



# Parents: humanity begins at home

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Rather than embracing victimhood, we must teach our children to treat others with empathy

**T**HE time bomb ticks, the headlines say. Sticks and stones break our bones and words are used to hurt. Our fate seems clear — to mend the gaps in the walls and live apart and scorn the other.

Yes, hate makes a great headline story but it's not the only one in town.

I recently attended a conference at the University of the Free State, called "Engaging the Other: breaking intergenerational cycles of repetition".

The university's vice-chancellor is Professor Jonathan Jansen, an outspoken, truth-telling commentator. Jansen is an embodiment of the powerful, moral leader who shows people an image of their best selves.

Maggy Barankitse, who survived the Burundian genocide and now works with both Tutsi and Hutu children in need of care, spoke of the horrors of her experiences and how she had transcended them to live with love, forgiveness and humour.

I listened to children of Nazis and Jewish Holocaust survivors in dialogue with each other about the effects of the Holocaust on

their lives. Other participants included people who facilitate engagement between Israelis and Palestinians, and people working to overcome legacies of race and gender discrimination in the American South, Australia, Africa, Cambodia and here in SA.

Dr Fanie du Toit of Cape Town's Institute for Justice and Reconciliation spoke about their annual reconciliation barometer with its two opposing points on the scale: "ticking time bomb" and "democratic dividend".

Is this SA's choice? Time bomb: a traumatised society that fails to heal itself, embraces victimhood, lacks empathy and becomes habituated to violent solutions.

Democratic dividend: teaching our children they can exercise free will, take responsibility for their lives and treat others with respect and empathy. It's a stark choice for parents: raise children who re-enact our painful history, or who break the inter-generational cycles of repetition.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission set us on the right path by publicly examining the past and encouraging repentance and forgiveness. I don't know how

successful the TRC really was, but it provided an outstanding example of a movement forwards, while acknowledging the past.

December 16 used to commemorate the Battle of Blood River as the Day of the Vow. Our first democratic government demonstrated its commitment to reconciliation by acknowledging the significance of December 16 in both the Afrikaner and liberation struggle traditions,

'Our genetic heritage is not a straitjacket'

renaming it the Day of Reconciliation. Within our own families we can also work on reconciliation.

Another speaker, Dr Jean Decety from the University of Chicago in the US, is a social neuroscientist with an interest in the neurobiology of empathy. Mammals provide altruistic care for their young because this promotes their wellbeing, but Decety asks why they care for others who are not kin.

His research shows that the

brain is primed for greater empathy towards those we are more familiar with. That's one clue to what parents can do, by exposing their children to difference and making other races and cultures more familiar.

The choices we make about schooling, religious observance and residence will have an impact on those our children interact with. But we can also make the other more familiar by showing our children how to embrace the ordinary moments, how to make everyday connections in public spaces with people we don't necessarily feel comfortable with.

Even if you are the offspring of narrow-minded and prejudiced parents, remember that heredity is not destiny, and the environment will always influence the expression of our genes.

"Our genetic heritage is not a straitjacket," says Decety.

Apartheid could not have happened if enough whites had

really believed that black people felt the same pain as they did. Lesbians would not be "correctively raped" if enough men believed these women were like their sisters and mothers.

Lastly, there are social forces working in our favour that we can take advantage of. Popular culture plays by its own rules, mixing groups in beer adverts and TV soaps, optimistically describing a new South African utopia as if it already exists.

At present, 66% of South Africans are under 35. For the first time, "born-frees" are able to vote. Some have no living memory of apartheid and constitute a new political force whose allegiance to race and culture can no longer be presumed.

The counter argument is that many young people still live and play in racially exclusive groups.

What can you do? To put it simply, humanity begins at home.