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Rekindling the Human Spirit in Business

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Editor's note: **Barbara Nussbaum** poignantly describes "inspiring dimensions of life in Africa that never make their way into mainstream American news media." Barbara believes that Africa has something very important to contribute to the change of heart that is needed in the world. More specifically, she writes about the African social philosophy, *Ubuntu*, which is a way of being, a code of ethics, deeply embedded in African culture. The underlying values of this extraordinary philosophy seek to honor the dignity of each person and are concerned with the development and maintenance of mutually affirming and enhancing relationships. *Ubuntu* acknowledges, among other things, that:

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

African Culture and *Ubuntu*

Reflections of a South African in America

By **Barbara Nussbaum**

INTRODUCTION

African values have a great deal to contribute to world consciousness, but Africa is deeply misunderstood in the West for a number of reasons.

- Firstly, much of the richness of Africa's traditional culture is inaccessible since it is oral rather than written, lived rather than formally communicated in books or journals. It is difficult to learn about from a distance.
- Secondly, some African political leaders have chosen to betray many of the very philosophical and humanitarian principles on which African culture is based and the political failures in these African countries tend to tarnish the views of many Westerners.
- Thirdly, people in the West, for whatever reason, receive negative and limited information through the media -- images of ethnic wars, dictatorships, famine and AIDS predominate, so the potential contribution of African values is often lost in these images.

I feel moved to write about the inspiring dimensions of life in Africa that never make their way into mainstream American news media. I write because of a strengthening conviction that Africa has something very important to contribute to the change of heart that is needed in the world. The need for this change has become clearer in my own mind since September 11, when increasingly there is no doubt that our world must embrace a sense of our interconnectedness as a global community if we are to survive.

This essay shares some personal reflections about Africa and their relevance for Americans and other citizens of the world.¹ It seeks to articulate some of the beauty and power of "*ubuntu*," an underlying social philosophy of African culture. Since *ubuntu* is a challenging concept to explain, this article will approach this term from a variety of perspectives, providing examples from African leaders, African literature, African philosophy, African cosmology, and South African business educators and business leaders. The article will explain the context and meaning of *ubuntu* at the individual level as well as the implications for the wider community in South Africa. The reader will learn that *ubuntu* is a deeply moving yet intangible African soul force that has been demonstrated most powerfully by personalities like Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther

King But there are also less well known yet very impressive living examples of this force quite palpable in both the “ordinary” citizens of South Africa and the policies and practices they have, both individually and collectively, introduced into the corporate sector and legal systems. The article then discusses the potential contribution of *ubuntu* to America and, perhaps the world. I am convinced that *ubuntu* could enrich the range of new paradigms emerging worldwide that are currently inspiring business, political and civic leaders to transform organizations. Finally the spirit of *ubuntu*, if taken seriously, could influence and change relationships between nations.

A. WHAT UBUNTU MEANS IN AFRICA

Ubuntu is the capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining community with justice and mutual caring. *Ubuntu*, an Nguni word from South Africa, speaks to our interconnectedness, our common humanity and the responsibility to each other that flows from our deeply felt connection. *Ubuntu* is consciousness of our natural desire to affirm our fellow human beings and to work and act towards each other with the communal good in the forefront of our minds.

Ubuntu calls upon us to believe and feel that:

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

Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu - A person is a person because of others

Ubuntu is a social philosophy, a way of being, a code of ethics and behavior deeply embedded in African culture. The underlying value seeks to honor the dignity of each person and is concerned about the development and maintenance of mutually affirming and enhancing relationships. Because *ubuntu* embraces and requires justice, it inspires and therefore creates a firm foundation for our common humanity. It has been in existence for thousands of years in most countries of Africa and continues to lie at the core of intrinsic values in traditional African culture, although in urban areas, such values are being increasingly eroded.

Sadly, the eclipse of *ubuntu* has darkened the spirit of some modern-day African political systems, and indeed, most countries in the world. However, imagine the potential of *ubuntu*'s sunlight, were it to be embraced as a vital part of the African *renaissance* and as Africa's unique contribution to heal a divided and fragmented world.

According to the South African Bishop Dandala “***Ubuntu is not a concept easily distilled into a methodological procedure. It is rather a bedrock of a specific lifestyle or culture that seeks to honor human relationships as primary in any social, communal or corporate activity.***” *Ubuntu* becomes a fountain from which actions and attitudes flow. Consciousness of what one is able to give and/or receive becomes equally important. The saying *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person because of others) becomes a statement that levels all people. **It essentially states that no one can be self-sufficient and that interdependence is a reality for all.**²

The South African sociolinguist Buntu Mfeenyana explains, “*Ubuntu* is the quality of being human. It is the quality, or behavior of ‘*ntu*’ or society that is sharing, charitableness, cooperation. It is a spirit of participatory humanism.”³

In its practical manifestation, *ubuntu* could include any actions that express an individual, organizational, corporate or governmental commitment to expressing compassion, caring, sharing and responsiveness to the community as a whole.⁴

Recent Examples of *ubuntu* in South Africa

President Nelson Mandela's decision to donate one-third of his presidential salary to the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund, which he formed to provide assistance to disadvantaged children in South Africa, is an expression of *ubuntu*.⁵

Typical of *ubuntu* is a tradition called *ukusisa*. A family in a rural village would “lend” a cow and a bull to a newly married couple recently arriving in a village and wait until an offspring was produced before taking back the original cow and bull. The offspring would stay with the newcomers, leaving them both with their own “seed capital” and their dignity. This mutually beneficial transaction is based on kindness, but also with the idea of reciprocity, sharing wealth in the interests of building the community as a whole.

A decision of the Constitutional Court in South Africa reflects the values of *ubuntu* expressed in a nation’s legal system. This court passed legislation making it illegal for all health insurance companies to exclude any person from health coverage, whether or not that person has a pre-existing health condition.

The now famous and highly respected Truth Commission in South Africa embraced the values of *ubuntu* through its decision to grant amnesty to perpetrators (including killers and torturers), who were willing to tell the truth about the nature of their crimes towards fellow human beings and to apologize directly to the victims of families who suffered. The decision was made in the service of community healing over retribution and with the goal of creating the context for nation building as opposed to fragmentation and divisiveness.

Joe Mogodi, a successful businessman in Pietersburg, South Africa, showed his *ubuntu* by buying up 100 sewing machines at an auction, which he then made available to men and women in the community who were interested in starting tailoring businesses but did not have the necessary capital. He honored their dignity by making a simple verbal agreement that they would pay him for the machines once there were sufficient profits to begin interest-free payments. This is typical of *ubuntu* consciousness and still occurs widely both in rural South Africa and among African communities in the urban areas.

General principles of *ubuntu*

- The hallmark of *ubuntu* is about listening to and affirming others with the help of processes that create trust, fairness, shared understanding and dignity and harmony in relationships.
- *Ubuntu* consciousness is about the desire to build a caring, sustainable and just response to the community – whether that be company, village, city, nation or our global family.
- Because of its emphasis on our common humanity and the ethical call to embody our communal responsiveness in the world, *ubuntu* offers an alternative way to re-create a world that works for all. Simply put, people, businesses and countries would re-learn how to live together with respect, compassion and dignity and justice and to re-organize resources accordingly.
- *Ubuntu*, applied to business and corporate responsibility, would be ultimately about sharing wealth and making (at the very least) basic services, such as food, housing and access to health and education accessible and visible to all members of our global family.

Ubuntu in African Literature, Philosophy, and Theology

Various African writers describe the meaning of *ubuntu*.

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.”⁶

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

Rev. Michael Battle of the Duke Divinity School in North Carolina is an African-American who has written about his understanding of Nobel Laureate Desmond Tutu’s work on *ubuntu*. According to 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.”**⁷

Ubuntu as 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 one another through mutual encounter and cultural integration.

Ronnie Lessem, senior lecturer at the University of Buckingham, has written extensively about global corporate culture. He and I had the privilege of being among the first researchers to write about the potential of *ubuntu* and other African values as a positive force in the South African workplace. Our book, *Sawubona Africa*⁸ describes various ways in which the arts, storytelling, and community-building rituals strengthen and enliven group relationships. Values and processes geared towards seeking consensus, mutual understanding and maintaining harmony are very much a part of African culture. These include simple interpersonal processes, such as how to greet someone in the morning, to leadership and healing skills. They range from how a person leads a group to improvise together in dance; to how a chief makes decisions or how war healers reduce vengeance among people who have participated in a 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 were not having a good day, how could I sleep well or have a good day? This kind of greeting would apply to close family as well as to a stranger one met on the road.

African culture has a gift to give the world because of its well-developed capacity to find the place of the common good both in the present and in relation to the past. Like other cultures which are more communal and less individualistic, mechanisms for processing what is happening in a group in a dignified and participatory way are extremely well developed. African “social technologies” exemplify the art of negotiating with each other in a way that I have not seen in western countries. The skills of traditional chiefs or other good community or corporate leaders include the sensitivity to inclusiveness, transparency and tolerance of the other. This often requires a commitment to take the time to listen for shared understanding.

For example, 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, in the end, summarize and make a decision which is just, preserves dignity and reflects the consensus of the group. **The phrase, “a chief is a chief by the people,” underlies the traditional way in which leaders, through listening to people, understand the place of the common good.**

An illustration of how the common good is also preserved and maintained is demonstrated by the skills of war healers. They skillfully mediate and restore spiritual and social harmony not only with those who have fought a war this month or this year, but also with the ancestors from many generations who have passed on prior to this month’s war.

I have heard about war healers only in South Africa. Traditionally, following a war between two tribes, war healers from each side would talk and together arrange for a cleansing ceremony that would involve those who fought on both sides. It is believed that since people died, ancestors on both sides would be aggrieved, and the hands, hearts and spirits of killers on each side would need to be cleansed. This mature and profound skill demonstrates an in-built capacity for reconciliation and healing after war or political violence.⁹ 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.

Ubuntu and reconciliatory wisdom in the service of discovering and building our connection with each other

I recall being the only white person working in an NGO in Zimbabwe in the late 1980s. Matanga, a colleague, and I disagreed about an issue and 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.” I have never forgotten this conversation since it illustrates a value base that stresses cooperation, the desire for reconciliation and communication in the interests not only of harmony but a shared understanding.

I honestly 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 embodied over many years. 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 that merits much greater attention in the world.**

A Short Memory of Hate

During a BBC lecture, Ali Mazrui, a famous Kenyan political scientist (now based at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia), referred to an African tendency towards a “short memory of hate.” He said, “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.**”¹⁰ Communicating, reconciling and finding ways to cleanse and let go of hatred are what children are taught and given the skills to do. 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.

A moving example of the “short memory of hate” is illustrated by the decisions made by the ANC in relation to the South African national anthem after the 1994 elections. The ANC decided to continue to include both the music and several verses of the formerly Afrikaans national anthem (called *Die Stem*) in the new anthem, *Nkosi Sileleli iAfrika* (God Bless Africa). *Nkosi Sileleli iAfrika* already includes four of the indigenous African languages in Africa and, as such, shows respect for the ethnic diversity in that country. This decision to include the Afrikaans verses from *Die Stem* reflects *ubuntu* consciousness and sent a powerful message to former oppressors that, through this inclusion, they and their language were still respected.

African Soul Force: Another aspect of Mazrui’s talk is his description of Gandhi’s views on African soul force. This is of great interest, since Gandhi profoundly influenced Martin Luther King. According to Mazrui,

“In the first half of the twentieth century India produced Mohandas Gandhi who led one of the most remarkable nonviolent anti-colonial 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.**”¹¹

Living in South Africa during the years 1992 to 2000, I watched Mandela become President, witnessed a new constitution brought to life through careful midwifery and watched the weekly special reports on the Truth

and Reconciliation Commission as South Africans dialogued together in the service of mutual healing. There is something powerful and inspiring about African soul force. It infused the pre-election negotiations in South Africa. It made its mark on the South African Constitution and in the vibrancy of the debate on civic engagement in that country. **Soul force is, perhaps, a beautiful quality deeply inherent in all human beings, but through the forces of time, urbanization, industrialization and the concomitant processes of alienation, tends to be denied, suppressed, or temporarily forgotten.**

Living *Ubuntu* - Mandela and Martin Luther King

Living in South Africa, I have been humbled many times by the short memory of hate that Mazrui describes. **Mandela is an icon who embodies a profound capacity for reconciliation and forgiveness. He has given to 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 translate what they learn from Mandela's heartfelt sense of connectedness in community into their own lives.

In his autobiography, particular paragraphs illustrate the power of this gift. Mandela writes:

'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.'**¹²

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."¹³

At this moment in our history, I cannot help wondering what the world would look like if other leaders took a leaf out of this remarkable man's book. What would capitalism look like if infused with "*ubuntu*?" What would the World's economic order look like? What would the legal system look like in America? What would the world be like if all oppressors apologized for their wrongdoings and then committed themselves to healing and helping members of their local communities and global family with appropriate restitution? Imagine the energy released by their reclaimed humanity? How much more heartfelt economic and political generosity might there be?

In his own version of "*ubuntu*" Peter Gabel, a law professor in San Francisco, begins his article, "Imagine Law"

"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."¹⁴

Martin Luther King obviously lived at a different time in history, but **King, Mandela and Peter Gabel share the 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 our common humanity as the soul force or the spiritual energy that carries within it the fire to transform and to correct.**

I see in Peter Gabel's writings and feel in his consciousness the echo and flavor of African humanity. In the small personal microcosm that makes up my life in America, I notice among my friends, that underneath the apparent alienation and masks, deep down lies a desire for compassion, connectedness and community. At this moment in time, could African values shed additional light and give meaning to defining and fulfilling that desire?

Mandela and Mini-Mandelas

Mandela's humanity has touched and inspired many of us deeply. In South Africa, I have had the privilege of meeting "mini Mandelas" whose capacity to transform feelings of hate into love is awe-inspiring.

I once interviewed a business leader, Eric Molobe, director of Kagiso Trust Investments in Joburg, South Africa. After many years of suffering both the small insults and great indignities of the apartheid system, Eric became a political activist and eventually found himself in jail. He started to hate all white people and saw them fitting into one category. In prison, in a single moment, his hardened attitudes began to melt and transform.

In his prison cell, Eric was feeling sad one evening and was comforting himself by whistling the song, "Silent Night, Holy Night." A white prison warden heard him. He went up to Eric 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." Eric's experience of the compassion of his prison warden started the beginnings of a profound shift in his attitude towards white people. This started the process of "love correcting, that which revolts against love." The wonderful feature of human beings is their capacity for love and compassion. We see in this brief vignette how the spiral of compassion can become a transformative one, moving upwards towards justice and healing. That spiral described by Martin Luther King, and so eloquently articulated by Peter Gabel, played out in this South African prison.

B. UBUNTU into the World

Africans who write about *ubuntu* would argue that non-Africans could also have *ubuntu*. It is a quality that is developed over time.¹⁵ So accepting this as an underlying assumption, let us explore what embracing *ubuntu* could mean for the East, the West and for the world.

The Individualism of the East and the West

Ronnie Lessem suggests that East and West have been able to meet to some degree because they are both somewhat individualistic. The South (Africa, Latin America) in Lessem's view is one of the primary sources of inspiration for the communal spirit which shapes ways of being and living in community. The idea that a person is a person through other people is a key understanding. The often-quoted Zulu phrase "umuntu, ngumuntu ngabantu" means: a person is a person through other people, that selfhood is achieved by what we do for others.

People in the East have their own version of connectedness. The world of the East, the analytical framework and spiritual world, is holistic, but somehow the living of life is more individualistic. From my limited understanding of Vedic literature from India, enlightened people who have cosmic consciousness or Unity consciousness realize that God is in all of us, and that nature and other human beings are part of us. This kind of consciousness can result in great selflessness, transcendence and pure action but may not always also result in detachment from the being in and doing for community.

One of the great statements of Vedic literature is “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam,” which means “The world is my family.” For Ronnie Lessem, “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.”

However, selfhood in the East is defined somewhat less strongly by one’s relationship to the group or community than in African communities.

According to Alexander Schieffer¹⁶, **“In the east, selfhood is not primarily achieved by what one does for others, but rather by what one achieves as an individual.** High achievement then would mean the manifestation of the universe in oneself. However, the “communal value” of a person is also strongly based on what he/she does for the family and for the community, and this is a very vital and important part of daily life, family bonds and the business context.”

While acknowledging the strong family and community bonds that exist in both rural and urban India and in Japanese and Chinese cultures, synthesizing Schieffer’s first assertion with Lessem’s conclusions feels intuitively accurate. Lessem says, **“In the great African souls, community and selfhood through collective belonging is a powerful force, which feeds the imagination and motivates a profound communal responsiveness.”**¹⁷

“Ubuntu” Physics

But there are writers in the West who have come to understand our interconnectedness through unexpected pathways, such as physics. Joe Jaworski is one of them. He describes in his book, *Synchronicity, The Inner Path of Leadership*¹⁸, his own evolution from a driven, hardworking Texas lawyer to someone who understood the need to foster connectedness in a country fragmented by too many social and economic divides. 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 of the people who influenced Jaworski’s thinking pattern was the late David Bohm who articulated the underlying philosophy of the new physics. Bohm described scientific dimensions of an implicate order that shapes and underlies our interconnectedness. Joe Jaworski saw the human and spiritual correlates of the new physics. He responded to this knowledge by finding his own way to healing the fragmentation he saw in American society and started ALF (American Leadership Forum). Through ALF trainings, leaders from different professions, social classes, political ideologies, and institutional sectors dialogue and discover their interconnectedness and their capacity for collaborative work together as leaders.

To some in South Africa, Joe Jaworski’s book resonated deeply. We recognized that Bohm’s new physics is about ubuntu – our African unscientific but similar manifestation of the interconnectedness of all things. African culture has celebrated and lived our mutuality and our connectedness for centuries. Africans have a profound understanding between the connections of past and present, between human beings and nature, of our common humanity, and of a shared spirituality. Africans have mastered the art of communication between ancestors of the past and those in the present, as well as dialogue between all of us (plants, birds, and animals included), who live together in a way that creates shared meaning and communal understanding. The new physics are, for South Africans the golden threads of ubuntu woven from the old traditional African fabric of interconnectedness.

Americans and Ubuntu - Ubuntu in US?

Occasionally I’ll hear and see dramatic examples of *ubuntu* in America. I have noticed that people have an opportunity to express their humanity and desire to help community members, particularly during disasters, and that in these situations, the media themselves play a helpful role

For example, during the devastating Hurricane Alison in Houston in 2001, strangers took food and blankets to people who lost their homes. Doctors, nurses and medical interns went way beyond the limits of their usual job descriptions to carry patients out of flooded hospital wards to safe dry places. In those moments, they did not stop to worry about whether the hospital’s risk management insurance policies would cover an injury they might incur as a result of helping another human being.

A recent example of *ubuntu* being spontaneously expressed was during September 11, when people traveled across the country to volunteer whatever support they could to firemen and victims in New York. The desire of ordinary people and movie stars to hold concerts to raise funds for victims they may not even have known and the collective compassion that was evident during those weeks and months was a natural outpouring of our common and shared humanity. The billions of dollars raised during the weeks and months following this tragedy are the tangible measures of *ubuntu*. **The intangible aspect of *ubuntu* is simply the movement and feeling of compassion for our fellow human beings in our hearts and the spontaneous desire to act in a caring and compassionate way, in which our selfhood is inspired by a sense of collective belonging.**

Ubuntu: A bridge of healing between America and Africa?

While there are deeply isolationist tendencies in this country, some people in America certainly have *ubuntu* and they give me a profound feeling of hope. They demonstrate that they care deeply about helping not just their own country, but other countries in the world. The following examples describe how *ubuntu* could lay the foundations for a bridge of healing between America and Africa.

The arguments posed by Jeffrey Sachs, formerly Director of the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, are full of *ubuntu*. In his op-ed article, "The Best Possible Investment in Africa," in the *New York Times* on February 10, 2001, 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. This may sound like a huge amount, but it is a remarkable bargain. Not only is it tiny compared with the great annual income of the well-off nations, but spending it could save the rich countries greater costs down the road: in response to military upheavals, humanitarian disasters and the worldwide spread of infectious diseases given a new foothold by AIDS...."

He goes on to argue some of the financial implications of a genuine commitment to Africa by America....

"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. Even the highest cost would be less than a penny for every \$10 of their combined gross national products, which will be around \$25 trillion this year. The financing for this program could be gathered from many sources: rich countries' national budgets, debt cancellation for African countries, grants from private organizations like the Gates Foundation and Rotary International, and from the World Bank. **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. The richest, most technologically advanced country in world history cannot turn its back on millions of suffering people when it could so readily help them."

Early in 2001, there was a special PBS television program in America about the war in Rwanda, a story of tens of thousands of people dying.... The story was about the failed efforts of the general leading the peacekeeping initiative to persuade other governments to send additional troops to keep the peace. Senator Paul Simon tried hard to persuade the Clinton administration to send just 4,000 troops to Rwanda. This request, according to Simon, was refused, because it was not in "America's strategic interest." Paul Simon, now a professor at Southern Illinois University, joined the Political Science faculty in 1997, just weeks after retiring from the U.S. Senate, where he was Illinois' senior senator. As a congressman he fought hard to get troops deployed from the Clinton administration to prevent killings in Rwanda. On the PBS program, he posed the question, **"Isn't caring about humanity a strategic interest?"** This kind of question indicates that Paul Simon has *ubuntu*.

It is heartwarming to see economists and educators such as Jeffrey Sachs and Paul Simon espousing what, through my own South African lens, sound like *ubuntu* values in America expressed towards Africa. More voices like this need to be heard. More people like Joe Jaworski who articulate the clarion call for our connectedness and interdependence deserve to be heard, both in America and throughout the world.

Ubuntu and the World

The bulk of this article was written in March 2001. The aftermath of September 11 has brought into focus the huge implications of our increasing social and economic global interdependence. **It seems clear that African *ubuntu* could have a great deal to contribute to the world, if indeed the people of the world would allow themselves to internalize this way of thinking.** If we acknowledge the common good and our interconnectedness, surely we can look to the wisdom of *ubuntu* to inform our lives? To my optimistic ears, there are some visionaries and leaders in America and Europe who are beginning to speak with the spirit of *ubuntu*.

One is Rinaldo Brutoco, Founder and President of the World Business Academy (www.worldbusiness.org).

He said recently, “While nations may not be ready to turn swords into ploughshares or to totally re-design 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 supersedes the reality of a world crippled by fear, runaway military budgets, starvation and saber rattling.”¹⁹

Ronnie Lessem, a long time advocate of including *ubuntu* values in business thinking, takes this vision further. The spirit of *ubuntu* in his view has the potential to lead world business to what he calls a union-centered mode of performance. This mode “arises from a perspective that understands that our actions do not truly serve us unless they serve us all.” For Lessem, “Organizations that hold this view creatively seek paths of actions that are good for business, good for people and good for the planet. Inclusion of the greater good in the world of business ethics and values seems a revolutionary concept to many. It actually marks a return to the earth-centered values of times long forgotten when we all lived closer to nature. It connects us to the forces of the cosmos. The financial markets, in fact, with their short-term focus and narrowly based criteria for performance, militate against such progressive union.”²⁰

I conclude by re-quoting words of the old South African saying, “**Your pain is my pain, my wealth is your wealth. Your salvation is my salvation**”. As more of us 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 re-envisioning how wealth could be shared in a world that works for all becomes more and 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. And by bringing about salvation for everybody, whether African or European, Muslim or American, we co-create our own safety and our own salvation.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ Since most of my experiences in Africa have occurred as a result of living in South Africa and Zimbabwe, when I use the word African, it is intended to apply only to those countries. In this article *ubuntu* is a philosophy and a frame of mind prevalent among people in Africa below the Sahara. I have no doubt that it exists in most African countries.

² Zulu and Xhosa are both Nguni languages.

³ Dandala, in Lessem and Nussbaum (*Sawubona Africa*) “Greeting or not greeting people, and **how** this is done, becomes a critical factor – not merely to demonstrate how sociable one is, but rather how human one is.”

⁴ Dandala, op. cit.

⁵ Note: the corollary in America is found in the generous philanthropic efforts of the many individuals who share their wealth through foundations. The only difference is that more than likely, such contributions would not come out of their own personal salaries.

⁶ Mkize, N. "In Search of an Africentric Voice" (1998)

⁷ Battle, Michael (1997)

⁸ Lessem, Ronnie and Nussbaum, Barbara *Sawubona Africa: Embracing Four Worlds in South African Management* (Zebra Press, Struik Publishers, 1996)

⁹ Bishop Dandala (of the Methodist Church for Southern Africa). Traditional healers and war healers from THASO (Traditional Healers Association of South Africa) combined Christian ritual with cleansing ceremonies in the African townships of Johannesburg after the 1994 elections in South Africa. There had been such great political violence and bloodshed prior to the elections. Through this creative partnership those who had participated in violence were given an opportunity to heal not only themselves but also their communities.

¹⁰ BBC Series, Mazrui et al *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (1986)

For additional elaboration on lack of hate retention and more current views by Mazrui, more in a political context, refer to pp. 14–18 in this paper. Mazrui, A. *Afro-Arab Crossfire: Between the Flames of Terrorism and The Force of Pax*, Americana Director, Institute of Global Cultural Studies, Albert Schweitzer Professor in the Humanities, State University of New York at Binghamton, New York, USA (Presented at a special seminar sponsored by the Ethiopian International Institute for Peace and Development, (EIIPD), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, December 5, 2001)

¹¹ Mazrui, op. cit.

¹² Mandela, Nelson *A Long Walk to Freedom*, (1994), p. 542

¹³ Mandela, op. cit., p. 544

¹⁴ Gabel, Peter, *Tikkun Magazine*, (Nov/Dec 2000), p. 11

¹⁵ Dandala, op. cit., p. 70

¹⁶ Schieffer, Alexander, Dr. Lecturer, University of St. Gallen Switzerland Head of Competence Center International Network Management; Institute for Leadership and HR Management /University St. Gallen

¹⁷ Personal interview, October 11, 2002

¹⁸ Jaworski, Joe *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership* (1996)

¹⁹ Personal interview, October 19, 2002

²⁰ Lessem, Ronnie "Four Worlds Summary" (2002) Forthcoming publication in the *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Development*

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