

## Teaching ubuntu: Some prompts and possibilities

Good evening, parents, staff, and students. It is a profound honour to speak to you today at the opening of this remarkable space—the Ubuntu Learning Centre. This moment is not just on occasion of a physical structure but also an opportunity to reflect on the values that can animate this space and the possibilities to convert a well-engineered space into a place. I suspect I have received this invitation as a scholar of ubuntu and a teacher of philosophy of education but it is also possible that Yusef Waghid was not available.

When I received the invitation and subsequently had the honour of learning about the (re)construction and naming of the building as someone in philosophy my first inclination was to think Why. Why is this naming significant? Why ubuntu? Why now? Why this building? At first I wanted to talk about the politics of naming, the power it takes to give something or even someone a name. To give name is to be in a particular standing with regard to power or even authority of the named. I thought about the dynamics of territory and how places and spaces receive their names and all the associations that carries. In the town I am from all the townships/suburbs carry the names of children and generals of the city's great founder king Mzilikazi kaMatshobane. While this is about memory it is also a very male centred type of memory. My first inclination was to think about questions on naming and the politics of names. But if we are honest, they are not transformative questions, as in they do not lead anywhere substantive. After I came to Bishops and saw the structure and saw first-hand the potentiality of the structure I had a different set of questions. And so, I titled my talk: Teaching ubuntu – some prompts and possibilities for Bishops. I believe the time is right to teach ubuntu. And so, my starting point is not history, or the many difficult decisions that have given us this building under this name. I would like to turn my back on all of that for a moment and look ahead – now that we are here with a building with this name, what is possible? And here is my prompt: for this occasion, to become substantive ubuntu cannot remain on the face of the building – it cannot just be inanimate as the building itself. It has to come alive. Ubuntu will have to be taught.

- i. Why teach ubuntu? I believe we have given enough lip-service to ubuntu. It is not just a concept to speak about and speak to. It is not just a noun with a root verb, ubuntu is a practice. While it is captured and encoded in language, ubuntu finds expression in the doing. It is a noun that is built on a root verb. It is first 'a lived and living philosophy'. Growing up the word ubuntu was rarely spoken in my family and yet when I look for examples, for stories of ubuntu my upbringing is

always a rich archive for me to tap into. In many Nguni cultures across southern Africa the word ubuntu/kintu/vhumuntu/hunhu/utu or however it shows up in a language is rarely spoken. That's because ubuntu is a doing. It shows up in encounters. Friends, we live in a world that is shaped and dominated by narratives. Narratives can secure an election. Narratives can start wars. Narratives can win millions of a fanbase on a social platform. Narratives can get people killed. One of the lessons I always try to engrain in the young people I work with is look beyond rhetoric, what do the actions say. Ubuntu is not another narrative, it is a doing. It's not just SAYING we value other persons it is DEMONSTRATING it! No wonder in many places the action – humility, hospitality, kindness is taken to be ubuntu itself. We associate that with ubuntu because ubuntu finds full expression in the doing. Of course we now understand, ubuntu is not just an ethic – ubuntu is in all the processes that make the action possible.

- ii. Why teach ubuntu - Because ubuntu (shared humanity) is what transforms a space into a place. No matter how immaculately designed a hotel room is, it rarely has the touch and feel of home. Not because it isn't homely. Because there is no sense of ownership, no sense of shared experience with other occupants of the facility. A building becomes home when the air in it feels like a dividend that all its occupants can tap into.
- iii. Why teach ubuntu – Because curriculum has become obsessed with passing learners along. From grade to grade. From school to varsity, from varsity to market. As MLK stated ***“The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. But education which stops with efficiency may prove the greatest menace to society. The most dangerous criminal may be the (wo)man gifted with reason, but with no morals.... If we are not careful, our colleges will produce a group of close-minded, unscientific, illogical propagandists, consumed with immoral acts. Be careful, “brethren!” Be careful, teachers!”***
- iv. How do we teach ubuntu? Within African households ubuntu is taught through language, relationships, and the gestures that accompany our interactions. It is embedded in everyday interactions as well as the practices that progenitor communities hold sacred whether it be practices of birth, of death, of marriage, of hosting strangers or of fulfilling justice after one is wronged. But how do we translate these deeply ingrained practices into a contemporary educational framework? I teach over 250 students each year at Stellenbosch University and most

come from cultures outside the frame of ubuntu. My challenge as I (re)introduce ubuntu is where do I begin, what should I teach and what can I forgo.

- v. A framework of encounter - I consider ubuntu as a framework of encounter or a social device. This is a definition I am particularly biased towards, as it emerges from my own work. I have come to see ubuntu not as a single, monolithic concept or a series of do's and don'ts but as a set of congealed acts that create the conditions for the humane. In this context, ubuntu is a social device employed to navigate the interface with the other. It is entering each encounter with the intention to bring the next person closer – however brief the encounter. The goal of ubuntu is always the establishment relationship—what in isiXhosa ubuhlobo or in Shona we might call ukama. Nespor (1997:xiii) notes that “education isn't to be found in what happens in classrooms or schools but in the relations that bind them [learners] to networks of practice extending beyond”
- vi. So how do I teach ubuntu?

1. Seeing the Other: In isiZulu, the word *sawubona* is more than just a greeting; it means "we see you." Kaunda (2023) notes *that “Sawubona is a functional aspect of ubuntu for mutual recognition of the life of all things that make up the universe.....[it] is not individualistic but a locus of collective encounters, exchanges, and experiences of eco-relations”* In my class I actively represent this through the act of giving audience to each other. It is not easy to speak in a class of 250 something people and when one chooses to do so we *sawubona* – we see them, we give them audience. There is something profound about being seen—it is both nerve-wracking and liberating. To see someone means to acknowledge their presence, their humanity, *and their right to occupy space*. In my own lectures at Stellenbosch University, I encounter students who have been invisibilized, or worse, who wish to remain invisible. ‘Sawubona’ challenges this, demanding that we all show up fully and authentically. Sawubona is NOT surveillance. I understand the need for this in today security riddled lives, but it is not that. Sawubona – we see you! Means to be equally caught up in each other's lives, each others humanity in the moment of encounter. It is being acknowledged, your presence means something. E.g a group activity in class usually they jump onto what is needed but the key to collaboration is not what is done but who is there and what can they do. The possibility is that the centre can be a place of sawubona. I already see that collaboration is already engraved on many doors in the space. A good start.

2. The Primacy of the Human: ‘Umuntu ngu muntu’—a person is a person. This speaks to the respect and reverence for life, not only one's own but that of others. In ubuntu, a person is

valued without precondition. It is also a right to be with others, to be among the living. When someone violates another, it is said they have foreclosed their place among others— ‘akasi muntu’—they are not a person. Teaching this aspect of ubuntu requires us to instil a deep respect and reverence for human dignity in our students, one that transcends mere tolerance and moves towards true acceptance and appreciation. It works hand in glove with sawubona.

3. The Shedding: This is perhaps the most challenging aspect of ubuntu in our contemporary world. The practice of ubuntu requires shedding—whether it is shedding ego, privilege, or the desire for dominance. In a world that often rewards accumulation and self-promotion, the concept of shedding is countercultural. Yet, it is essential for the creation of a just and humane society. In African households one is taught to shed again and again until it becomes second nature. One would shed clothes for one sibling to the other, a warm plate for a stranger that arrived after the plates had been dished etc.

The story of the Amish [Forgiveness is a part of what they call daily grace, it is taught, practiced and passed on from the youngest to the oldest]

It is one thing to say we want ubuntu; it is another to say we teach Ubuntu. And then another to live ubuntu. The challenge before us is to ensure that this Ubuntu Learning Centre becomes more than a building with a beautifully named façade, that it becomes a living embodiment of the principles we would want cherished and are taught. I have shared with you some of my own attempts at applying these principles in my teaching. My hope is that they will inspire you to consider how you might do the same in thinking about this space and other spaces across the college.

As I close: Toni Morrison said “the grandeur of life is that attempt and not that solution. It is about being as fearless as one can, and behaving as beautifully as one can under completely impossible circumstances. It is that that makes it elegant. [UBUNTU] Good is just that more interesting, more complex, more demanding. Evil is silly. It maybe horrible but at the same its not a compelling idea. Its predictable. It needs a tuxedo; it needs a headline, it needs blood, it needs fingernails. It needs all that costume in order to get anybody’s attention. But the opposite, [UBUNTU] which is survival, blossoming, endurance those things are just more compelling intellectually if not spiritually especially spiritually”. Ubuntu is good. If I can read that again from an ubuntu perspective:

However the path that has lead you to this occasion there lies many GOOD possibilities for this space ahead. I hope you can all build on that good in this new space and beyond it.

Thank you.