



## “EVERY NEW START CALLS FOR CLEANSING”

Pastoral counselor, Anglican Archbishop, “God’s showman”, champion of political change, and vociferous, courageous critic of apartheid in South Africa – whatever the role, Desmond Tutu has invariably imparted his message with pure passion. When apartheid was finally overcome in 1990, and South Africa set out along the long road to social renewal, the country found itself encumbered with the countless violations of human rights under the old regime. A young and still fragile democracy faced the critical dilemma of being unable to process all past crimes through the courts, while at the same time not wishing to belittle the suffering of the victims nor diminish the guilt of the perpetrators. One of the most influential figures in guiding the new South Africa along the narrow ledge between amnesty and retribution was Desmond Tutu. In November 1995, president Nelson Mandela appointed the Archbishop of Cape Town Chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Before the Commission, victims were able to give voice to their suffering, while perpetrators who voluntarily admitted their misdeeds could hope that their confession might mitigate their sentence. Desmond Tutu was a prime mover in this process, not least because he was convinced that without reconciliation there could be no social healing. His conciliatory sense of justice, his charismatic personality, and his fundamental Christian and humanist convictions founded in deep faith have made the Archbishop a sought-after advisor on secular matters as well. THE FOCUS spoke with Desmond Tutu about the crisis of values in the business sector and potential approaches to self-renewal.



THE FOCUS: The western capitalist world has suffered a severe crisis of confidence. Corporate leaders who bore great responsibility and thus enjoyed great admiration have transgressed in a way that no one expected. Where has the business sector gone wrong?

DESMOND TUTU: The pressure to succeed has a lot to do with why people overstep the line. It is a peculiar weakness of western culture where we have made a fetish of success. We give kudos to people who have succeeded. We don’t care in what they succeeded as long as they succeeded. The worst thing that can happen to anybody in this cultural environment is to fail.

THE FOCUS: The Bible tells us that “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.” What does success, and commercial success in particular, mean to you?

TUTU: To answer that, consider what we sometimes do with our children: We imbue them with this sense,

very early on, that they have got to succeed. We are not content that they just do well, they have got to wipe the floor with the opposition. There are very few institutions that give prizes to people who may not have got to be number one, but are possibly better at coaxing the best out of others. Our Christian faith is actually very subversive of the conventional notion of success – the notion that what invests a person with worth is something extrinsic.

**THE FOCUS:** So to escape the crisis of confidence, the global business sector would do well to re-focus on inner values?

**TUTU:** We will indeed escape from this crisis, although not spectacularly. The victories are going to be small ones which may in the end turn out to be spectacular. First we must return to the fundamentals; the fundamentals being that you count. That is where you start from. That you count; you matter for God. That is a fantastic realization, and one that very

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few of us actually get to accept. If we can accept it, then we can enjoy a self-assurance that doesn't depend on the state of things outside ourselves, be it downturns or booms or whatever. With that self-assurance we can build a way out of the crisis.

**THE FOCUS:** But are performance, ambition and the resultant success fundamentally negative?

**TUTU:** I have absolutely no objection to performance and success as long as they don't become false idols and threaten to rule our lives. People sometimes strive after and think they will find deep satisfaction for their psyches in wealth, sex or drugs, but then find that ultimately these things do not satisfy human longings. Sadly,

the things that we have set out as being worth striving for are not ultimately the things that satisfy human longings. And why not? Because we are practically the ultimate paradox: the finite made for the infinite.

**THE FOCUS:** When we witness malpractices at the highest levels of business or society we are appalled, but most people would instantly claim "That couldn't happen to me." Just how fallible are we?

**TUTU:** One of the things we might want to learn when considering the failings of others is not to gloat because someone else has tripped up. One of the things that struck me as I listened to some of the gruesome testimonies set before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa was the fact that we all have such an incredible capacity for evil. None of us, sitting in judgment on another, could say, without being arrogant, that we know we would never have done what that person did.

**THE FOCUS:** To err is human...

**TUTU:** O yes, human beings can be awful, but they can also be tremendous. A great African saint once said, speaking of God: "Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in thee." Someone once put it this way – each of us has a God-shaped space within us. Only God can fill that space. But we run ourselves ragged trying to find things other than God to fill it with. So we need to help human beings recover their sense of being human. Because human beings are actually made for goodness.

**THE FOCUS:** Many business leaders doubtless also sense this need, but at the same time they are under tremendous pressure to succeed, pressure applied by external sources. How can such a change in awareness find expression in the day-to-day work of a top manager?

**TUTU:** There is no magic formula. There isn't a wand that you can wave and 'hey presto' things change.

Without a certain experience of suffering it is harder to establish deep credibility.



**Desmond Tutu, 72, is not a clergyman whose profession is the consequence and fulfillment of an early calling. As a young man he was keen to pursue a career in medicine, but that wish was denied as a result of his family's financial circumstances. Instead, Tutu opted to follow in his father's footsteps and became a teacher. Faced with increasing discrimination against the black population in South Africa, in 1958 Tutu abandoned his chosen career to join the priesthood. In addition to his duties as a parish priest, he also pursued academic interests and so laid the foundations for his progressive rise through the church's internal hierarchy. In 1975 he was elected Bishop of Lesotho and in 1986 Archbishop of Cape Town. In recognition of his peaceful struggle for justice and reconciliation between races and ethnic groups in South Africa, Desmond Tutu was awarded the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize. His spiritual and political work has brought recognition in the form of many other international awards.**

But it is dark and to lighten that darkness we are going to need... perhaps not a paradigm shift, but certainly a different view of human beings. A person who is assured of the love of God will see his fellow men in a different light and treat them and himself differently, and of course this also applies to business leaders. You might have thought that a world such as ours, so hard-nosed and cynical and brash, would have very little time for transcendence, spiritual values of goodness and compassion, gentleness, and caring, but we actually do experience them.

**THE FOCUS:** You talked a moment ago about the lack of respect in western culture for leaders who are good at coaxing the best out of others rather than striving to become number one. What makes for a respected leader?

**TUTU:** There are leaders that we admire or maybe envy and then there are leaders that we revere. What's the difference? The ones we perhaps envy come across as macho and successful and aggressive. They practice a tough style of leadership that plays havoc with their blood pressure, gives them stomach ulcers and makes them lax about respecting ethical standards. Because it is the bottom line that counts. As long as they perform, these leaders are heroes. As soon as they don't perform, they are out of a job.

The kind of leadership that we revere – remarkably – is often in many ways a leadership that, by the above standards, one might call weak. So why do we feel this way about Mother Theresa? Why do we feel the way we feel about Nelson Mandela and the Dalai Lama? Because they are all imbued with a kind of altruism. Theirs is a leadership which is there for the sake of the led. They exist for the sake of others. These are the kind of leaders who say, “You matter...believe that you count and become what you really are – someone who matters, infinitely.” Their popularity, I think, stems from the fact that we have discovered that they are good. And this in turn is evidence of the fact that, ultimately, we know that we are all made for goodness. Not necessarily for success – although that may be a welcome spin-off.



Human beings have an extraordinary capacity for evil but – much more wonderfully – we have the capacity for infinite good.

**THE FOCUS:** What personal qualities, moral values or experiences would you say are essential in a good leader.

**TUTU:** The leaders that the world admires seem almost all to be people who haven't had things quite so smooth or easy in their lives. Consider the Dalai Lama: You would think that someone who has been in exile all of his adult life would be hard and harsh. In fact he is actually quite mischievous, and there are very few people I have met who are as serene as he is. He has a lovely, childlike sense of humor. Consider Nelson Mandela: I believe very fervently that the twenty-seven years that Mandela spent in jail, far from being what we might easily say was a waste, were quite

crucial in making the man who emerged. He went to jail an angry young man, appalled at the travesty of justice that had taken place. If he had had to take a hand in government at that time, we wouldn't be where we are now. And he gained a credibility with which, somehow, it seems that only suffering can endow a personality.

**THE FOCUS:** Is suffering an inevitable part of the process of renewal and recovery? Would you even say that there can be no great leader without this experience of suffering?

**TUTU:** No, we mustn't romanticize suffering. It can turn people bitter and hard, although it does seem to have been almost indispensable in making people into the kind of leaders that we admire. It could very well be that leaders need to have a deep sense of empathy with those who suffer. Certainly without that experience of suffering it is harder to establish deep credibility. I think one course of action that corporate leaders might very well consider is spending some time in a favela – in the slums – just experiencing what it's like to live without knowing where your next meal is coming from. It may not be quite the same, as they know they will ultimately move out again, but I think there is something to be said for doing so. Then they can, at least to some extent, speak from experience.

**THE FOCUS:** As Chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, you made a decisive contribution to helping people come to terms with the injustices of the apartheid regime, thereby paving the way to a more equitable society and building interracial trust. Do you believe that, if we are to successfully rebuild trust in the business sector too, there must first be a reappraisal of what has happened in the past?

**TUTU:** The philosopher George Santayana once wisely said: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." As long as we fail to face up to the past and deal with it accordingly, the future will smack of corruption. Only if we face up to our

past can we regain our credibility. If we pretend that our trust is greater than it is, we will be like someone who tries to patch over a crack. Dealing with the past is a painful process. It was a painful process for us here in South Africa, but I think South Africa is a better place for having gone through that process.

**THE FOCUS:** You often talk about catharsis as being a “therapeutic experience.” What do you mean by that?

**TUTU:** Catharsis is about cleansing and healing at one and the same time – healing memories and attitudes, healing the spirit and the heart. One thing that struck me was that I should come away from a harrowing, debilitating process like the Commission hearings with this incredible sense that, yes, human beings have an extraordinary capacity for evil but – much more wonderfully – we have the capacity for infinite good. That is an important message to communicate: The aberration is the bad person, for we are actually made for good. That is why we are upset by evil. Of course, because evil is sometimes so spectacular, we don’t remember all the good that has happened – all the kindnesses, all the compassion that has been shown. We are aware of the ghastliness of AIDS but, on the positive side, we need to be aware of just how passionate people are about working in a campaign against HIV; how they pour themselves out on behalf of those who are infected. What am I saying? I am saying that the world is awful but also that the world is beautiful. Human beings are awful, but ultimately human beings are tremendous. Catharsis returns us to the purpose for which we were originally intended – to be called by God to do good – and thus ultimately returns us to ourselves.

**THE FOCUS:** Can there be genuine renewal without this process of catharsis?

**TUTU:** Every new start calls for cleansing, and that is part of catharsis. Catharsis is about things coming out into the open and being cleansed so that you can make a new start. In order to turn around and do something better, we must first escape the vicious



The interview with Desmond Tutu was conducted by Ulrike Mertens, **THE FOCUS**, and John J. Grumbar, Egon Zehnder International, London.

circle of self-righteousness and denial. And that calls for the humility to say “I’m sorry. Please forgive me.”

**THE FOCUS:** Could this be one way of overcoming the crisis of confidence, of regaining the trust that we talked about earlier?

**TUTU:** Trust is one of the fundamentals of human existence. We need to be able to trust one another. A man who can no longer trust anyone will become sick. In Africa there is something called *ubuntu*, the essence of being human. Essentially, *ubuntu* means that I cannot be human in isolation. And just as I need other human beings in order to learn from them, so I also need their trust. If we aren’t aware of that, if we fail to take it to heart and instead betray other people’s trust, things will go badly with us. So human beings have a vested interest in being trustworthy. Once lost, trust can only be regained if we are as good as our word.

**THE FOCUS:** Archbishop Tutu, thank you for talking to us. ■