

The Professor's teachers

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A gifted story teller, a skill possibly honed in his years of teaching, it wasn't long before the Professor had the crowd eating out of his hand with humorous and light-hearted tales of transformation in South Africa.

But it was the third story he told that brought the laughter down from its giddy heights and replaced it with a quiet murmur of contemplative understanding.

The story is about Prof Jansen's latest endeavour, that of being the Vice Chancellor of the University of Free State - a traditionally white and Afrikaans institution that in 2008 was thrown into the media spotlight after a discriminatory video made by students surfaced.

In trying to settle into the university, the Professor went for walk around the campus, and came across "two depressed big *boere* kids." To purposefully stir these boys up a little, Prof Jansen sat right between them and helped himself to the chips they were eating. ("Don't try this at home!" Jansen warned the bookstore audience.)

From sharing their food the Professor then invited the boys to share their thoughts about what he, as their "servant-leader", should do for them.

"They didn't say what most students say - bring the fees down and get better food in the *koshuis*. No, they simply said, without any anger, 'Please don't force us to integrate.'"

That statement hung in the air for a while, before Jansen added that it was a stark reminder of the fact that we are "a nation still deeply traumatised."

A unique generation

We are a unique generation of South Africans says Jansen, "the first and only that would have lived through one of the most dramatic transitions of the twentieth century."

What makes us unique is the sense of conflict between our past and our future; others call it the struggle to lay our ghosts to rest. It is the knowledge, direct and indirect, of our past that has left us suspicious, nervous, even afraid of one another.

We are "a fearful people, anxious about personal futures and institutional fate, concerned about jobs and security, nervous about "transformation" and what it might portend, and aware of the fragility of language, custom and culture," writes Jansen in his book.

It is possibly our biggest challenge.

Surprisingly, Jansen's new book does not explore this issue from the perspective of those in his age group (50s) that have spent most of their lives on the other side of a democratic South Africa but rather he looks at the worrying sentiments of young Afrikaans undergraduate students such as those who asked not to be forced to integrate.

Jansen's book seeks to answer the following question: why is it that Afrikaans children, who were but infants during the dying days of Apartheid, hold the same pessimistic views about South Africa's future and are as bitter about the present, as their fathers and grandfathers?

To highlight this point, the Professor shared another story with his bookstore audience that cut to the depth of the transformation challenge.

As Dean of Education, he was once invited to address a *meisies hoerskool* Grade 10 camp. After relaying the story of the Good Samaritan as a way to teach the group a lesson on crossing bridges, one of the girls raised a hand and said, "Well Professor I agree with what you say about crossing borders and stuff. But tell me this, how do I cross bridges toward someone who looks like the people who almost killed my sister and me a few weeks ago in a violent car jacking?"

The question was honest and brave and Jansen didn't know how to answer it. After much deliberation he finally answered her by telling them about a particular incident in his life.

A young Jansen, 17 years old and already quite politicised, was walking to the shops when he was hit by a brick that came flying from the hands of a young white boy. He reacted by hitting the boy, whose father was an off-duty policeman. Jansen was thrown into the back of a police car and the boy's father repeatedly beat and humiliated him - a memory that clearly haunts him even today.

"So you see," he tells the Grade 10 girl, "I too have this terrible knowledge of what happened to me, and all my life I have been struggling to cross this bridge toward people who look like you. And I must be honest it is very difficult.

"And so all I can ask of you is that you try to cross the same bridge from the other side and maybe we will meet each other somewhere in the middle. For the sake of our country, we must at least try."

This moment, said Jansen, and others like it - moments of honesty and sharing with young Afrikaans children who in the end were battling the same fears as he - had changed his life.

"I am deeply aware of how my encounters with young Afrikaans children have helped to make me more human, more tolerant and to deal with my demons. I was transformed by my white kids and am eternally grateful to them."

Leaving the event that evening, I wondered whether the Professor would actually heed the request made by the boys at UFS who said they do not want to integrate, and I thought probably not. He will find some sneaky way to have UFS students, black and white, sitting side by side on a daily basis. But the difference is that he will probably be sitting right alongside them, helping them to understand themselves and each other just a little bit better, while taking in a few more lessons on healing and transformation from them.

By Lindy Mtongana