

# Treat wounds to heal nation's past

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"TRAUMA and pain afflict not only individuals. When they become widespread and ongoing, they affect entire communities and even the country as a whole. The implications are serious for people's health, the resilience of the country's social fabric, the success of the development schemes and the hope of future generations." – Martha Cabrera.

I loved sport. Even though I was not exceptional, as a youth I avidly played rugby, soccer and hockey. My affiliations were informed by the slogan of the South African Council on Sport: "No normal sport in an abnormal society". The result was that I never played with or against white teams, did not support South African sports teams and I was not afforded the luxury of visiting the city's best sports stadiums.

As fate would have it, I became the father of two sports enthusiast boys, raised in a new democracy, whose experiences, free from apartheid, were radically opposite to mine. They challenged my paradigm and at times even called me a racist. After much internal reflection and personal growth, today I support Western Province and South African sports teams. While it may seem that I have come a long way, the truth is that I still carry the wound of exclusion whenever I think that black players have to prove themselves more than white players for team selection, or that the inclusion of black players is considered by some as a lowering of standards. This scenario plays itself out on so many platforms in South Africa on a daily basis. Inclusion and exclusion still form an important part of the South African staple diet.

All South Africans inherited a negotiated settlement which was intended to create a new society that was forward-looking. We glibly talked about the new South Africa without lying to rest the old. Our first steps could therefore not be permanent steps but tentative and mobile. The result was that we often stopped or stepped back when confronted by our past. We naively expected dysfunctional communities, institutions, families and individuals would self-correct, that the abnormal would magically become normal.

The urgency of meaningful change was assuaged, by the presence and stature of Nelson Mandela in the early 1990s, by a Rugby World Cup title in 1995 and an Africa Cup of Nations soccer trophy in 1996, making us feel that we had become a winning nation. As the euphoria began to wane, the old fault lines started appearing again. Old wounds resurfaced as people began to realise that the freedom dividend



**LEVEL PLAYING FIELD:** I still carry the wound of exclusion whenever I think that black players have to prove themselves more than white players for team selection, or that the inclusion of black players is considered by some as a lowering of standards, says the writer.

was devoid of economic redress for the poor and a continuation of a safe environment for the rich. The wounds of inheritance will continue to be a blight on the South African miracle story as long as we continue to "boast" the biggest inequality levels in the world. While a number of black people have accessed varying levels of wealth in this country, the majority of the poor are still black, while the rich are largely white.

In spite of our constitution, which guarantees freedom of association, our preoccupation with group loyalty and socialisation within racial, religious or cultural groups renders the notion of a rainbow

nation superficial. We are still too quick to use derogatory terms when we do not agree with people. This is not only a lazy short cut to secure a hollow victory but it is often also incomplete, unfair and a misleading way to characterise someone. Our contradictory interpretations of the extent of economic benefit derived from an exclusion suffered under apartheid form part of a cocktail of ingredients that contribute to discontent and disappointment in the "new" South Africa.

In this context, Martha Cabrera's seminal work on *Living and Surviving in a Multiply Wounded Country* proves to be most useful. Cabrera worked as a psychologist in

Nicaragua and kept running into blockages in sessions with people who had experienced severe trauma, both structural and personal. The opening quote captures the essence of her discovery.

In South Africa we have changed our laws, policies, even the faces of those who govern, but we've done very little to address the generational wounds of exclusion, dehumanisation and subjugation. We should not be surprised at the deep cleavages when we are not prepared to address the origins of the woundedness. The alarming nature of the many types of abuse, the disintegration of the social fabric of our society, the persistent disen-

chantment of the poor and marginalised are clear indications or symptoms of a wounded society. This had been forcibly articulated by people like Desmond Tutu, Mamphele Ramphele and others, and we ignore it at our peril.

As difficult and uncomfortable as it is, we need to start treating the wounds that we carry. So far we have used plasters to conceal a festering wound. Previously disadvantaged people need to understand that woundedness cannot only be treated by legislation, policies, affirmative action, BEEE, employment equity or even grants.

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ances, it can never replace the hard work of confronting wounds of internalised oppression, racism, inferiority and mediocrity. Previously advantaged people must understand the need for serious shifts in their thinking about the benefits of whiteness, the worth and inherent dignity of all people, that no amount of name-calling, cursing and judgement will improve their lot in the long run and that today's actions determine the inheritance we leave for future generations. The Nigerian author, Ben Okri, aptly reminds us that "we have made these things and we can unmake them".

Those who know something of river rafting know that the point of no return is not at the edge of the waterfall but further upstream. We can still heal this beautiful country if we are prepared to confront our demons. Healing is a consequence of catharsis and catharsis happens when you deal with your pain (wounds). When wounds won't heal we run the risk of serious infection, gangrene and who knows, even amputation.

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