

**Conference of the Community of Mandela Rhodes
Scholars: welcome address and introduction of
Mr. Zakie Achmat**

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INTRODUCTION

The CEO of the Mandela Rhodes Foundation, Mr. Shaun Johnson, and other officials, the keynote speaker, Dr. Zakie Achmat, the organizers of the conference, presenters and participants, distinguished guests, molweni, good evening

It is a great privilege to host the Conference of the Community of Mandela Rhodes Scholars and also a great pleasure to welcome you all to Rhodes University, to iRhini/Grahamstown, and to the Eastern Cape.

Over the next few days an exciting and impressive range of presentations and sessions on the theme of *Ethical Leadership: The Promise and the Practice* will be held.

I thank our students for their work in the hosting of this conference at Rhodes, and I thank you all for choosing Rhodes as the venue, and for travelling long distances to grace us with your participation.

For transport, logistic and costs reasons, compared to universities in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban, Rhodes students and academics have to work hard to attract and host national and especially international conferences. That we do so with considerable success, I believe, is testimony to the quality of the students and scholars to be found at Rhodes and the recognition that the University enjoys nationally and internationally.

Indeed, as a University we take pride in having among South African universities among the best pass and graduation rates and the best research output per academic staff member. We take especial pride that although we only have 0.8% of South Africa's university students, last year we were awarded 14% of the Mandela Rhodes scholarships and more than any other university. Some like to say that our successes have to do with the fact that there is very little to do in our small town. Hardly, but we like to think that it also has to do with the fact that at Rhodes we take knowledge and scholarship very seriously and work hard to create an institutional culture that values knowledge and scholarship.

Challenges

Before introducing Mr. Achmat, permit me to address a few words to you, who represent some of the most outstanding and talented graduates on our continent.

Currently, we are living through a severe global financial crisis. One reason for the crisis is that despite globalization and greater contact across regions, nations, cultures, religions and languages, during recent decades there has been an all too evident closing of minds and hearts and negation of important human values.

The negation of core human values – respect for human dignity, difference and diversity, human rights and the oneness of humanity – and the closing of hearts have promoted destructive fundamentalisms of various kinds, intolerance and prejudice, and have made the world a much less just, safe and secure place.

The closing of the mind has been evident in economic and social thought and policies that have prevailed

during the past twenty years. Wisdom derived from vigorous intellectual debate, knowledge, and understanding has been disdained. Instead of the idea of the public good and ethical leadership, self-serving ideas based on arrogant power and narrow economic interests have triumphed.

The result has been dubious and pernicious economic and social orthodoxies that have slowly matured into the grave financial crisis which envelopes the world today.

Rather than, as the Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen put's it, viewing 'development as human freedom', as 'a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy', human development has come to be reduced to 'growth of gross national product, or with the rise in personal incomes, or with industrialization, or with technological advance'.¹

Under the sway of the new economic and social orthodoxies a culture of unbridled individualism, greed and crass materialism has taken root, its mantra 'grab what you can and damn the rest'.

Instead of a concern with people, social equity and justice, in the new gilded age the unadulterated pursuit of power, self-interest, money, material wealth, profits, and performance bonuses have come to be the new gods.

What powerful economic and social groups have sowed during the past two decades, without any effective restraint and regulation, the whole world now reaps.

Drawing on Dickens' memorable opening lines in *A Tale of Two Cities*, the global financial crisis is 'the worst of times', an 'age of foolishness', an 'epoch of incredulity', 'the season of Darkness', 'the winter of despair', with 'nothing before us'.

Still, among the dark clouds there could be silver lining, and the global crisis could also become 'the best of times', an 'age of wisdom', an 'epoch of belief', a 'season of Light', 'the spring of hope', a time when we 'ha(ve) 'everything before us'.

The current crisis provides the opportunity for a new imagination that is freed from the stifling and dangerous orthodoxies of the past decades.

It creates the space for new ideas, and for the recovery of important values related to human development, justice, solidarity, freedom and internationalism.

It enables us to think about and act to construct a different kind of world and different kind of citizenship, 'a world where markets are servants, not masters'.² It creates the space for leadership of a different kind from that which has tended to prevail during recent decades.

Whether and to what extent this happens, whether amidst these 'worst of times' and 'winter of despair' we move into 'the spring of hope' with 'everything before us' depends on us.

It depends on whether, as intellectuals and scholars, as graduates and citizens, and as universities and government's we take on the responsibility of re-thinking and re-making our world and our societies on

the basis of other principles and logics than the ones that have dominated in recent decades.

This new logic must first and foremost put human development, people's needs, justice and human rights at the centre of all our actions.

It must more greatly appreciate, respect, and affirm difference and diversity related to race, gender, sexual orientation, language and culture as well-springs of social vitality and strength.

It must embrace the idea that we have inherited the earth in safe-keeping for future generations and must abandon the reckless degradation of our environment in the name of 'progress' and 'development'.

The orthodoxies of the last two decades have been especially harmful to how we think about the value, purposes and goals of universities, and about education and knowledge.

The new logic must revalue knowledge and education as cornerstones of human development and restore to

schools and universities their important and varied social purposes.

Above all, the new logic must prise open minds and hearts that have been closed to all needs other than those of their own.

Responsibilities

The motto of Rhodes University is 'Vis, Virtus, Veritas - 'Strength, Virtue, Truth'.

It is my hope that in the years ahead the Rhodes values of Strength, Virtue and Truth will also guide your conduct and animate your existence:

- ★ That you will pursue the Truth that derives from knowledge, understanding, reason, and from intellectual debate and the open and respectful clash of ideas
- ★ That you will embody the Virtue of imagination, creativity and perseverance

- ★ That you will possess the Strength of conviction to respect, protect and promote the values of human dignity, equality, social justice, non-sexism and non-racialism, and the human rights and freedoms that the South African *Constitution* and *Bill of Rights* proclaim, and
- ★ That you will also possess the Strength of courage to ‘speak truth to power’, when those in power must be reminded of their obligations and responsibilities; when they must be criticized for failings in public leadership and morality; when they must be rebuked for their disdainful treatment of citizens, and when they must be cautioned against obliterating the distinctions between political party, government and state, and using public offices for private gain.

Rhodes University’s slogan indicates its aspiration to be a place ‘where leaders learn’. It is therefore fitting to close my welcome with the words of two outstanding leaders.

One is the Bengali poet and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, who has written that ‘We may

become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy'.

The other is the Jewish sage Hillel who says: 'If I am not for myself, who will be? But if I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?'

I hope that in the years to come you will continuously reflect on these wise words. And I hope that each of you will, in your in our own way, also use your capabilities to help to ensure that our future is indeed a time when 'we ha(ve) everything before us'.

It is a pleasure to now introduce Dr. Zackie Achmat; indeed, a great pleasure because Zackie holds an honorary doctorate from Rhodes University, which was awarded in April 2007 during my first year as Vice-Chancellor.

Usually a speaker is introduced with a few cursory words; and although that will be Zackie's preference, with your permission and confident that you will appreciate it I wish to provide a more extended introduction.

It is well known that South Africa has become an epicentre of the global HIV/AIDS pandemic. The latest statistics are staggering – 1500 South Africans newly infected with HIV every day; 5.5 million already infected; a daily AIDS death toll of 1000.

Countering this pandemic has required intense involvement on the part of non-governmental organizations. The pioneer in this NGO endeavour has been the TAC – the Treatment Action Campaign. At the forefront of the TAC has been its national chairperson, Zackie Achmat.

Along with ten other activists, Zackie co-founded the TAC in 1998. It soon embarked on a two-pronged campaign. First, pushing for the provision of affordable drugs by the main pharmaceutical companies. In 2000 Zackie himself travelled to Thailand where he purchased a quantity of cheap AIDS drugs – enough to treat 700 sufferers – and in person brought them back to South Africa. The following year effective lobbying by the TAC led to 39 major pharmaceutical companies backing down in their attempt to block the importation of cheaper generic copies of patented AIDS drugs.

The second prong of the TAC's campaign has been to pressure the South African government to promote the use of ARVs – anti-retroviral drugs – a campaign that came up against official denialism, political obfuscation, and a dissident quasi-science. But Zackie and his fellow campaigners, with their persistence and defiance, gained ground and momentum.

Zackie spearheaded a civil disobedience campaign to force the government to provide ARVs. The TAC also took legal action against the government, which duly backed down. In November 2003 the Ministry of Health agreed to a government-funded programme to distribute ARVs on a wide scale. But further pressure from the TAC was still required for this commitment to be undertaken.

Given his own experience of suffering and his spirit of activism it is not surprising that Zackie Achmat should have been such a resolute campaigner. Seventeen years ago, in 1990, he was diagnosed with HIV and given six months to live. He went home and watched five videos a day, waiting to die, but he pulled through. In 1998, the year in which he openly disclosed his HIV status, he was again seriously ill and close to death. Friends helped him acquire medication,

and he survived. He was once more at death's door in 2002 – this time because of his decision not to take ARVs in protest against the government's failure to make the drugs available in the public health sector.

Nelson Mandela pleaded with him to take the drugs, but Zackie continued his own personal 'drug strike' until late 2003 when the government agreed to distribute ARVs. By this time Zackie was barely able to speak. On resuming his medication he recovered.

Zackie's spirit of activism goes back a long time – to his early teens – to the 1976 youth uprising in which he became involved as a fourteen-year-old, participating in school protests. Over the next four years he would be arrested and detained five times for his political activities. At the age of fifteen he spent some time in solitary confinement. After release from prison in 1980 Zackie continued his political work in the Western Cape. He helped build a series of NGOs that provided educational support for disadvantaged youth. He helped organized the first mass ANC funeral in the region. The Freedom Charter was publicized in huge spray-painted murals.

The focus of Zackie's activism shifted somewhat in the 1990s – not only towards the HIV/AIDS campaign. He helped found in 1994 the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality, and became its director – a body that successfully campaigned for the rights of gay and lesbian people to be recognized in the new South African constitution. To further secure such rights the Coalition took cases to the Constitutional Court.

Before us today is a versatile person. A film-maker who has researched, written and directed a number of documentaries; and he once showed potential as an actor. At one time during his schooldays – he was a brilliant schoolboy – he was prone to bouts of fainting. Strangely, though, these always occurred on a Tuesday. The school was greatly concerned about its star pupil and he was sent to Groote Schuur hospital for tests, which showed nothing to be wrong. It turned out that the fainting had been feigned, very convincingly, so that he would not have to attend woodwork classes.

Awards and honours have been heaped on Zackie Achmat, if not for carpentry. In 2001 the Desmond Tutu Leadership Award; in 2003 the Nelson Mandela Award for Health and Human Rights. In the same year named as one of *Time*

magazine's 35 world heroes. In 2004 voted sixty-first among the top 100 great South Africans.

One can see why. Zackie's life has been marked by considerable suffering, remarkable endurance and resilience, and by extraordinary drive and attainment. He endured childhood hardship, growing up as one of six children in a single-bedroomed flat in which up to 20 people would sometimes be staying. He has suffered from depression since the age of twelve, and, as we have seen, for the past seventeen years from debilitating illness which has often brought him close to death. A few years ago he suffered a heart attack. He once said that he had dedicated the last ten years to getting ready to die.

Here stands not only a great survivor, but a dogged fighter who has risen above his own personal tribulations, and summoned the will, energy and drive to battle for the rights of others. He is to be admired for the open, frank way in which he reflects upon and talks about his own life, thereby helping to erode the stigma attached to HIV/AIDS. He has been a huge inspiration to other HIV/AIDS sufferers – one said that her body gained strength from Zackie's own fight.

In the words of Judge Edwin Cameron, Zackie is a man of “personal magnetism and courage...with unequalled guile...and a steely sense of strategy”. Nelson Mandela has called Zackie a national hero.

Raymond Suttner has recently written about the great patriot Braam Fischer that he “took the course of self-sacrifice, the road which brings no personal gain, the road where death was risked”, and that key features of Fischer were his ‘integrity’ and “subjective moral commitment” (Inauguration of the Bram Fischer Multi-purpose Hall, Bramfischerville, 6 September 2009).

“Integrity and ethical qualities are ignored or are almost a subject of ridicule these days. We need to resurrect these and re-insert them into public and private life... We are badly in need of...”an alternative leadership model” (ibid.).

A remarkable intellectual, activist and human, Zackie Achmat provides such an “alternative leadership model” and also magnificently personifies the ethical leadership that is the theme of this conference.

If we can multiply and embed such leadership into the fabric of our society, then we will indeed be able to look forward to the 'the spring of hope' with 'everything before us'.

¹ Sen, A. (1999:3).

² Ibid.