

A Reflective Conversation with Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Kobus Maree

Prof. Maree: First of all, what are you currently working on, writing or researching?

Bishop Tutu: (Chuckle). At the moment, I'm preparing speeches, I'm writing something ... it's more a lecture on leadership, and I'm going to give the lecture next week. I spend a fair amount of time writing ... people send me manuscripts and sometimes ask me to write a foreword or, what do you call it, an endorsement?

Prof. Maree: Yes, that's right.

Bishop Tutu: I'm not currently busy on an extended work. The last thing that I did was "God has a dream", and even that I did in collaboration with a young man in California.

Prof. Maree: My second question: How do you personally help schools to work with gifted and talented children?

Bishop Tutu: I don't really do anything at all. Except perhaps just now ... I am a patron of something called "*Dance for all*". It's not actually designed for gifted children, but I think they discovered that many of the children who would otherwise be loitering on the streets in the townships are, in fact, gifted.

About ten years or so ago, a retired white ballerina and ballet dancer went into the townships, and, while walking *down the street*, they said, "We want to teach you to dance". They have been so successful ... two of their former students are now dancing overseas.

Prof. Maree: Wonderful!

Bishop Tutu: Yes, they are dancing for ballet companies overseas. So, in fact, there are hidden gifts and talents that people don't know about, but I think your

own particular concern is children who are very bright and what provision is being made for them, and what do I do about it?

Prof. Maree: Archbishop, most of the work that I do is in distant, disadvantaged regions, and I agree with you that 90% of our talent does not blossom to full capacity. What else can we do? Please give us some guidelines.

Bishop Tutu: Well, I would say that we need to be saying to people that every one of us is gifted. I mean, some people are more gifted than others, but I think we probably ought to be saying that God gives gifts and talents to all of us and expects us to develop them to the best of our ability. There are those others who are very, very bright in mathematics or science. I would hope that as soon as we find out that somebody is precocious, we should do all we can to develop that particular ability. The world needs all the geniuses that it can get. We are in so much trouble, which is why I believe it is important to say everybody is gifted. You know, so that we do not make others feel less important. They can quite easily be discouraged. But we should encourage those who show a particular aptitude. I found out that that there are kids who can, say, play the piano at a very, very early age. They just have particular powers, a particular aptitude. We ought to be doing all we can to identify them.

Prof. Maree: I couldn't agree more.

Bishop Tutu: And say, "This is God's gift to you. Make it your gift to the world." That is what somebody said to our youngest daughter. She wanted to paint, she wanted to be a painter. She attended Harvard University, for a while. She wanted to do a fine arts course, but they said, "You did not send us your portfolio, so we don't know what you can do". So, she decided to do a liberal arts degree instead and did very well in the maths and science component. One of the teachers then encouraged her to switch electrical engineering and said, "This is God's gift to you, make it your gift to the world."

Prof. Maree: What a wonderful story. Archbishop, how important do you view the idea of mentoring? Have you had mentors?

Bishop Tutu: I thought that was of the best way of nurturing somebody, especially when they are gifted. Some gifted people, when they are in a normal classroom setting, quickly became bored because they jump way ahead of the others and feel that they are being held back. Mentoring provides children with a role model ... it provides them with someone they can turn to when they have problems. This is somebody who can encourage, who can really help someone to blossom. If you can't have a mentor, you at least hope that you can have small classes.

So, there is a very close relationship between a pupil and the teacher. A mentor can also be someone who is just slightly older than the person he/she is mentoring. The mentor can encourage the pupil to realize that, yes, it is possible to obtain whatever he/she is setting out to achieve. I mean, the sky is the limit. And if the pupil sees somebody who is not much older than herself who has actually achieved, I think it is a far greater source of encouragement than perhaps an older person telling the child she can do so and so. The child sees the example in the mentor.

Prof. Maree: Can you mention a few of your mentors, Archbishop?

Bishop Tutu: (Chuckle). My mother.

Prof. Maree: Your mother?

Bishop Tutu: Yes, my mother was not highly educated, but I hope I learnt from her to be compassionate and to care about others. I wasn't aware that perhaps there was some mentoring. When I was maybe 8 or 9 years of age, I used to be a server, you know, assisting the priest at the altar. The first African priest that I met was a wonderful African man. I wasn't aware that perhaps I was "emulating" him. He impressed me deeply ... we used to go out with him to the farm areas. When we finished the service, he, like a big chief, would kneel in a special place. The thing that I still carry with me is how he never sat down to eat before coming out to check on whether we "lesser souls" had also been looked after. I wasn't aware that something was impressing me, but I think that deep down inside my subconscious I hoped that one day I could be like him. I had TB as a youngster

and was in hospital for 20 months. The priest used to visit me once a week, and I knew he was a very busy and important person

Yet he took time off to visit a ghetto urchin like me. I think I learned about caring for the individual person in that way. When I went to theological college, I was deeply impressed by members of the religious community ... how devout they were outside regular service times. I used to clean the chapel, and it amazed me that you could always find one or two old monks sitting in their pews in the stalls praying, and I realized that an authentic Christian existence is one that requires the spiritual to be at the centre of your life. And so, yes, I have had many wonderful examples, and I hope that to some extent I have been able to emulate them.

Prof. Maree: You can take my word, Archbishop, you have.

Archbishop, who has influenced you and how? Have there been any particular books that you have read?

Bishop Tutu: The conventional view was that you should not let children read comics because it is not good for their language. But my father, the schoolteacher, actually encouraged me, and I “devoured” a load of comics. He was actually quite smart because enjoying reading comics can develop into a very real love of reading. I remember that some of the things I read early on were Lamb’s Tales of Shakespeare ... do you remember that? And fables. I was around 9 or 10 when I tended to devour any reading matter that was around. I got to like reading, and when I went to high school, one of my favorite subjects was English and English literature. I think I didn’t do too badly in it because we also had some very good teachers.

We had some wonderful teachers when I was in matric in a black high school township school that did not have too many resources. When I went to teacher training college, we had to do a degree course through Unisa, and one of the subjects was English. Those of us who came from this particular school did really well, especially in the English courses, because we, as I have said, had some fabulous teachers.

Prof. Maree: Thank you very much, Archbishop.

Bishop Tutu: Are we nearly finished?

Prof. Maree: Almost (Chuckle).

Bishop Tutu: You don't feel sorry for a sick old man?

Prof. Maree: As we approach the year 2010, what do you see? What do you see as the major challenges of educating highly intelligent children? I'm almost done!

Bishop Tutu: We face major challenges in education. As it happens, last night at a function for the Institute for Justice and Education, the Minister of Education spoke about the major problems they were having in the department, and she said she was quite exhausted. I hope that we do not produce a standardized, mediocre system. We should do all we can to make our children want to aim for the stars. Every child should seek to be the best that he/she can be. We cannot afford to play ducks and drakes. Where you have children who are particularly gifted, it would be criminal not to want to develop their potential to the highest possible extent. We are not looking for uniformity ... we want to ensure that every child has a basic education, but we mustn't make a virtue of mediocrity. We must produce the best possible children in every possible sense.

Prof. Maree: Archbishop, my last question. You can answer in one line.

I go to the most distant schools in the country, to the poorest of the poor, and I want to say to the pupils, Archbishop Tutu has given me these words of encouragement to you.

Bishop Tutu: First of all, there are levels of poverty in our country that are unacceptable, that can't be justified at all. It is important for our children to know that many, many people in the black community who are now stars, came out of the squalor and deprivation that was characteristic of apartheid South Africa. Our children must not think that they are pioneers. I studied for matric and my BA by candlelight because we didn't have electricity at home, but that was also true for so many others. It was so common that you didn't even speak about it. Many

people were educated by mothers who were also washer women. Very few of my contemporaries were people born with a silver spoon in their mouths. We ought to do everything we can to reduce the levels of poverty that exist still in so many parts of our country. But we also should say to our children that they should regard all obstacles and difficulties as challenges. They should not let these things demoralize them "Eskia Mphahlele", who was one of our best novelists, worked as a clerk and studied for his BA and MA privately through correspondence. He was the first South African, not the first black, the first South African to get an MA in English with distinction. Children must know that anything is possible, and that obstacles and handicaps can be overcome and should be looked at as challenges.

Prof. Maree: Thank you so much.

Bishop Tutu: Thank you, and God bless you.