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# Follow Ben's lead: 'The world is crying out for ethical leadership'

*By Thuli Madonsela*

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**G**reetings to Mary Turok and the Turok family and my deepest condolences to the whole of South Africa. On the one hand we mourn the passing of one of South Africa's greatest human beings and impactful leaders. However, we also celebrate a life well lived. It is said that a long life is a blessed life, but I am not sure that all long lives are a blessing. What then is a life that is well lived?

Firstly, every human being wants to belong. We form families and we start our own families because we want to belong. We go to churches, of course because we want to worship God, but also because we want to belong. It might not be a church, it could be Muslim group, it could be a Bahai group, a Jewish group, and so on. We join these groups because we want to belong. We form countries because we want to belong. Humans yearn to belong. I once read that human beings will do just about anything to belong, to stay in the group. That is why young boys will kill to remain in a gang that they desire to belong to. That is why some people might even consider terminating their lives if they feel that they don't belong.



Why is it so important that people belong? One psychologist suggests that it is a remnant of our genetic coding. In [the first] human settlements there were close-knit groups and everyone had to comply with the rules in order to stay in the group; if you did not comply with the rules you were kicked out. Being kicked out of the group meant death. It meant either being killed by

another tribe or by animals or dying due to hunger or loneliness. Therefore, that is why everyone has always wanted to stay in a group. That is why everyone plays along. That is why when I released the Nkandla report, everyone voted with their parties. No one wants to step out of line because everyone wants to belong.



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So why did somebody like Prof Ben Turok step out of line? I will draw on what I learned from him during our association when we worked on drafting the RDP and my days as Public Protector when he was the Co-Chairperson of the Joint Committee on Ethics and Members' Interests in parliament. I have also shared with him more recently, in the last three years, working together on social economic inclusion and social justice. One of the first things that I learnt from him is the courage to step out of line.

In his book *With My Head Above the Parapet*, he outlined the cost of stepping out [of line]. You don't die, as in primitive society, but there is a social death that comes with stepping out of line. Why then would a person step out of line? In his case, we recall two instances when Prof Ben Turok stepped out of line [with regard to] his group, [the ANC]. Everyone knows of the time he [refused to vote for] the Protection of Information Bill, referred to as the secrecy bill. However, I don't think

that was the main reason he ended up annoying some of his colleagues. I think it was as the Co-Chairperson of Ethics in parliament. I think we suddenly learned, as many people who are enforcers of ethics learn, that there is an unwritten mafia code. Do your work ... but don't touch the family. When he touched the family [by reporting on the corruption of a fellow ANC member, Minister Dina Pule,] the family fought back. But in his view, it was worth fighting for.

Since his teens he had embarked on a quest for justice, and not justice for some. [He meant] justice for all. I met a very good man yesterday who said he didn't understand why people expected him to apologise for what he had received during apartheid. He said he had worked hard, was an ordinary worker and never hurt anyone. Prof Turok understood that under apartheid as long as you were white, and worked hard, you were guaranteed social mobility. He also understood that much is expected [from those] to whom much is given. He understood where his parents had come from, running away from their own [experience of] oppression. He wanted a world without oppression, a world where there is justice for all because it is a world based on peace.

So when he conducted one of his great investigations, which led to the disciplining of Minister Pule who eventually had to leave parliament, one of the reasons I think he really did what he believed in was to do with a sense of belonging. How could you belong when you are forced to do [something that] does not resonate with what you believe is right. You can't belong on the outside when on the inside you are dying; he didn't want to be the walking dead. I never saw Ben drink, so he probably wasn't one of those people who liked to drown their sorrows in drink or in some other pathological behaviour. He had to do things that resonated with his soul, he had to do things that resonated with what he believed was right.

I think [that in] stepping out [of line] Prof Turok understood that everything has a cost. Those who would do something, even if it was unethical, in order to stay in the inner circle [may] think that they are avoiding that cost, the cost of being excluded. The truth is that in itself it comes at a cost, a dual cost. First is the cost to your own peace of mind. [Most] people deal with that cost [with] more money, more management of people's perceptions of them. If I perceive myself to be bad and yet I want to be good, I will invest so much in managing how I am perceived. But what I see in the mirror every day is a person that I don't like. I see a person who doesn't do what he or she believes should be done. I think Ben probably didn't want that. There is a further cost down the line when the truth is discovered. That is when everything comes tumbling down.

The final cost is a cost to the country and beyond. We all want a functional world, but we all have to keep asking ourselves are we part of the problem or are we part of the solution? The problems we have today in our unethical world did not start with the Zuma government. I believe that what happened in state capture had its roots in what we didn't address in Codesa. It [spread] like wildfire until we noticed that we have a problem. But Ben had always believed that if you believe in something, you must stand for it. He did more than that; he made sure that he influenced the rest of us to think like him and act accordingly. That is called leadership, the art of inspiring and influencing others to think and act in a certain way.

The second lesson I learnt from him is the generosity of sharing space. That goes back to when we collaborated on the RDP. Later, when he investigated the Pule matter, I was Public Protector and I was investigating the same case. He and his colleagues shared information with us and we shared information with them. They brought ►►

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in the intellectuals of the country and the experts on ethics, including Chapter 9 institutions, and sought their views on the Parliamentary Code of Ethics. One of the things we were going to do arising from a workshop that Prof Turok and his colleagues organised was to develop a country code of ethics. Yet, one of the problems [we found] was that each institution sets its own ethical standards, and often some of those standards are too low. The idea was to come up with something that is universal, and I think those in government should consider a universal code of conduct [that applies] to everyone, from the cleaner to the president and from municipality to national government. That is in addition to specific departmental codes and professional codes.

Another area [in which we] cooperated was economic justice, which is something he felt strongly about. Read about it in many of the

books he has written. An area in which I joined him was a roundtable he had on Confronting Inequality held in 2017, and we've worked together ever since. We (the Thuma Foundation) have organised various events. He was 90, but he never missed a single event on economic justice and on social justice. One of the contributions that he made was by cooperating with the Institute for Sustainability and Mark Swilling, and we will be distributing copies of the outcomes because he was concerned that as long as there are those who are left behind, democracy is not working for all. And if democracy does not work for all, not everyone has an interest in democracy and we have a problem on our hands.

In August last year, he participated in the National Summit on Social Justice and his ability to collaborate demonstrated an understanding that if somebody knows more than him, his knowledge is not diminished. He also came from the understanding that he may disagree on some things but can work together on what we do agree. I remember at that summit there was a disagreement between him and Premier Zille. Premier Zille was still premier then. The basis for moving forward was that we all agree on what South Africa should look like at the end of the tunnel. Where we disagreed was on what it looks like now. But together we can build the pathways for going ahead.

He had the ability to learn and we can see that in the way he interacted with young people after the Fees Must Fall [campaign]. He understood that there is a lot that we can teach young people about leadership, [but] there is also a lot we can learn from young people on issues such as decolonialisation, and so on. He understood young people will be the

future and he walked the talk.

He also walked his talk on integrity and, hence, he was prepared to walk away all by himself if his group was not going to go with him. I don't know of him ever being involved in any scandal.

Darwin said that the species that survives is the fittest and often people make the mistake of thinking that when Darwin spoke about the survival of the fittest, he meant the strongest. The strongest can break. What he referred to was the most adaptable. Ben Turok was someone who was born in 1927 [but who was] still relevant as a leader to young people in 2019. That is adaptability, that is emotional agility, intellectual agility and social agility and that is something we can all learn from him.

Lastly, we learned from him resilience, [the determination to] carry on and his timeless leadership. Why was his leadership timeless? It was the kind of leadership that is ethical, purpose driven, impact conscious and committed to serve. Now is our time to take the baton and move forward from where he left us. The world is crying out for ethical leadership. The world is crying out for economic and other forms of social justice. He did not betray the challenges of his generation, and every generation has a responsibility, an opportunity, to identify the most pressing challenge of its time. We need to identify ours. I hope we have done so and [that we] do not betray the duty of our generation. I have a sense that we are equal to the task. We will not betray the giants, such as Ben Turok, who gave up everything to get us to where we are. It is our turn now to make sure that we don't betray ourselves, or the previous generation and, above anything else, we don't betray future generations from whom we have borrowed this land. **NA**