going on to become role models, leaders and study further.
Children that come through our programmes are better equipped to handle the challenges of the townships and life in general, to ward off the temptations and negative influences prevalent in our society, and are thus better equipped to become future entrepreneurs and employable citizens able to bring income to their families and communities.

Programmes

Our programmes reach over 1,500 children every week. The number of children that we can reach is directly proportionate to the amount of funding that we are able to raise and your support will enable us to continue our vision of providing a brighter future with greater opportunities for children from disadvantaged communities.

These programmes place a focus on the creative side of the children’s brain, and supplements the shortcomings of the educational system in the townships of South Africa.

There are great inadequacies in the impoverished township schools in which we work, creating a great need for our programmes. Every year the Western Cape has an influx of up to 80,000 people from the rest of South Africa and Africa and this influx creates huge pressures on the Province’s already thin resources and infrastructure.

Each day there are thousands of unsupervised children in the impoverished townships of Cape Town, leading to rampant crime, drug abuse, violence, and unsafe sex. Those in the townships still receive poor or limited education, have little opportunity to be creative and are largely left to their own devices during the afternoons, Saturdays and school holidays, when they are exposed to numerous negative influences. If the youth are occupied between 3pm and 6pm every weekday, Saturdays and school holidays, and if they complete their schooling, their propensity to turn to crime, drugs and violence is dramatically reduced.

The programmes offer young people healthy alternatives to today’s negative influences, providing them with hope and a brighter future and keeps them off the streets and away from violence, drugs, alcohol, sex and idleness. At the same time, we unlock their creative talent by providing them with opportunities to become future leaders, entrepreneurs and well rounded citizens in a global society, able to break the cycle of poverty prevalent in the townships.

Our mission is to create a safe, amiable and educational atmosphere where youth are nurtured and encouraged to grow. The Foundation believes in stimulating, developing and growing children into healthy, well rounded individuals who can contribute to the well-being and future of South Africa. The programmes include parental involvement

3 The programmes include after school care; music, including violin, guitar, recorder, marimba, choral singing and brass; HIV / AIDS peer education; greening and environment; youth reading role models; creative arts, including drama, beading, pottery & dance - kwaito, modern, traditional and ballet; sport including soccer, hockey, surfing, swimming, diving, cricket and the only Golf Driving Range in a township; computer literacy; and prison outreach.
and the training of teachers in subjects such as the theory and practice of music. We are also catalysts in bridging the gap between schools and the local community, and strive to involve community members in all the programmes that we run.

We proudly walk in the footsteps of Amy Biehl by providing a positive influence in the lives of as many young people as we can. We will remember the past, and the lessons of reconciliation, forgiveness and justice that the Biehl family has taught us, while tirelessly working to create a brighter future for today’s children of South Africa.

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<th>Providing youth with:</th>
<th>Keeping youth away from:</th>
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<td>• Structure during after-school hours</td>
<td>• Dangers of the street including:</td>
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<td>• Activities designed to challenge their minds and foster teamwork</td>
<td>- Violence</td>
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<td>• Leadership qualities, strong values, life skills, entrepreneurial abilities</td>
<td>- Drugs</td>
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<td>• Alternatives to idle hours spent on the street</td>
<td>- Gangs</td>
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<td>• Positive role models</td>
<td>- Unsafe sex</td>
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<td>• An optimistic outlook for the future</td>
<td>• Low expectations of what they can accomplish in life</td>
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<td>• Opportunities which otherwise would not be available to them</td>
<td>• Negative influences of other students who do not have high expectations for the future</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Opportunities to become employable one day and earn income to help break the cycle of poverty &amp; HIV/AIDS.</td>
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**Importance of Music Education**

Research shows that students exposed to music score 100% higher on fractions tests than those who learn conventionally. Music majors are the most likely group of college graduates to be admitted to medical school. Music participants achieve more academic honours and awards than non-music students. Piano students are better equipped to comprehend mathematical and scientific concepts. College-age musicians are emotionally healthier than their non-musician counterparts. Music training helps under-achievers.

Students in high-quality school music programmes score higher on standardized tests than students in schools with deficient music education programmes (22% better in English, 20% better in maths). Schools with higher levels of student participation in arts have higher academic ratings and lower drop out rates. Children with music training have significantly better verbal memory than those without such training. An education rich in the arts and humanities develops skills that are crucial to the productivity and competitiveness of the nation’s workforce: the ability to think
creatively, communicate effectively and work collaboratively, and to deal with ambiguity and complexity⁴

**International exchange**

International partnerships and exchanges are an important part of the success of the Amy Biehl Foundation and play a big role in making a difference in the lives of the youth in South Africa.

A partnership that has already been making a significant difference is one with the Northern Irish. The Northern Irish Youth Justice Agency has been working with Amy Biehl Foundation for a few years now and have an excellent and successful model of ensuring youth offenders do not re-offend, a holistic process which sees the victim and the offender engage with one another, similar to what happened in South Africa when the perpetrators of Amy’s death met Amy’s parents through our Truth and Reconciliation Process. This saw Amy’s parents forgive them, get them amnesty and released from jail and 2 of them working for the Foundation, still today. This partnership with the Northern Irish has seen them bring out hockey and soccer coaches, under the leadership of Eric Jenkinson of Jenkinson Consulting, to Cape Town South Africa for 4 years in a row now and work with underprivileged children from the black and coloured poverty stricken areas (townships) for a week each time.

The change in these children is wonderful to see. This partnership developed in 2009 to seeing a businessman, Raymond Acheson from Euro Construction, fully sponsoring 16 girls from the townships of Mannenburg and Guguletu to go to Northern Ireland for a week to play hockey and see the country. The 8 coloured and 8 black girls did not want to go together but the Amy Biehl Foundation insisted on mixing the group and the development and growth in these 16 girls has been phenomenal. By the end of that week all 16 were great friends, and even better they had developed as emotionally well rounded youth.

People from different backgrounds, colour and culture just need a catalyst to break down the barriers that exist and get them to be able to embrace one another. This trip and its results with the coloured and black girls is testimony to this. We have seen these girls grow tremendously since that trip, in fact their confidence, self esteem, assertiveness and general behavior is amazing to see. They have become role models in their community and stand out as leaders. They are doing well in every aspect of their lives and are testimony to the power of focused, healthy programmes that tap into the creative side of the brain as well as what broadening one’s horizons by being exposed to the bigger world can do.

Another exciting partnership with HIC in the Netherlands saw a group of girls from the Netherlands come out this year to spend a week teaching and playing hockey with another group of youth from our townships. In that short time we again saw the benefit and growth in these girls, which sets the scene for us to continue working with the youth, developing and growing them into

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⁴ Source: *AMC Research document.*
well rounded adults, free of drugs, crime, violence and gangs and most importantly creating leaders and emotionally well rounded contributing citizens of society out of them.

Last year saw the Managing Director of the Foundation address students at Wellington College in the United Kingdom which is a very exciting partnership that has developed. It has seen one girl from Wellington College that was present rise to the occasion of wanting to make a difference and a huge difference she has made, she has been out to volunteer and is coming again in October this year for a month to work with our youth. In addition she has tirelessly worked to raise funds in the UK for the Amy Biehl Foundation and has raised over R 40 000 through different fundraising projects for us.

We have another volunteer from the Netherlands, Anita Dijkstra who was here in Cape Town for a while making a difference and went back, is now our Ambassador in the Netherlands and has already raised over R 5000 for the programmes. A volunteer from Germany, Mario Sibum has made his mark many times over. He regularly sends musical instruments over to us as well as raises money, has extended his support through Germany. Another exciting partnership is with the Hausach Economic School in the heart of the Black Forest. Here students have fundraisers during the year to raise money and send us, like selling cookies and other innovative ideas. International volunteers and interns coming to work with the Amy Biehl Foundation make a big difference to the children, the skills and expertise they bring and the impact and effect they have on the children is really important, effective and special. We have up to 10 volunteers a month from all over the world and they spend between 1 month to 1 year with us – UK, USA, Holland, Germany, Austria and many more.

We have recently signed an agreement with The University of Arts in Rotterdam (CODARTS) and will see some exciting exchanges with students and lecturers in the future.

The interaction with people from all over the world has a significant positive impact on the youth here and assists us in giving them hope and a better life.