

Mandela moments

I am writing this on a very cold day in Maryland, USA, when my thoughts cannot help but turn to the Caribbean. But thoughts of the Caribbean are taking second place because of the programs around the death of Nelson Mandela. I am watching the celebration of his life that is taking place in the football stadium in Soweto and I cannot help but recall that this place is not that far from the apartheid museum where one comes face to face with the horrors of that period and must question how it could be possible for such a systematic dehumanizing of a people to take place partly through the systematic destruction of their institutions. If you would destroy a people, attack their institutions! One also has to think about how to ensure that the cries of “never again” should never again be heard.

But there are also feelings of joy as one watches the obvious outpouring of rejoicing by South Africans and others at what Mandela was and what he did for that country. There was singing and dancing in the cold rain in celebration and I was told that the rain signifies a blessing on the rituals to carry Mandela to heaven. I recalled my personal experience with that regime. A South African scientist, who had been a participant in a meeting I helped to organize in the University of the West Indies at Mona, thought it would be a good thing to invite me to give a keynote address to a conference he was organizing in his country. It was on a topic of my own research, but then I understood that in order to get a visa to go there I would have to be designated an “honorary white”. Initially I thought it was just hilarious, but then amusement was replaced by anger as the enormity of its significance sank in. Of course I could not accept.

As I watched the celebrations, I also recalled with some pride the role the Caribbean governments and my predecessor Chancellor Emeritus Sir Shridath Ramphal played in the dismantling of that heinous regime and the freeing of Mandela.

I was brought back to thoughts about our University and what we owe it when I heard President Obama give his stirring address; when he compared Mandela with the princes of peace –Gandhi and Martin Luther King and with Lincoln who amid the blood and stench of Gettysburg could memorialize the sacrifice made and relate it to the commitment to unity. President Obama in a global and local contextualization of what “Madiba” stood for used the word “Ubuntu” which stirred a chord in me. I had heard that word used to express unity and togetherness and one definition I got from Wikipedia to which I could relate was: *“We create each other and need to sustain this otherness creation. And if we belong to each other, we participate in our creations: we are because you are, and since you are, definitely I am”*.

I related that to our University and its products and the idea that there has to be a connection between those of us who share the common bond of having been nurtured there and having some obligation to those who are being and will be nurtured there. It is this spirit of connectedness, of partaking in the same “faith” that was very much part of what nurtured the network which helped to sustain minority elites in various parts of the world. But I contend that it need not relate only to an elite which is bound together by privilege. It can be fostered among groups that have other ties.

We are often questioned about the weakness of our alumni associations and obliquely about the ties that bind us alumni. My response is that the creation of these bonds takes time, they do not always grow spontaneously and as the group gets larger they become ever more difficult to establish and maintain. Good communication is one of the critical mechanisms and it is a pleasure to see the growth of the communication vehicles of excellent quality that are coming from the University. But I point out to the doubters that there has been progress and as an example I relate my experience in a reception in a small Caribbean country, when one of the newly created corps of UWI Ambassadors would approach me and speak with pride of what he was doing and was committed to doing as an envoy for the University and to continuing to encourage those of his generation to join him in maintaining their links with it. He pointed out that at his stage, what he had to “give back” was his time and energy. This movement is growing and we must encourage it. I am also comforted and cheered when I hear our recent valedictorians speak with passion about their University, what it has made them and commit to seeing it grow and prosper as a West Indian institution. I must not over- glamorize the notion of “Ubuntu”, but I wish to convey that the idea of belonging to and being a part of others is one of the concepts that must enter the thinking of some if not all of those who owe their place in the sun to the University of the West Indies and consider it a responsibility to support and maintain it.

Let me wish you and yours every good thing for the coming year and I hope that I cross paths with an increasing number of you in 2014.

And finally, let me congratulate and thank the alumni of Trinidad and Tobago for standing up for the integrity of the University in the recent imbroglio there.