

# Ubuntu: Reflections of a South African on Our Common Humanity

Barbara Nussbaum

African values could contribute much to world consciousness, but people in the West misunderstand Africa for many reasons. First, Africa's traditional culture is inaccessible because most of it is oral rather than written and lived rather than formally communicated in books or journals; it is difficult to learn about from a distance. Second, many African political leaders betrayed the philosophical and humanitarian principles on which African culture is based, and political failures in African countries tend to tarnish the views of many Westerners. Third, people in the West, for whatever reason, receive negative, limited information through the media; images of ethnic wars, dictatorships, famine, and AIDS predominate, so the potential contribution of African values is often lost.

I have chosen to write about the inspiring dimensions of African values that rarely make their way into mainstream US news media. I write because of a strengthening conviction that Africa has something important to contribute to a change of heart needed in the world. This need for change has become clearer in my own mind since September 11; there is no doubt that our world must embrace a sense of interconnectedness as a global community if we are to survive.

I share here some personal reflections about Africa.<sup>1</sup> I seek to articulate some of the beauty and power of *ubuntu*, an underlying social philosophy of African culture. Ubuntu is the capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony, and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining community. Ubuntu calls on us to believe and feel that:

Your pain is My pain,  
My wealth is Your wealth,  
Your salvation is My salvation.

In essence, ubuntu, an Nguni word from South Africa, addresses our interconnectedness, our common humanity, and the responsibility to each other that flows from our connection. The eclipse of ubuntu has darkened the spirit of modern-day African political systems. However, imagine the potential of ubuntu's sunlight, were it to be embraced as a vital part of the African renaissance or even as Africa's contribution to help a divided, fragmented world.

Nhlanhla Mkhize, a South African psychologist, explains that *self* is rooted in community in several traditional African cultures in South Africa:

The African view of personhood denies that a person can be described solely in terms of the physical and psychological properties. It is with reference to the community that a person is defined. The importance of the community in self-definition is summed up by Mbiti, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." . . . It is this rootedness of the self-in-community that gives rise to sayings such as *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (Nguni)/*Motho ke motho ka batho babang* (Sotho). These roughly translate to, "It is through others that one attains selfhood." The Venda saying, *Muthu u bebelwa munwe* (a person is born for the other), also captures the interdependence between self and community (Mkhize, 1998: 1).



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Leopold Senghor, a West African social philosopher, describes another dimension of ubuntu, “I feel the other, I dance the other, and therefore I am.”

According to Duke University professor Michael Battle, ubuntu reflects the strong interdependence of human beings:

We say a person is a person through other persons. We don't come fully formed into the world. . . . We need other human beings in order to be human. We are made for togetherness, we are made for family, for fellowship, (for community) to exist in a tender network of interdependence (Battle, 1997).

### Interconnectedness of Self and Community

Ubuntu sees community rather than self-determination as the essential aspect of personhood. People are distinctive beings, able to recognize and acknowledge each other through mutual encounter and cultural integration.

Ronnie Lessem, a senior lecturer at the University of Buckingham, and I were among the first researchers to write about the potential of ubuntu and other African values as a positive force in the South African workplace. In our book, we describe various ways in which the arts, storytelling, and community-building rituals strengthen and enliven group relationships (Lessem and Nussbaum, 1996). Values and processes geared toward seeking consensus and mutual understanding, and maintaining harmony are very much a part of African culture. These include leadership and heal-

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ing skills and simple interpersonal processes, such as how to greet someone in the morning, how a person leads a group to improvise together in dance, how a chief makes decisions, or how war healers reduce vengeance among people who have been at war. For example, Shona greetings (from Zimbabwe) in the morning would be:

*Mangwani, marara sei?* (Good morning, did you sleep well?)  
*Ndarara, kana mararawo* (I slept well, if you slept well.)

And at lunchtime:

*Marara sei?* (How has your day been?)  
*Ndarara, kana mararawo?* (My day has been good, if your day has been good.)

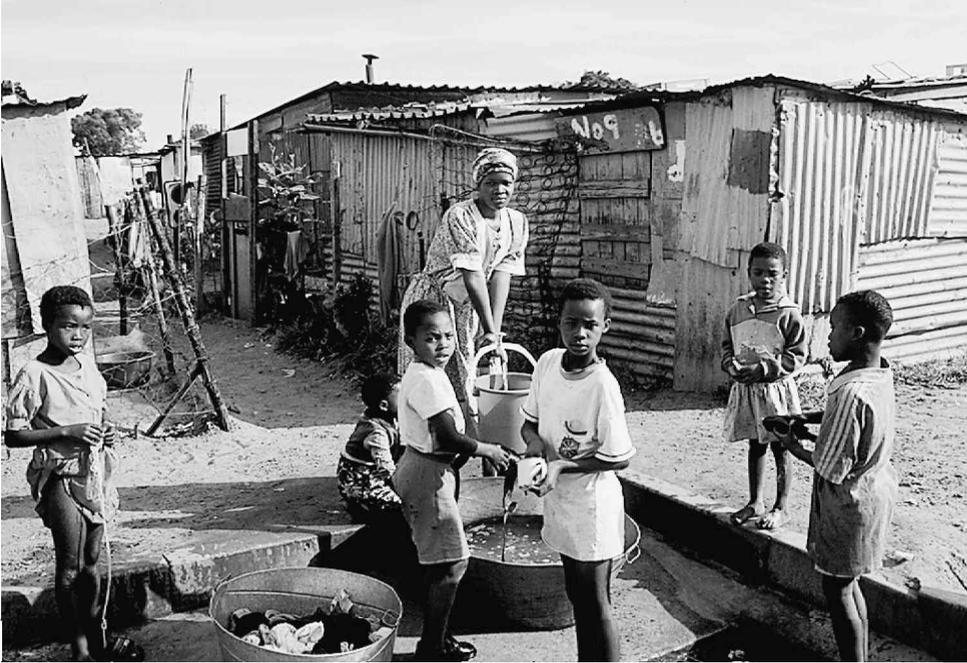
In other words, we are so connected that if you did not sleep well, or if you are not having a good day, how can I sleep well or have a good day? This kind of greeting would apply to close family and to strangers.

A good chief listens to the group and finds the point of consensus. He (most are men) would play a low-key role, listen to all viewpoints, facilitate debate, and finally summarize and make a decision that is just, preserves dignity, and reflects the group consensus. The phrase, “a chief is a chief by the people,” underlies the traditional way in which leaders, by listening to people, understood the place of the common good.

Traditionally, following a war between two tribes in South Africa, war healers from each side would together arrange for a cleansing ceremony involving those who fought on both sides. They believed that because people had died, ancestors on both sides would be aggrieved, and the hands, hearts, and spirits of killers on each side needed to be cleansed. This mature, profound skill demonstrates an in-built capacity for reconciliation and healing after war. Where else in the world does this happen? Imagine if the Israelis and Arabs had been able to do this at various points during their long, antagonistic history? Such ceremonies remind people of their common humanity and reduce the buildup of vengeful feelings.

### Reconciliation and Soul Force

When I was working in a nongovernmental organization in Zimbabwe in the late 1980s, a colleague, Matanga, and I disagreed about an issue. After discussing it for an hour or two, I said, “Matanga, can't we agree to disagree?” He said, “No, *sisi* (sister) Barbs. We have to sit and talk until we agree.” This conversation illustrates a value base that stresses



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cooperation, the desire for reconciliation, and communication in the interests of not only harmony but shared understanding.

I believe that some of the cultural dynamics behind South Africa's political miracle must be attributed to the patience, maturity, and reconciliatory skill that African leaders embody. Nelson Mandela and others found a way to talk issues through, until a dignified consensus was found. Credit is also due to the humility and commitment of white leaders who chose to listen. But, in the final analysis, the reconciliatory wisdom in the service of discovering and building our connection with each other is an inherent gift of African cultural heritage, a gift the world is just beginning to recognize and one that merits greater attention.

Ali Mazrui, a Kenyan political scientist, has referred to an African tendency toward a "short memory of hate": "In reality, black people have been at least as violent as anything ever perpetrated by Indians. What is distinctive about Africans is their short memory of hate" (Mazrui, 2001: 14–17). Africans teach their children to communicate, reconcile, and find ways to cleanse and let go of hatred and give them the skills to do so. The wars in the Congo and Rwanda are a sober counterpoint, compromising the powerful legacy of this continent, which gave birth to a deeply human heritage.

Mazrui also described Gandhi's views on African soul force, of great interest because Gandhi profoundly influenced Martin Luther King, Jr. According to Mazrui:

In the first half of the twentieth century, India produced Mohandas Gandhi, who led one of the most remarkable nonviolent anticolonial movements ever witnessed. Westerners themselves saw Gandhi's message as the nearest approximation of the Christian ethic of the first half of the twentieth century. Mahatma Gandhi's India gave birth to new principles of passive resistance and *satyagraha*. Yet Gandhi himself said that it may be through the black people that the unadulterated message of soul force and passive resistance might be realized (Mazrui, 1986).

There is something powerful and inspiring about African soul force. When I lived in South Africa from 1992 to 2000, I watched Mandela become president, a new constitution brought to life through careful midwifery, and the weekly special reports on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as South Africans discussed mutual healing. Soul force infused the pre-election negotiations in South Africa. It made its mark on the South African constitution and on the debate about civic engagement in that country. Perhaps soul force is a beautiful quality deeply inherent in all human beings, but through the forces of time, urbanization, industrialization, and concomitant processes of alienation, it tends to be denied, suppressed, and temporarily forgotten.

## Ubuntu in Mandela and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Mandela is an icon who embodies a profound capacity for reconciliation and forgiveness. He has given the world the gift of seeing, fighting for, and then living out our common humanity. My dream is that the leaders and citizens of the world not only receive his gift but translate what they learn from his heartfelt sense of connectedness in community into their own lives.

Mandela's autobiography shows the power of this gift:

I have always known that deep down in every human heart, there is mercy and generosity. No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite. Even at the grimmest times in prison, when my comrades and I were pushed to our limits, I would see a glimmer of humanity in one of the guards, perhaps just for a second, but it was enough to reassure me and keep me going. Man's goodness is a flame that can be hidden but never extinguished (Mandela, 1994: 542).

Mandela's expression of ubuntu, as he conceived of its logical and ultimate extension, embraces freedom and respect for all humanity:

It was during those long and lonely years that my hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the freedom of all people, white and black. I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred; he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not truly free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity. . . . When I walked out of prison, that was my mission to liberate the oppressed and the oppressor both. . . . For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others (Mandela, 1994: 544).

At this time, I wonder what the world would look like if other leaders followed Mandela's example. What would capitalism look like if infused with ubuntu? What would the world's economic order be? What would the legal system be in America? How much more heartfelt economic and political generosity might there be?

In his own version of ubuntu, law professor Peter Gabel has commented about Martin Luther King, Jr.:

The most profound definition of justice is Martin Luther King, Jr.'s: "*Love correcting that which revolts against love.*" Its power comes from its affirmation that we are first of all *connected*, that as individuals we are but unique incarnations of a spiritual force that unites us, and that justice is the making manifest of that love by correcting, through the inherent ethical call that love makes upon every one of us, the spiritual distortions that revolt against love and seek to deny it. It was to this inherent ethical understanding emanating from the very essence of our social existence, pulling upon the conscience of the oppressor as much as giving courage to the oppressed, that King always addressed himself (Gabel, 2000: 11).

King lived at a different time in history, but he, Mandela, and Gabel share an understanding of the link between the oppressor and the oppressed. They all allude to our connectedness and interdependence and recognize the power of love and common humanity as the soul force or the spiritual energy that carries within it the fire to transform and to correct.

In Gabel's writings, I see the echo and flavor of African humanity. In my small, personal microcosm in America, I notice among my friends, underneath the apparent alienation and masks, a deep desire for compassion, connectedness, and community. Could African values shed additional light and give meaning to defining and fulfilling that desire?

In South Africa, I met "mini-Mandelas," or people whose capacity to transform feelings of hate into love are awe inspiring. I interviewed a business leader, Eric Molobi, director of Kagiso Trust Investments in Joburg, South Africa, who, after years of suffering

*What would capitalism look like if infused with ubuntu? What would the world's economic order be?*

the apartheid system, became a political activist and was jailed. He began to hate all white people. In prison, in a single moment, his hardened attitudes began to melt. One evening, Eric was feeling sad and comforted himself by whistling, “Silent Night, Holy Night.” A white prison warden heard him and said with gentleness and kindness, “My son, this is not the end. Have faith.” Eric was deeply touched by this warden’s humanity. “This man doesn’t know it, but he changed me. Previously, I had clubbed all whites altogether. He called me, ‘my son’! He understood what I was feeling and he comforted me.” The compassion of his prison warden began a profound transformation in Molobi’s attitude toward white people. In this brief vignette, we can see how the spiral of compassion can become a transformative one, moving toward justice and healing, the spiral described by King, Gabel, and played out in this South African prison.

## Individualism of the East and the West

Ronnie Lessem suggests that East and West have been able to meet because both are somewhat individualistic. In Lessem’s view, the South (Africa, Latin America) is a primary source of inspiration for the communal spirit that shapes ways of being and living in community:

The key aspect which differentiates the east from the south is the eastern notion, ‘I am the universe.’ In other words, the universe lives in me and me in the universe, but not as much in other people or the community. In the great African souls, community and selfhood through collective belonging is a powerful force, which feeds the imagination (Lessem, personal interview, September 2002).

But there are writers in the West who have come to their understanding of interconnectedness through unexpected pathways, such as physics. Joe Jaworski describes his evolution from a driven, hardworking Texas lawyer to someone who understands the need to foster connectedness in a country fragmented by too many social and economic divides (Jaworski, 1996). In his own journey, he began to understand his emerging leadership role as transforming society by building bridges between leaders from different institutional, class, and professional sectors.

One person who influenced Jaworski’s thinking was the late David Bohm, who described scientific dimensions of an implicate order that shapes and underlies our interconnectedness. Jaworski saw the human and spiritual correlates of the new physics and responded to this knowledge by trying to heal the fragmentation he saw in American society and starting ALF (American Leadership Forum). Through ALF trainings, leaders from different professions, social classes, political ideologies, and institutional sectors discuss and discover their interconnectedness and capacity for collaborative work.

Those of us in South Africa recognized that Bohm’s new physics is about ubuntu—our African unscientific but similar manifestation of interconnectedness. African culture has celebrated mutuality and connectedness for centuries. Africans understand the connections of past and present, human beings and nature, our common humanity, and a shared spirituality. Africans have mastered the art of communication between ancestors and people in the present as well as dialogue among us all (plants, birds, and animals included). The new physics are, for South Africans, the golden threads of ubuntu woven from the old traditional African fabric of interconnectedness.

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## Ubuntu in the US and the World

Voices in the US media give me hope that, while there are deeply isolationist tendencies in the US, some people have ubuntu and care deeply about helping not only their own country but others as well. For example, Harvard professor Jeffrey Sachs writes:

Africa, with tens of millions of lives at stake, needs around \$5 billion to \$10 billion a year from the rich countries in the next decade to battle AIDS. . . . A realistic policy would go beyond fighting AIDS, committing to another \$5 billion to \$10 billion a year to a full-fledged fight on malaria, tuberculosis, and other killer diseases that help keep Africa trapped in

poverty. The rich countries could finance both this and the AIDS program—at between \$10 billion and \$20 billion a year—without breaking a sweat. . . . A likely American government share—say, \$3 billion or so annually in the next few years—would represent about \$10 a year for each of us—the cost of a movie ticket with popcorn. Saving millions of African lives in the coming decade would have practical returns for the United States, sparing huge later costs. But the real returns would be to our own moral worth (Sachs, 2001).

Such thinkers espouse what, through my own South African lens, sounds like ubuntu values in America. More people who articulate the clarion call for connectedness and interdependence deserve to be heard throughout the world.

One is Rinaldo Brutoco, founder and president of the World Business Academy, who said recently:

While nations may not be ready to turn swords into ploughshares or to redesign the world economic order, the only way to ensure long-term sustainability and global security is to inspire investment in a world where the vision of peace, mutual benefit, and rising economic wealth for all, supercedes the reality of a world crippled by fear, runaway military budgets, starvation, and saber-rattling (Brutoco, personal interview, October 19, 2002).

In the aftermath of September 11, which has clearly underlined our increasing social and economic global interdependence, it seems clear that African ubuntu could contribute to the world, if people would allow themselves to internalize it. If we acknowledge the common good and our interconnectedness, we can look to the wisdom of ubuntu to inform our lives.

I conclude by repeating the old South African saying: “Your pain is my pain, my wealth is your wealth, your salvation is my salvation.” As we begin to entertain the possibility that the roots of poverty are similar to the roots of terrorism, the challenge of radically altering the way financial markets operate and reenvisioning how wealth could be shared becomes more real. Indeed, if it were possible to sprinkle ubuntu on the consciousness of humankind, we could look forward to a more just, equitable, and sustainable future. By bringing about salvation for everybody, whether African or European, Muslim or American, we could create our own safety and our own salvation.

## Acknowledgment

This article is adapted from a research paper published by the World Business Academy. For the original article, see [www.Worldbusiness.org](http://www.Worldbusiness.org), Perspectives, Vol. 17, Issue 1 (February 12, 2003) or write directly to BarbaraNu@aol.com.

## Note

1. Because most of my experiences in Africa have occurred as a result of living in South Africa and Zimbabwe, when I use the word *African*, I intend it to apply only to those countries. In this article, ubuntu is a philosophy and a frame of mind prevalent among African people living below the Sahara.

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