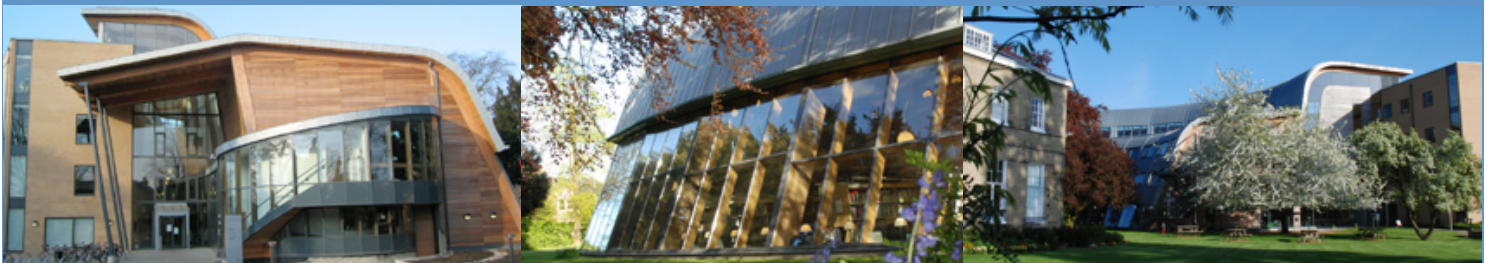


Professor Jonathan Jansen

Vice Chancellor, University of the Free State,
South Africa

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It was a huge privilege to host Jonathan Jansen at the Faculty of Education in April and for him to lead a lunchtime seminar for LfL and the Centre for Commonwealth Education. Our only regret was that it fell during the Easter holidays when many staff and students were away and so missed being inspired by his compelling account of confronting racism in South Africa.

The title of his book *Knowledge in the Blood* depicts a way of knowing the world that is passed from generation to generation. With deeply entrenched 'knowledge' of white, black and 'coloureds' stretching back over generations and insitutionalised in schools and universities the challenges facing a first black Dean are beyond imagining.

This edition of InForm seeks to convey something of the impact of Professor Jansen's LfL Seminar. We have combined his response to eight questions John MacBeath put to him following the seminar with accounts from people present.



1. You entitled your book *Knowledge in the Blood*. What underlies the choice of that title?

The title comes from an Irish poem by Macdara Woods, referring to the deep emotional, spiritual, psychic and bodily roots of knowledge - a knowledge not easily changed or transformed, and which from time to time keeps holding us back from doing the right things, and propelling us forward towards what is good: "for there is no respite from the knowledge in the blood" (Woods). It is a reminder, in pedagogical terms, that simple instructional or curricular remedies for complex problems do not yield easily to the logic of those who teach.

I have been made aware of the possible association of the title with the sentiments of national socialism or the assumptions about human behaviour drawn from eugenics. I am sensitive to these connections, but also believe that all meaning - including in this case poetic meaning - should not be reduced to Hitlerian thought.

2. Theories of organizational change abound. For you as a new Dean or VC what was the very first step?

The first step is understanding. Politics hates complexity, and in the overcharged politics of South Africa, there is little room for deep understanding of how society and its institutions came to be the way they are. You cannot change something without investing time (and resources) in 'getting to the bottom of things,' in a manner of speaking. Wherever I have been asked to lead, always in complex circumstances, I spend three months saying nothing except in trying to understand the cultures, traditions, histories, practices and beliefs of the organization I am entering. It works.

3. From your experience as leader in such a hugely challenging context what is the most important lesson you have learned?

That leading through the open acknowledgement of your own brokenness (as opposed to moral self-righteousness) finds enormous resonance among young and indeed older South Africans as we struggle to deal with our woundedness from the past and our mutual vulnerability in the present.

4. What have been the most formidable obstacles you have faced in trying to achieve your vision?

Dealing with myself. I do not lead outside of my own emotions, hurts, experiences and troubles. Leading is a deeply personal and indeed emotional experience. Knowing yourself, being open to change and adjustment even as you lead, and yet knowing what is worth pursuing, are critical elements in credible and effective leadership. I often find myself "surprised by joy" (CS Lewis) as the people I am privileged to lead respond with enthusiasm to what we set out to do. The problem is not the followers.

5. Your willingness to understand and forgive bigoted students guilty of outrageous behaviour to black students could be seen by many as 'soft' on racism. Is there a limit to 'understanding' and a place for tough sanctions 'pour encourager les autres'?

The charge ('soft on racism') would stick if that (forgiveness) is the only thing you do. But when forgiveness is part of a collective of actions that deal with personal and institutional and societal transformation, then it is a first step, not the only one. Institutional forgiveness (remember students still went through the criminal trial) brings students back into the university so that their bitter knowledge can be engaged and their angry knowledge intercepted; this is exactly what happened. One of the students now teaches others, like him, about the dangers of racism and the possibilities of a life that embraces others. Forgiveness of course also helps the perpetrator

'Leading is a deeply personal and indeed emotional experience'

overcome the burden of unresolved hurt and the restoration of human relations. By going counter-cultural, in this way, the door is opened for other white South Africans to 'come clean' and re-join the project of social change and renewal knowing that the finger of judgment will not (again) be shoved in their faces; we now have more white students coming to the University of the Free State (UFS) than before, for this reason. You cannot deal with racism in an all-black university, which is what the UFS was on its way to becoming. But this simple act of forgiveness, in a country still hurting deeply with past wounds, enabled a national dialogue to break-out in civil society which is quite unprecedented, not only in churches and synagogues and mosques. More and more South Africans now claim to understand the deeper meaning of that initial act of forgiveness; of course Desmond Tutu understood it right away, as expressed in his October 2009 letter.

'this simple act of forgiveness, in a country still hurting deeply with past wounds, enabled a national dialogue to break-out in civil society which is quite unprecedented'

6. You showed us a picture of a moment in a rugby match frozen in time. What do you see in that picture that many of your audience could not see?

A young black woman taking an enormous risk crossing over masculine, racial, cultural and sporting barriers to demonstrate joy and affection for a young white rugby player on a campus once dismissed in the media as irredeemably racist.

7. You are described by many of your audience as a powerful charismatic figure with your own deep personal conviction and commitment. But you will move on. To what extent does it require you individually to sustain the vision? How can you leave a legacy for others to carry forward the vision?

This is an abiding concern that I carried over from my previous job. I now work with strong teams, carefully selected, across the university, to build a common understanding of what we wish to achieve. I begin to identify young leaders to take over from me. But most importantly, we started to

'change the rules of game' in social and cultural practice so that what we started is sustained beyond the one or two leaders at the top. Still, this means staying for at least 7-10 years; anything shorter risks backsliding on both the academic and the human projects which constitute our central vision.

8. What or who has most influenced your thinking and your understanding of leadership?

My grandfather from a rural town in the Western Cape of South Africa.

My earliest memories of him was that he went blind after he lost his property that was given to white families and he was moved to a poor township. This proud, elegant, decent man refused to become bitter and demonstrated the same love and affection for black and white as he did when he was better-off, materially speaking, than most whites in that area. I still remember how we would walk down the Main Street of Montagu, the town's name, and he would lift his hat when a white woman greeted him, as was the custom those days. Even more surprising was that in greeting, the white woman or man would say respectfully, "Meneer Johnson" (Sir, Mister Johnson). For the 1960s, that was something else. Apartheid robbed him, but it could not break him.

Oupa (grandfather) Johnson is the kind of leader I so much wish to become.

Jonathan Jansen is Vice-Chancellor and Rector of the University of the Free State, Honorary Professor of Education at the University of the Witwatersrand and Visiting Fellow at the National Research Foundation, South Africa.

He was a Fulbright Scholar to Stanford University (2007-2008), former Dean of Education at the University of Pretoria (2001-2007), and holds Honorary Doctorates from the University of Edinburgh and the University of Cleveland, USA.



Reflections

Confronting and changing culture: Knowledge in the Blood

Jonathan Jansen is an inspirational speaker, someone whose integrity and humanity go hand-in-hand with his keen intellect, his gentle wit and his gifts of oratory. I make these judgements having first heard Jonathan speak last summer in Mauritius. Of course, it's easy to get carried along on a wave of enthusiasm generated by a charismatic first speaker at a conference set in idyllic surroundings, but having been fascinated by that talk, I went on to read *Knowledge in the Blood*, as well as some of Jonathan's other writings, and his recent seminar in the Faculty left me every bit as inspired as I was a year ago.

Molly Warrington, Department of Geography, University of Cambridge

It was an immense privilege and an affecting experience to meet Jonathan Jansen and to hear him speak, but his humanity, courage, scholarship, intellect and wisdom are equally, if not even more evident, in his writing. Jonathan's book *Knowledge in the Blood* tells the story of his term of office as Dean of the Faculty of Education at the historically Afrikaner University of Pretoria. It is absolutely, and rivetingly, about understanding and confronting the multiple legacies of Apartheid in South Africa, but the insights into leadership and change are widely applicable. We all know change is often difficult and resisted: *Knowledge in the Blood* refers to how beliefs and identity which shape responses to change are an integral part of every individual - formed, reinforced and transmitted by heritage, experience, culture and company.

Sue Swaffield, Senior Lecturer, University of Cambridge Faculty of Education

The term 'cultural change' is liberally used in leadership contexts yet Professor Jonathan Jansen's tenure as the first black Vice-Chancellor of a South African university genuinely epitomises cultural change. Based within an institution located in the heart of Afrikaner territory, Jonathan Jansen is addressing the pernicious remnants of a system which, he explained, still manages to entrench and even scar the mindsets of young students born several years after the end of the apartheid regime. In his widely recognized warm, lively and sparkling manner, the Vice-Chancellor of the *University of the Free State* shared compelling, astonishing and sometimes shocking narratives in his efforts to turn around a South African university characterized by an element of (on occasion violent) racial tensions between white and black students. Jansen astutely and a little mischievously opened his talk by recognizing the British higher education establishment - his visit to Cambridge just happened to coincide with newspaper headlines quoting a speech by Prime Minister David Cameron which condemned Oxford for only admitting one black Caribbean student in 2009.

Afua Osei, Client Director, Cambridge Judge Business School

Leadership: charisma and sustainability

Here was a man whose leadership embodied charisma, determination, and humility... a man for all seasons and for all people, accessible to all and visible throughout the wider community, in the most unlikely of contexts ... a man who saw leadership as a collaborative and energising activity... who saw leadership in a context of seeking out people who offered exceptional skills, unusual abilities, unorthodox 'takes' on situations, finding talents hidden sometimes in obscure contexts... a man who created opportunities and offered challenges, who defied convention and role definition, who was not hide-bound by status and tradition. Whatever challenges leaders of communities face – the response has to be similar... to build trust, to balance listening with considered and decisive action, to seek out opportunities to give opportunity to others, to reconcile charisma and humility.

Mike Younger, Director Commonwealth Centre for Education, University of Cambridge

One is tempted, having experienced the magnetism of the seminar presentation, to ascribe part of the answer to this leader's personal charisma. No doubt charisma succeeded in galvanizing or mobilizing UFS colleagues, but other factors had to be in play, because charisma doesn't stick for long. The timing surely had to be right (having sunk so low in 2009, and having been shamed in the eyes of the world by the Facebook account of the students' atrocities, where else was there for UFS to go?) and, equally, the measures implemented, which were intended to tackle the terrifyingly ugly and horrible problem of racism, had to be the right ones. Here is where there was evidence of a deftness of touch; a deftness of touch which was grounded in a willingness to get to grips with the fear at the heart of the racial oppressor's worldview.

Peter Gronn, Head of University of Cambridge Faculty of Education

Integral to Jonathan's leadership style is a process of listening and explaining, of making space and time for all voices to be heard and all perspectives to be expressed, particularly those of students. Thus has Jonathan been able to act in bringing about transformation, despite powerful and entrenched opposition. Such a leadership style has sometimes been conceptualised as 'feminine', and indeed, Jonathan admitted that it had initially been easier to shift the thinking of female students than that of males. But gender sensitivity is not only evident in his approach, but embedded within his understanding of the complexities underlying 'racial' divisions, because Jonathan acknowledges that social justice is grounded in an intersectional approach, which addresses not only 'race', but also gender, class and sexuality. A truly remarkable man! (Molly Warrington)

Jonathan's leadership by example, and candid reflection when in his eyes it has fallen short, are inspiring and humbling. Leadership is about what you say and do, not just at official decision-taking points but crucially every day, and particularly in unguarded moments when tired and under pressure. It is about engaging with, understanding, and learning from those who seem most distant and antagonistic. It is about dialogue, in classrooms, on campus, over a meal, and through the media. It is about the messages conveyed by physical surroundings: Jonathan writes of the portraits of previous deans, all white males, lining the corridor to his office, and of the prominent statue of the Afrikaner founder of the university (one he keeps the other he removes – with good reasons). What do our institutions, and the behaviour in them, say about what is valued? Anyone wanting to learn about leadership will find immense richness in the pages of his masterpiece. (Sue Swaffield)

Racism and reconciliation

The disturbing events which instigated a campus race riot clearly represent some of the more challenging episodes of Jonathan's tenure. He highlighted the four black university domestic workers assaulted on a prolonged basis by a fraternity of white male students – a riot and then national and international outcry ensued. As Jonathan shared his insightful and articulate reflections, it was evident that he has an inherent understanding of behaviours alongside a gift for diplomacy and widespread buy-in. The governing ANC roundly criticised Jonathan's compassionate resolution of the crimes committed by the Afrikaner students; he simultaneously gained the trust of the Boer community. Tackling the root causes, he launched a global recruitment campaign and hired 20 black professors of international standing. Ultimately, Jonathan Jansen identified the black African students *and* white Afrikaner students as victims of a racist system. The narratives and anecdotes perfectly illustrated that Vice-Chancellor Jansen has rolled up his sleeves and is addressing the challenges brick-by-brick, dismantling (with gusto) the legacy and impact of apartheid on the South African university landscape. (Afua Osei)

When he was fair with the Black and white students and so he allowed them back to the University and people put posters saying 'Kill the rector'. I think that it is a good idea that he accepted the white students back because if he did not accept them they would have never learnt that everyone is equal. And also he made an impact on the blacks because they felt the same way towards the white. When he arrived in the free state, he saw that Blacks and white were split. My view was that it was impressive and emotional.

Camilla O'Grady, 15 year old student

How could Jonathan sympathise with his students who were exhibiting such blatant racism? I have had cause to recount his story on many occasions and in many different contexts since I first met him in Mauritius last year when we gathered under the auspices of the Centre for Commonwealth Education to revisit the Millennium Development Goals. But as with so many things in life, understanding the theory is not at all the same as putting it into practice. Jonathan Jansen is a giant of a man: not only in terms of his stature – I had great difficulty getting into reverse gear when he sat in the passenger seat of my small car - but also in terms of his humanity. My admiration for what Jonathan has done and continues to do is boundless.

Judy Curry, Chief Executive, Commonwealth Education Trust

What was made starkly evident to me, and I guess to many others present, was through Jonathan's vignette of how he dealt with macho racial behaviour by white youths who had systematically degraded black men ... the striving for reconciliation, the notion that the University and the wider society had responsibility for these actions as well as the youths themselves ... working for understanding, breaking down barriers, challenging stereotypes, demanding all acknowledge a wider responsibility. Difference, then, in the scale, the nature, the intensity of the challenges, but an approach to leadership which was context-specific, which acknowledged historical legacy but was determined to challenge assumptions of responsibility and of power, of negativity and apportioning blame. (Mike Younger)

No doubt many leaders had been in parallel positions and had tried beforehand but were at best partially successful or at worst had little or nothing to show for their efforts. If so, then how and why did the University of the Free State (UFS) campus race riot of 2009 morph somehow into circumstances in which South African students, regardless of their ethnic and cultural backgrounds, were fraternizing to the extent depicted in Jonathan's powerpoint image of cross-racial congratulatory rugby union triumph, as the students' team defeated its traditional rival? Moreover, how much of what had been in place for the space of barely two years would be likely to stick or persist with Jonathan's (eventual) departure? (Peter Gronn)



Jonathan gently teased us as we struggled to decipher the true meaning of the photograph showing black and white students playing rugby together. But why did we find it so hard? Was it because we genuinely did not notice the colour differences? Or was it that we were concerned that by referring to them we might expose an underlying racism that we did not even know we had? Dare we white middle class Brits who are almost sure that we have no vestiges of racism expose ourselves to Jonathan's laser like scrutiny by raising the issue? Yet again Jonathan had subtly and with great gentleness managed to make us examine our own attitudes. (Judy Curry)

Confronting fear and creating new openings

I am really glad I attended Jonathan's talk. His very human presence and anecdotal sharing of the beginnings of breaking through barriers of hate and fear at the University, and cultivating new openings to possibility beyond what is but what might be was rejuvenating for me personally. Some of the struggles in the community that Jonathan mentioned resonated with some of my experiences in Lebanon where social divisions among the main sectarian groups (Shiites, Sunni, Maronites, Orthodox, Druze) have become more entrenched in the last few years. I thought it was interesting that Jonathan decided to start with students and not faculty members. It made me think about how students can play a very powerful role in breathing new life into an institution if given the opportunity to engage their perspectives, reflect together and experience something different.

I wondered what kind of educational initiatives Jonathan was planning for students and what his thoughts were regarding how he and his colleagues would approach staff and parents to actively participate in this 'human project'. Jonathan's resolute commitment to co-creating what felt to me was a "pocket of hope" (de los Reyes & Gozemba, 2002) in spite of difficult circumstances offers courage to all who are committed to individual and collective social transformation.

Lena Bahou, PhD Student, University of Cambridge

Engaging student perspectives

I knew there was a lot of racism in South Africa but I didn't realise that blacks and whites were so against each other. Jonathan Jansen told stories that he actually experienced himself and not just stories that he heard or read about which made his speech more impressive and intriguing. He was definitely not boring and he knows how to get the audience's attention - all his jokes were quite good. Teachers I know don't normally have time to talk to their students but he cares about his pupils. He told us about standing on the campus giving chocolate eggs to his students so he could talk to them. I found that very thoughtful.

Louisa O'Grady, 13 year old student

Throughout the Jonathan Jansen talk a few things surprised me such as the segregation between the white and the black people - how they couldn't do things together such as the White and Black menu, in the bus, at school. The picture he showed us was interesting seeing a Black girl on the football pitch- how can something so trivial be so important in South Africa. He described the long process of how he really had to work hard to have a free black and white university where people can mix together. It showed the determination of the people and of Jonathan Jansen and the importance of mixing black and white people in order to stop and eradicate racism. (Camilla O'Grady)