

**Archbishop Thabo Makgoba**  
**Inauguration as Chancellor of the University of the Western Cape**  
**“Moral Leadership and the Task of Education**  
**for the 21st Century”**  
**28 February 2012**

---

**VERSION FOR DELIVERY**

- Chair of Council, Mr Brian Williams, and Members of Council;
- Vice Chancellor, Professor Brian O’Connell, and all other staff, students, alumni and members of the wider UWC family;
- honoured guests;
- ladies and gentlemen;

it is a great honour to find myself being inaugurated as Chancellor of this distinguished university. Thank you.

I am deeply humbled by this privilege you have bestowed upon me, and I fully commit myself to uphold the responsibilities of this office, to the best of my ability.

Knowing my predecessor well, I am quite sure that my feet are many sizes bigger than his – but nonetheless I am also certain that he has left me with the challenge of a very large pair of shoes to fill!

As I look back, almost my whole life has been bound up with education, in one form or another.

After schooling, first in Alexandra then at Orlando High, came Wits university.

Soon after graduating with my bachelors’ degree, I also completed theological studies for ordination in the Anglican Church, with time in Grahamstown.

I then returned to Wits for honours, followed by a Masters of Education.

I lectured part time at Wits, and was also Dean of Knockando, at Wits College of Education (formerly Johannesburg College of Education).

And as if all that were not enough, I went on to pursue a doctorate, graduating in 2009 from the University of Cape Town.

You might say that I am something of a perpetual student at heart [*and certainly my family always complain I have my head in a book*], though teaching has also always been a great joy to me, whether in the corridors of learning or through the channels of the church.

Despite this long connection with studying and teaching, the privilege of becoming the Chancellor of UWC prompted me to revisit two key questions.

First, what actually is the task of education?

And, second, what, in light of our answer, is the true vocation of a university within South Africa, in the unfolding years of the twenty-first century?

The simplistic response might be that the role of a university is to pursue and disseminate learning.

But this begs the question of what constitutes learning.

It is of course far more than the accumulation and communication of information: facts and figures, opinions and arguments, practices and procedures.

For theory cannot be abstracted from the human contexts of surrounding societies and the wider world.

As we well know, from quantum physics to the writing of history, there is no wholly neutral place from which to view our world, and no completely objective way of speaking about what we think we know. And nor can there be.

One corollary of this is that there is equally no morally or ethically neutral way of pursuing or sharing learning.

Both are always inextricably linked to the world around: the world in which we live; the world from which our students come, and to which they return.

Education must fit us for engagement with such a world.

What we need then, is beyond mere knowledge – understanding, perhaps.

But the word which resonates best for me is ‘wisdom’.

From the *hikmat* of the Old Testament, to the *sophia* of ancient Greeks and the New Testament, this is a concept with a long and honourable pedigree.

It calls us to ‘realised knowledge’, to ‘practical understanding’ (such as that of the skilled craftsman or woman), to shrewd discernment of situations and how to handle them.

Wisdom is what enables human beings to be competent and skilled in engaging well with life, and in playing a constructive role in wider society.

It is what enables us to be – so to speak – part of the solution, not part of the problem.

Of course, wisdom in Christian tradition is inescapably bound up with living according to God’s purposes for humanity – purposes which we believe are designed by an infinitely loving creator entirely for our well-being; in other words, for the flourishing of individuals within flourishing societies.

This aligns closely with the concept, shared in many faiths and philosophies, of the moral life being directed towards the common good of all members of society.

Yet even if one abstracts the concept from any specifically religious or philosophical context, it still retains an unavoidable ethical component.

One cannot be wise and simultaneously pursue an immoral life – not merely in the personal sphere, but in any other walk of life.

And this is why for me, moral leadership and education must go hand in hand.

Our task is both to provide moral leadership, and to help form the moral leaders, which our country, our continent, so desperately need.

For wisdom directs us to seek a world of justice and fairness for all, which moves towards overcoming inequalities – whether the legacies of the past, or the growing economic disparities of more recent years, to name but two – and strives to promote conditions in which all may have the opportunity to fulfil their potential.

Within South Africa we are blessed with a Constitution that provides a clear picture of such a society.

Its Preamble describes a united, democratic, nation, with overarching goals that include: healing the divisions of the past; and establishing a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights – and which improves the quality of life of all citizens and frees the potential of each person.

This is the yardstick against which we must measure progress, success, morality.

This is the vision to which we must commit ourselves, and which we can only achieve through strong ethical leadership that draws energy from the promises of the Constitution, and captures the hope that gave this nation birth.

This is in many ways a deeply spiritual undertaking.

We are speaking of the nurturing of the soul of our nation.

The choice for education – particularly tertiary education – is actually quite stark.

Do we position all we say and do within such a context, committed to such goals, putting our weight behind the pursuit of such a vision – or do we not?

Do we sit by while corruption grows, nepotism flourishes, freedom diminishes, and inequality deepens? and be happily, heedlessly, complicit while narrow self-interest, callous selfishness, and the pursuit of personal gain, of power, status, and material wealth, regardless of the consequences for other people or our planet, become the norm?

Do we turn a blind eye as cutting corners, dropping standards, sharp practices, become the order of the day?

Now, the University of the Western Cape has come a very long way since it started life as a so-called 'bush college', over half a century ago.

The radical changes UWC has experienced through these decades mirror those our nation has undergone.

Indeed, this place has had leaders, and produced leaders, who have been at the forefront in driving the best of these changes.

Today, I am proud that we are one of the most diverse universities in South Africa – and this without compromising standards of excellence or quality of education.

We have an international reputation, particularly for the research and development of open-source software solutions and open educational resources.

Our historic commitment to genuine transformation, and to upliftment of all, has gone without saying.

Yet the situation we face demands that we relax neither our vigilance nor our commitment.

For it is not at all clear that our country as a whole remains safely on the path to achieving the vision for which so many struggled, and for which so many gave their lives.

It is all too evident that economic disparities remain vast, and are even growing.

The situation in education is little better, for all that the headline statistics trumpet great increases in matric pass-rates.

For beneath these figures lies the sad story that a good half of those who entered school in 2000 failed even to write matric.

And what can a pass truly mean, when it is sufficient to achieve a mere 40% or even 30%?

We must not be afraid of excellence.

We must reject any generalised attitude of acceptance towards the mediocre, even inadequate; and name it for what it is, especially where it is bound up with deep and complex apprehensions of inferiority, inherited from the past.

For these we must seek continuing healing and wholeness, a liberation of the heart and mind and soul from any persisting legacy of the lies of apartheid.

The other side of the same coin is to beware of grandiose and indefensible claims which can never be realised – from the capacity of our economy or our global political influence to the potential of our football team – which then only reinforce the idea that failure, suitably dressed up in fine rhetorical clothes, is all we can expect.

No, we must be realistic about where we are coming from and what can be done, but always seeking to go forward, do better, make progress.

For we know that educational and economic poverty, left unaddressed, are mutually reinforcing, condemning generations to squalor; whereas education – rightly prioritised, resourced and directed – ought to be a primary means of escaping and overcoming financial deprivation: whether by individuals or of whole communities.

We need an economic wind of change.

We need the emancipation of all who are currently deprived of the ability, for whatever reason, to realise a decent and dignified standard of living.

The task of education, at every level, is to be alert and intentional in working to overcome these divisions and close these gaps.

For their existence and their persisting, even worsening, is a scandal. It is truly immoral.

Institutions such as ours must name and address these gulfs, speaking up against all in society that fuels their continuance, whether directly or indirectly, through the policies and practices of politicians, the private sector, civil society or anywhere else.

And in our own area of expertise – education – we must engage with policy makers and role players.

We must do so, not only in the tertiary sector, but in support of reform that will ensure schools provide our children with the basic knowledge, and technical and language skills, to succeed in life – including in preparing them adequately for further study where this is appropriate.

Furthermore, we must locate these skills within an ethical framework – one which helps young people learn to pose and wrestle with deeper questions about life's purpose; the human capacity for good and evil; and the need to choose between right and wrong.

For without such an ethical framework, we are not going to build that 'better life for all' of which politicians and others so easily speak.

Universities have a particular task in searching out and offering better ways forward, across the breadth of human activity.

For it is far easier to criticise and pull down, than to create and build up.

Yet universities, more than most other institutions, are called to be pioneers of new ideas: researching and developing fresh possibilities, new options, better ways ahead; and then offering these resources to those who need to draw on them.

And we must do all this not in isolation, either from one another within our different disciplines, or from others around us.

For the comprehensive challenges of contemporary life require joined up responses, with joined up thinking and acting:

- across academic fields;
- between academic institutions in this country, this continent and beyond;
- and in partnership with other spheres of society.

I am glad that, even in small ways, I am finding opportunities to engage with others across the continent, even the globe – with the African diaspora, and our friends – to bring new participants to the table as we seek effective solutions to poverty in all its ramifications.

'Knowledge is power' says the well-known maxim.

In the past, knowledge – knowledge available to, and controlled by, a narrow elite; knowledge as one of the currencies of empire – was used to subjugate and maintain enslavement.

Now, today, rightly harnessed, the power of knowledge, of true wisdom, can and must be deployed in the service of liberation and emancipation.

This brings me back to the question of moral leadership.

Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese leader and Nobel Peace Winner, has been quoted as saying that 'the quintessential revolution is that of the spirit ... To live the full life, one must have the courage to bear responsibility of the needs of others ... one must want to bear this responsibility.'<sup>1</sup>

We need leaders prepared to bear this responsibility, prepared to undertake this 'revolution of the spirit' in the service of others, which is so counter-cultural to the individualist and self-centred trends of contemporary life.

All of us, in one way or another, have the capacity to be leaders, and to be moral leaders.

For all of us live in a world of choice; and the choices we make, or fail to make, for good and for ill, inevitably affect our own lives and the lives of others around us.

- How we handle relationships,
- how we act as parents,
- how we deal with bosses or employees or clients,
- our role within our neighbourhood,
- our willingness to serve on school boards,
- our readiness to stand up and be counted

all of these are potential acts of leadership.

Some of us, however, find ourselves in positions where we have the gift – the responsibility – of being able to exercise influence on a wider level.

Perhaps this is as academics and teachers, as community activists, politicians, journalists, writers, religious leaders, and so on.

Perhaps the decisions we take in our work – as government officials, as business people, or in many other walks of life – impact upon our society, upon our world, and their wellbeing.

Or perhaps we are still at the stage of learning, and aspire to become such a person.

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Popham, *The Lady and the Peacock: The Life of Aung San Suu Kyi*, Rider, 2011, p.301

In such situations, all of us must remember that those who are in greatest need are those whose voices we are least likely to hear; whose influence upon us is likely to be far weaker than that of those already enjoying power, wealth, status.

We must be mindful in paying attention not only to what is big and loud and right before us.

We need to take account of the small, the hidden, the marginalised, the weak, the poor.

Indeed, more often than not, we need to put them first.

Only in this way can we turn around the systemic injustices that are legacies of the past or symptoms of current unsustainable policies.

This may take considerable courage.

It goes against the grain of so much of contemporary life.

But this is a mark of true moral leadership, of genuine wisdom: to be able to see with clear eyes what is the right course of action to pursue, and not only to follow it, but to give others the encouragement to do the same.

Psychologist Nathaniel Branden has said,

‘Innovators and creators are person who can to a higher degree than average accept the condition of aloneness.

They are more willing to follow their own vision, even when it takes them far from the mainland of the human community.

Unexplored places do not frighten them – or not, at any rate, as much as they frighten those around them. This is one of the secrets of their power.

That which we call “genius” has a great deal to do with courage and daring, a great deal to do with nerve.’

Genius, courage and daring:

- all in the service of moral leadership;
- all in the service of wisdom;
- all in the service of others, of society and of our planet.

Can we make these the defining marks of the University of the Western Cape?

I pray it may be so.

I commit myself to this vision.

And I ask you to join me.

Thank you.