

In his inaugural address, the newly appointed Rector of the University of the Free State, Professor Jonathan Jansen made the following statement about the Reitz incident:

I also feel compelled to say this to you tonight. Those four students who committed that heinous act, are my students. If I may borrow from another leader, I cannot deny them, anymore than I cannot deny my own children. The four Reitz students are children of this country, they are youth of the province, and they are students of our university. They are, I repeat, my students.

And so I have made some decisions.

1. 1. In a gesture of racial reconciliation, and the need for healing, the University of the Free State will withdraw its own charges against the four students. The University will therefore not pursue any further action against the four young men implicated in the Reitz incident. In this spirit of toenadering, the University will go further, and invite those four students to continue their studies here.

2. In recognition of our institutional complicity in the Reitz saga, and the need for social justice, the University of the Free State will not only pursue forgiveness but will also pay reparations to the workers concerned for damages to their dignity and their self-esteem.

3. And,

In a determined commitment to the urgent task of reconstruction, the University of the Free State will re-open the Reitz residence and transform it into a model of racial reconciliation and social justice for all students.

The decision to withdraw the University's internal charges against the four students involved in

heinously demeaning and racist actions has drawn praise from some quarters and condemnation from others. Those who praise Professor Jansen see his decision in the spirit of ubuntu.

As Rector, though newly appointed, he has taken upon himself responsibility for the actions of the Reitz four, 'they are my students', as a father takes responsibility for his children's actions. It is a grand and gracious notion and brings to mind Mahatma Gandhi and the many incidents in his life that confused followers who could not understand that he was not on this side or that; he was for our common humanity.

But as Mary Metcalfe points out, in her letter to Professor Jansen, that even though he takes responsibility, that does not absolve the students from their responsibility.

From Mary Metcalfe's letter:

Whilst one person may apologise for the acts of another in which he or she feels themselves to be complicit, this does not take away the responsibility of the person whose action caused the offence to apologise himself or herself.

Whilst individual actions do occur within the realities of systemic and institutional culture, this cannot remove individual responsibility. Institutional complicity must be addressed, but the responsibility of individuals must also be addressed.

Only the offended person can forgive. No other compensation has meaning if an apology is not offered and accepted. In the absence of an apology, financial recompense can be interpreted and experienced as an insult

Though the situation will be dealt with in a court of law, legal action cannot resolve the crisis on campus. To put it in Professor Jansen's terms, it is a family matter and needs to be resolved in the family.

The Reitz four are his students, but so are the others - all those who are outraged and call for retribution.

The Rector cannot deny that the Reitz four are his students. But in acknowledging his responsibility there, and not acknowledging it with regard to the victims of the crime and the students who feel violated, is he being a responsible parent.

Has he not favoured his prodigal sons and left the others out in the cold?

His decree has not eliminated the problem on the ground, among students, among the workers who were vilified.

As impartial as his decision may seem, it has taken into account only one side of the story.

Furthermore, the country having newly emerged from entrenched racism, is not ready for such idealistic acts as the pardoning of the Reitz four. Though we had a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which may have brought some relief to people, we have not rid ourselves of racism. The TRC looked at individual acts of racism and revealed the truth of the worst crimes of apartheid, but to what extent did that achieve reconciliation? If after the TRC incidents such as the Reitz crime continue to manifest, we need to ask what is meant by reconciliation. For many Black people, it has come to be seen as Black people forgiving and White people getting away with crimes and maintaining racist attitudes.

I believe that the kind of truth that the TRC focused on was a legalistic search for truth: details of the crimes against political figures and activists. That may have resolved issues for some but not for the remainder of society which still maintains attitudes of superiority and inferiority, attitudes so ingrained that they are taken for granted and most often not recognised.

It is that conditioning that needs to be identified and examined before racism can be eradicated.

Many young people believe they are free of racism and make statements such as 'apartheid has nothing to do with me' or

'I am not responsible for what the older generation did'.

Young people do not understand that racism does not simply consist in overt actions such as those of the Reitz four, or in obvious prejudice.

Racism comes from the way our lives are structured and the way we live.

Most people have been to separate schools, live in separate racially defined areas, and the privileged have always had access to more and better facilities.

... as scholar Peggy McIntosh noted in her celebrated article, White Privilege: ... &quot;I think whites are carefully taught not to recognise white privilege, as males are taught not to recognise

male privilege. White privilege is an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious.&quot; (*Business Day* article)

I don't believe that 'white people are carefully taught not to recognise white privilege,' they simply take it for granted. It is the way they are brought up and that makes it worse because it is almost instinctual.

Similarly, Black people do not recognise their readiness to collude with racism that arises from the way their lives were structured under apartheid. Black people developed a readiness to accommodate White people: they adopted Western culture, language and beliefs. Now reconciliation processes and affirmative action are being identified as further forms of collusion that confirm White people in their feeling of superiority while corruption, fraud and mismanagement at the highest levels justify such an attitude.

Professor Jansen has declared:

In a determined commitment to the urgent task of reconstruction, the University of the Free State will re-open the Reitz residence and transform it into a model of racial reconciliation and social justice for all students. (Inaugural address)

I hope that in this, the task of reconstruction, the University will not look only at the most obvious forms of racism but also at the subtler forms, the more deep-rooted forms that are part of the psyche, that arise out the ways in which we live and dictate how we react to one another.

Considering that the Reitz incident involved working class women, if we are ever to become a democracy, we need to develop a respect for all people regardless of race and class.

We may have rid ourselves of racism to some extent, but class distinctions are firmly fixed and as a society we show little respect for poor people.

Since Professor Jansen is in a university environment, I don't know whether he will have time for the 'lower' classes.

He did not claim the workers who were victimised in the Reitz incident as 'my workers'.

In his reference to changing the curriculum he speaks of preparing the youth for leadership.

What about ordinary people?

Most people are ordinary people.

Why not plan development of our youth, all our youth, based on their aptitudes, so that each one finds a way to contribute to the society in the way that comes naturally?

What is needed is a deconstruction of society before it can be reconstructed. Perhaps that is what Professor Jansen proposes to do.

The real problem for transformation, however, is not simply the number of black faces in the staff and student bodies of a former white university. The most important challenge is the problem of knowledge. The often troubled knowledge the student comes to university with—the knowledge of the past, the knowledge of black and white and, especially, the knowledge of the future. The university curriculum, here and elsewhere, has not yet confronted the crucial question of what a student needs to know in a dangerous and divided world.

And so I will propose to the Senate of the University of the Free State that we do a fundamental curriculum overhaul and that no student graduates from this university without engaging basic human questions such as who we are and where we come from; without learning how to live and learn together in ways that prepare our youth for leadership in the workplace. (Inaugural address)

## **Another View**

### **From B**

Yes, JJ is a strategist. He wanted to just set the old guard at ease at the start and then run with changes. Now it blew up in his face. The culture of protest (which is a constitutional right) has now reached levels which must be addressed by the leadership. Pres Zuma, calmly read from his speech to the mayors last week that the burning of libraries are not acceptable. Energetic speaking, direct talking and telling people what is right or wrong are required to show people that the government is serious. R3m damage was caused by students at UFS last year, with the reaction to Reitz. Teachers want to strike now with the exams upon us. It is crazy. It is difficult to support Jansen, as Blade and even cabinet is saying the rights of the perpetrator got precedence. Life remains interesting in SA.