

The Centre for Conscious Leadership (CCL) believes conscious leadership is becoming increasingly important in the 21st century and that the current challenges demand more of leaders than they have in the past. Emeritus Prof Njabulo Ndebele, well known public intellectual and former vice chancellor of UCT, is one of the leaders CCL has worked with over the last 10 years. Although unique in many ways, Professor Ndebele fundamentally exemplifies many of the traits that we believe leaders will increasingly need in the future



Njabulo S. Ndebele: Early Stories, Major Influences (Part One)

By

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Professor Njabulo Ndebele, former vice chancellor of the University of Cape Town carries with dignity, a unique blend of many roles and talents – thought leader, public intellectual, published author, a visionary, an exemplar of conscious leadership, and an academic leader of note. Ndebele is a rare voice in South Africa, always inviting the reader to reach for

higher order ethics, to access deeper levels of awareness and to appreciate the complex layers surrounding any issue. In many ways this gentle man is a national treasure, because of the incisiveness of his analytic skill and the purity and clarity of his thinking. Part of his strength is his own creative mélange of leadership qualities - though starkly independent, he has also been described as a communal writer. Part of his gift is his ability to be able to describe and see a situation from multiple points of view. As a thinker and writer his humility contrasts with his courageous writing, which embodies a profound sense of hope and love for his country and fellow human beings. These qualities and many more, make it possible for him to hold up a moral mirror enabling those of us exposed to his thinking, to appreciate the paradoxes in ourselves and in our country and to make sense of the layers of complexity beneath the surface.

In learning about his early childhood memories, one gets an inkling of some of the remarkable threads which weave through his consciousness. He shared stories of his childhood which shed light on two core elements which have shaped who he is as a conscious leader: his emotional sensitivity and his ability to be aware of layers of complexity in any situation.

What were the experiences that shaped who Njabulo Ndebele was to become?

Njabulo Ndebele grew up in a relatively privileged environment of his home in Charterston, the township of Nigel. His father was a school principal, a “rational and principled man” who also had a wicked sense of humour and an enthusiastic openness to modernity. His mother was a nurse who brought spirituality and compassion to the household. This is how our conversation unfolded as he recalled and described a moment when he was about seven or eight years old – a moment which he was never to forget. A moment which both reflected and shaped the leader he was to become. I was curious about how his ability to appreciate, describe and embody complexity was rooted in his life. Here is how our conversation went.

Barbara Nussbaum: What have been the forces in your life which have shaped your ability to appreciate and embody complexity?

Njabulo Ndebele: I have gone back to one experience many times. It is one I have never really talked openly about. But it has returned to me in critical times of ethical complexity.

In my township of Charterston in Nigel, my family by township standards could have been considered middle class. We had a car and plenty of books in the house; a ‘kitchen scheme’, piano, and a radio and turntable unit with a glass display. I was conscious and aware that I had privileges that many of my friends didn’t have. I was a kid of seven or eight when one afternoon I returned from school to find school children working in the garden of my home. I figured out immediately that my father had in all likelihood spoken to the principal of a school other than his and arranged extra help for our garden with pupil labour. When I saw my peers working in the garden of my home, I instantly felt ashamed. The garden was my responsibility. I could take care of it. I went into the house and never came out. I couldn’t face them. I just sat in the house until I was sure they had left.

I have a vivid memory of an ethical moment which did not sit comfortably with me. Where did that awareness come from? Perhaps I felt deeply connected relationally to these boys, who were my equals. We were now unequal, whereas I thrived from wanting to be like them. Tortured by self-awareness. The discomfort I felt also raised the question: how did they come to be there? The meaning of it. That was my first awareness of an ethical moment although I could not characterize it quite that way as a boy. “What led my parents to make such a thing happen?” was an intuitive question. Many years later, I can now contemplate the probable meanings of the event.

BN: How do you understand it now?

NN: I can now analyse it more. It had something to do with the relative power that my parents had in the community that made easy for them, and others in the same class, to deploy privileges among themselves that others couldn’t. I was deeply aware of a delicate moment. There was I, my school peers working in my garden. I was a part of them as a school child myself. The situation in the garden in my home separated me from them in a way I may not have fully understood but for which

I had had a deep intuition. How was this going to affect my relationship with them from that day, tomorrow and thereafter?

BN: What other reflections did that experience evoke in you?

NN: It's really about how much do we **live with our awareness** and what conclusions do we draw from that awareness? Do we engage it and explore its implications, or do we brush it aside and move on? My sense is that most of us would decide to brush it aside. It's the easiest thing to do, with the minimum internal discomfort. It's easier to shut down a disturbing thought than to ponder the discomfort. Consider one's vulnerability during that ethical moment: you dangerously question the parents whom you love, and who protect you: thought and sensibility too disturbing to entertain.

So you brush it away. Soon, brushing aside ethical disturbance becomes a habit. The insight here is that we always have a choice: we make a decision one way or the other. We are not entirely victims of ethical fate. We choose to either take on things or to ignore them.

BN: If you see that as a trajectory of your conscious awareness, what would be a subsequent marker? Since we know that leadership arises from awareness, if you think of other moments of ethical complexity, what immediately comes to mind?

NN: In the old days in townships we had the bucket system for clearing sewerage. Men came at night in horse drawn tankers to remove the sewerage. These men were derogatively known as "tsutsa" (those who carry away the stuff). They were most likely to be amaBhaca. Many years later I was to know that this situation was the outcome the joke English capitalism played on us in South Africa even before official apartheid in 1948: assigning labour functions to different ethnic groups, a tendency resulting in a mass of stereotypes. According to this system, amaZulu would be night watchmen, baSotho deep level miners, amaXhosa, clerks, amaBhaca "night soil men" etc. It does not take much of an imagination to know why the amaBhaca were considered at the bottom of the township ethnic hierarchy.

One day on a very cold winter evening, a horse drawn "night soil" tanker broke down in front of our house, in the night soil passage. So here was a terrible situation: a tanker with all that stuff in it, brought there by men so despised and disrespected for the work they did, stuck outside our house. Nothing could be more shameful!

I have never forgotten how my mother responded to the situation. She set about to prepare tea for them. To my boyish horror, she used all the good teaspoons, cups and matching saucers that we used at home among us and even for visitors who might walk in. And then she added scones into the bargain. "How could she? For such people? I thought. But she did. She went out into the cold with a tray laden with tea and scones to warm the men up. I have never forgotten that gesture of care and hospitality. Nothing better could have disturbed my youthful prejudices acquired from my township community. We were all implicated. Including my peers, the very ones that I felt bad about the other day, for working in my garden.

The message from my mother's actions was clear: what is good for me, is good for you. Each one of us deserves kindness, decency, and civility. This event was another ethical moment in my childhood that I have never forgotten.

Social life is so fraught with ethical moments of this kind that our reactions to them may lack consistency. Context and circumstances change and it becomes difficult to see connections. We may then indulge in self-justification, the escape we resort to in order to avoid ethical and moral accountability even towards our own selves

Many such moments in my childhood I believe fashioned my ethical sense.

BN: What other elements from experiences of living at home have stayed with you?

NN: I also learned to be comfortable with change. It came from a father who loved modernity, and who exposed me to modern music, fine arts, theatre, and to open-mindedness. The world understood from an artistic lens is seldom about clear cut moments. These experiences coming from inside my home did a lot to give me a sense for the **fluidity** of life and for the necessity to make choices as you live it.

The themes of emotional sensitivity, understanding paradox and complexity and acknowledging the fluidity of life are central themes in Njabulo Ndebele's life as a writer and leader. It was sometime after the interview that I realized the depths of Ndebele's insight. I realized how in the telling of the stories of his uncanny awareness as a seven or eight year old child, had played out in his life. How in confronting his own vulnerability in the complexity of a moment, he was able to interrogate himself and appreciate the dynamics of the larger system. Confronting his own vulnerability made him "dangerously question" the parents he loved and who protected him. That is what enables him to be a thoughtful insider in South African society, yet also able to ask challenging questions. His writing is a great act of hope, and it is in loving his audience that he is able, through his own awareness, to invite us to step into more ethical and courageous leadership.

There were also other influences – notably Paulo Freire's work, the black consciousness movement and King Moshoeshoe. Ndebele first encountered Freire's work at the University of Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland (UBLS) in Roma, Lesotho. Freire's book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was to have a lasting impact on his thinking. "I noticed his compelling thoughts and appreciated his theory of communal learning, which is grounded in real context. The words he uses come out of the experience of **living**. He uses a vocabulary which captures the texture of people's real lives. Reading involves reflection and engagement with the reality of their lives. Freire developed a theory that the reading experience is a liberating one.....so that the readers are able to identify sources of their own discomfort."

So in reading Freire, Njabulo Ndebele realized that “the oppressed are able to develop and embrace consciousness. The oppressor is locked into the demands of control. The oppressed are able to transcend it and create a reality that works for everyone.” For Ndebele, this has always remained a powerful example of human transformation and a careful reading of his work, reveals that he is able to be both a deeply socially conscious communal writer with universal appeal inviting all readers to become more conscious, but always inviting those who were or are oppressed to transcend their realities to embrace a larger reality – a society that works for all. Rather than giving into victim consciousness “behaving as if we are free, giving leadership”. Let’s free everyone” he says “That is the trajectory of that thought as I confronted the thinking of the Brazilian educator.”

Njabulo Ndebele has also been influenced a great deal by the black consciousness movement (BCM) and was a participant in it. He was later to deliver the first Steve Biko Memorial Lecture on September 12, 2000 three months into his tenure as Vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town, blazing the trail for a distinguished list of successor lecturers. He reflected that, “the Freirian perspective had an even greater resonance because of the affinity between that perspective and the black consciousness movement in respect of their common recognition for the role of awareness, consciousness, pride in oneself, self esteem, definition of self within community in the quest for freedom.

“The restoration of a sense of personhood for systematically oppressed, despised, and humiliated black people was a vital aspect of the quest for liberation. Personhood was a definitive quality of that liberty. But it is personhood within community. This was the perspective that drove community development initiatives of the BCM. A deeper connection with the Freirian perspective is the conceptual, ethical, and leadership of the oppressed in creating a new political society. Today, we appear to have either lost that leadership as black people now in power spend a great deal of energy maintaining the essential workings of an inherited state on many of its own terms. This means many of the structural conditions of inequality are still able to reproduce inequality in the old ways.

Professor Ndebele’s early writings, during the early 1970’s, in the prelude to the Soweto riots, reflect his indebtedness to black consciousness. Apartheid sought and thrived on the depersonalization of black people. Black people mattered only as a mass of labour. Individuals that made up the mass, bore no inherent value; nor did their families, friends, beliefs and values. The recovery of individuality as personhood would be a radical antidote to the depersonalizing tendencies of a repressive state. The spectacular oppression of the black mass could be countered by the recovered lives of individuals in their ordinary but suddenly powerful presence.

It is for this reason that Ndebele deliberately chose to write stories which were not about the usual struggle heroes who represented the masses in their group response, but about ordinary characters in the township who represented the masses in the fullness of their individuality and personhood: township boys playing soccer in the street; an uncle visiting his nephew; the travails of a boy from a township middle class family who wants to play classical violin; a morally corrupt black teacher, etc.

There is another benefit to this strategy. The relative absence of white people as characters in those stories results in their tactical marginalization in the consciousness of the black characters as the latter live their lives fully in their universe of social experience. White people need not be a decisive presence in the lives of black people. The imaginative objective was to displace oppressive whiteness with black being as fully realized as possible; “to restore the individuality and vitality of black people and counter the totalizing effect of their oppression where everyone who is black is rendered a faceless unit of labour.” Doing this at a time when readers of black South African literature were predisposed to expect to see heroes shooting and protesting was risky. It could expose the writer to the charge of “irrelevance”, a word that implied a severe political judgment. A moment of insight emerged when he realized that “an alternative critique had to be solid, thought through and rigorous.” It was during these very early years that Ndebele became aware of the importance of rigour. “I knew that you can’t be casual about taking a new and unusual position – you have to invest time and intellectual energy. **You agonize, you revise and revise, you test continuously until you land in an artistic world as close to perfection as you could get.** The resulting literary effort whether liked or disliked by readers could nevertheless not be easily ignored or dismissed by them.

There is an idealistic quality in Ndebele’s being and his writing, always seeking to raise collective consciousness in our fragmented society. His intention then, was to bring out the individuality and experience in the characters “so that even when the white oppressor reads the stories, they could say ‘they are like my own children’. I wanted to find a way of breaking down barriers that were constructed by the official culture of racist oppression.”

In many ways Professor Ndebele, in his own being, is a living embodiment of the layered and rich complexity he is able to describe so eloquently. His rigorous thinking and intellectual maturity are the hallmarks of a man who treasures intellectual independence while at the same time caring deeply about his audience, always showing great emotional sensitivity. He resists simple explanations or knee jerk placement of ideas in boxes, always articulating an original perspective on whatever he is writing about.

While independent in thought he is at the same time, very much at heart a nation builder writing in a deeply nuanced and layered way, aware of his audience, sensitive to his readers, yet unafraid of naming a paradox, or expressing emotion. His eloquence includes an awesome blend of rigorous thinking, literary flair, systems thinking and artistic genius, glued together with great love and humanity. In his writings he is not only afraid to acknowledge vulnerability, but gives his readers permission to feel the paradoxes lying in complex emotional landscapes. He is a public intellectual whose intellect is not disconnected from emotion and passion. He not afraid to use words like “anguish”. He asks profound questions as a way to engage his audience.

His particular gift as a conscious leader is to ask the readers the same questions he asks himself. How do we live with our awareness. How do we integrate ethics into higher order leadership along with our awareness of our human limitations? Do we engage in it or do we brush it aside? A champion of thoughtful engagement and practical action, Ndebele both acknowledges our human limitations and

envisions high order ethics and leadership. We have in Ndebele a human diamond, emerging deep from our soils, pure in intention - mirroring back our genius and our flaws. In his being as a conscious leader, he contributes magnificently, uniquely to our collective consciousness in South Africa.