

EZEMPILO MENTAL HEALTH ARTS

Keynote Speech By Professor Eugene Skeef

(Start by showing the videos, 'Tulani dancing to custodians of the song' and 'kalimba for tulani'.)

These videos represent the truth about the healing power of the arts. I used to play the southern African kalimba for my daughter Tulani when I carried her on my bosom as a baby. Not even her mother Azra could get her to sleep on some nights. I would have to walk around the block at night while singing and playing the kalimba for her. Without fail, she would sleep soundly. To this day it does not escape me that the word "sound" has multiple meanings, including deep and undisturbed with reference to sleep; in good condition, not damaged or injured; secure; well; and, of course, vibrations. I believe that Tulani's choice of dance as a career is her way of self-healing and healing her audiences and workshop participants. Her name literally asks for there to be peace.

The same applies to my son Shakur who is 21. With his current mental health problems, he is at his most peaceful when he sits at the piano. He basically heals himself in this way. Playing the piano stills the voices in his head and returns the glow of a radiant smile to his face. This reminds me of a man who used to walk the streets of the township I grew up in. All the children used to call him Underwood. We were fascinated by his educational accomplishments. He had a degree in law, but at some point, for reasons we did not know, he spent his days walking the dusty streets. He would step gingerly, always looking downwards in the hope of finding bits and pieces of rubbish that he would pick up and transform into beautiful sculptures that he would hand to the next child he encountered at the point of completing his original work of art. I was fortunate to have been the recipient of several of his masterpieces. Underwood always lingered longer with me because I engaged him in meaningful creative conversation as a boy who already knew and appreciated the benefits of artistic expression, having started at a very early age to read, write poetry and make music from homemade instruments fashioned from available discarded materials.

Please allow me to reiterate the poem that is part of the video with Tulani dancing.

**custodians of the song
(*umakhweyana chant*)**

we wake up
with the quivering
of hidden tendons
of the night
whose tautness vibrates
the morning into the blooming
of a song that soothes
the pain of our yearning
for harmony

for we are the stewards
of the garden
of creative cultivation
we bare ourselves
of the husk of the grain
throbbing with the deep
inner music of being human

our song invokes
the spirits that permeate
every nuance of life's
timeless pulse

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For those of you who may not know, ***umakhweyana*** is a musical instrument of the Nguni people. It evolved from the bow-and-arrow of the San and Khoi, who invented it to appease the ancestral spirits of the animal they were about to take the life of during a hunt. They would place one end of the bow in their mouth while percussively tapping the string with one of their arrows. They would shape their mouth in such a way as to create a resonator. They would then change the size and shape of the mouth cavity to creatively play with the overtones or harmonics of the sound they produced. In this way they were able to speak to the animal's ancestral spirits and assuage the pain of the kill. This ritual was also a way of the hunter apologising for being so base as to need to cease the breath of the creature for the sustenance of his own and that of his community. This represents the most potent and profound meaning of music.

Among the Nguni, the instrument evolved into one largely played by women in healing ceremonies and as a tool for resolving conflict between individuals, families and communities. This is the original example of a

weapon of destruction being turned into an instrument of peace-making. **Umakhweyana**, which also comes under other names such as **ugubhu**, **umqangala** and **umhubhe**, is also used traditionally during storytelling. Princess Magogo ka Dinizulu, the mother of the recently passed Mangosuthu Gatsha Buthelezi was the most renowned exponent of this instrument.

I greet you in the spirit of wellness.

When I was a child growing up in South Africa, my father told our family that life had to be an act of beauty for it to be worth living. This led to my mother singing us to sleep at night and waking us up to song every morning. As for his part in ensuring the pursuance of this family ethos, my father used his physical prowess and moral fortitude to protect the family from the violence and multiple forms of apartheid violation of our universally enshrined human rights. My father's notion of beauty was not of the superficial cosmetic variety that normally appeals to the eye of the beholder, but the deeper manifestation of harmony bestowed by the blessings of a life instilled with love, peace, joy and empathy.

If the purpose of life has anything to do with the perpetuation of joy and the fostering of harmony and balance within and between us and the environment in which we live, then the pursuit of mental wellbeing should be our primary objective. The mind is like an analogue clock pinned to the elusive horizon that ticks to mark the infinite unfolding of life. It needs regular maintenance to ensure its smooth and continuous sweep across its repetitive time cycles. We have to make sure its batteries are always freshly charged to sustain its perpetual rhythm. All societies have had to face this challenge. The attainment of inner and outer harmony and balance is not unique to any one group of people. This is the indelible inscription in the subconscious of all of us, irrespective of where in time and space we may find ourselves.

The particular aspect of the human narrative that I wish to share with you, though, is weighted in the direction of the African emergence of solutions to individual and communal disharmony and imbalance. Allow me to give you a simple image to reflect on: an aloe vera plant in its native African location bears more healing potency than one transplanted through the seed from the gullet of a migrating bird onto the turret of the ruins of a European castle.

In the cultures of undiluted African traditional practices, medicine dealt with the whole person: body, mind, spirit. There was a holistic approach to healing. The strands that constituted being fully human were treated as braided, and, thus, if they were separated, this was a sure way of precipitating un-wellness. The consideration of the braided strands as a whole bore greater critical significance in understanding the person, than

the isolated parts, because it was their interrelatedness that was important in restoring her or his harmony and balance. This same conceptual interrelatedness applied to perceptions of art as well.

In uncontaminated African cultural traditions, art is coterminous with life. As such, it *is* life, and cannot but matter. It is particularly encouraging for me to learn of the non-profit organisation (NPO) Art That Matters, with its (and I quote) “profound vision and unwavering dedication to using arts as a powerful tool for transformation and healing. Founded on the belief that creative expression has the potential to bring about positive change in individuals and communities, Art That Matters seeks to harness the immense power of art to address various social, emotional, and psychological challenges faced by individuals and communities in South Africa.” (End quote)

Just as we do not have to reinvent the wheel because it works perfectly as a motive force of directional determination, let us celebrate the time-tested holistic African resources for maintaining a society of communal and individual mental wellbeing.

When we inhale the indigenous African plant known as *impepho* we are realigning ourselves with nature and its embodiment of our ancestral continuum. We are restoring the balance of our nature, which is in fact nature. I would like to draw your attention to a seminal book that my wife Azra Kayani made me aware of through her work as a forest school practitioner. The book is written by Richard Louv, and is titled **Last Child in the Woods - Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder**. The author replaces what is conventionally referred to as ADHD (or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) with what he terms Nature-Deficit Disorder (NDD). I quote from his website: “In this influential work about the staggering divide between children and the outdoors, child advocacy expert Richard Louv directly links the lack of nature in the lives of today's wired generation — he calls it nature-deficit — to some of the most disturbing childhood trends, such as the rises in obesity, attention disorders, and depression. *Last Child in the Woods* is the first book to bring together a new and growing body of research indicating that direct exposure to nature is essential for healthy childhood development and for the physical and emotional health of children and adults. More than just raising an alarm, Louv offers practical solutions and simple ways to heal the broken bond — and many are right in our own backyard.”

Healing through the arts must of necessity be an immersive interactive experience for the participants. We say we are touched by an artistic performance or visual piece of art. It is revealing about Westernised attitudes to visual arts that most galleries warn the viewer not to touch the art. Often there is a member of security staff standing at attention to make sure that this fundamental rule is not contravened. While

understandable in some respects, this restrictive policy goes against natural human curiosity. It is normal for us to want to feel something presented to us. Our senses hunger to interact as wholly as possible with what is before us. Imagine for a moment our childhood fascination with a naked flame succumbing to the seduction of its undeniable danger. The inherent contradiction in the prohibitive policy of a standard art gallery becomes more starkly acute in the context of someone with visual impairment taking an interest in a piece of exhibited art.

Living according to African holistic principles makes life therapy in itself. But this is easier said than done in a world engulfed in the flames of war right across the globe - from Sudan to Israel-Palestine, to Russia-Ukraine and more.

Let us meditate on the lyrics of Bob Marley's global hit song, WAR:

[Verse 1]

Until the philosophy which holds one race
Superior and another inferior
Is finally
And permanently
Discredited
And abandoned
Everywhere is war
Me say war

[Verse 2]

Until there are no longer
First-class and second-class citizens of any nation
Until the colour of a man's skin
Is of no more importance than the colour of his eyes
Me say war

[Verse 3]

That until the basic human rights
Are equally guaranteed to all
Without regard to race
Dis a war

[Verse 4]

That until that day
The dream of lasting peace
World citizenship
Rule of international morality
Will remain in but a fleeting illusion to be pursued
But never attained
Now everywhere is war

War

The obsession with our cosmetic differences based on religious doctrinal dogma blinds us to the primacy of our common humanity. These calamitous conflicts in our world indicate a profound need for promoting, perpetuating and advocating mental health as an urgently required precondition for global peace.

We desperately need to unblock the channels of our natural disposition to be in constant flow in fulfilling our motivation for a life of peace. We are naturally designed to flow as an expression of being fully alive in resonance with our whole inner and outer environment. Mental ill health is one of the first signs of losing our balance or alignment as a result of our flow being disturbed. The restoration of our flow constitutes the route to mental wellness, which assures us of our natural balance and alignment of being. I say "natural" because it is in our nature to be in tune with the greater harmony that the natural world is in constant motion towards attaining.

The arts are a priceless asset to humans. They possess the best inherent medicine for restoring and perpetuating flow. The healing medicine of the arts is like a ubiquitous plant that everyone can pick along the pathways of life's labyrinth. All that we need to do is to remember to pause and pluck a handful of the leaves of the healing plant before continuing on our personal journey.

Flow brings to the fore our nurturing capacity of wholesome love - much in the way that an oak produces acorns: fruits that are protected in a cup-like base. A healthy community protects its members in a similar way. It keeps them safe so that they may grow into the fullness of their seed-bearing ripeness and ably perpetuate the cycle of life. To nurture is to care for, support and cherish. This should be the highest attainment in the relationship of a society and its citizens.

Promoting a healthy society founded on the central ethos of empathy is at the root of civilisation and development. I should point out that I use the word civilisation advisedly, not in the divisive sense promoted by racist colonial anthropologists. To substantiate my interpretation of the term, allow me to share a story from Margaret Mead, the renowned American cultural anthropologist who rose to fame in the 1960s and 70s. The story is told by Ira Robert Byock, an American physician, author, and advocate for palliative care. Begin quote: "Years ago, anthropologist Margaret Mead was asked by a student what she considered to be the first sign of civilization in a culture. The student expected Mead to talk about fishhooks or clay pots or grinding stones. But no. Mead said that the first sign of civilization in an ancient culture was a femur (thighbone) that had

been broken and then healed. Mead explained that in the animal kingdom, if you break your leg, you die. You cannot run from danger, get to the river for a drink or hunt for food. You are meat for prowling beasts. No animal survives a broken leg long enough for the bone to heal. A broken femur that has healed is evidence that someone has taken time to stay with the one who fell, has bound up the wound, has carried the person to safety and has tended the person through recovery. Helping someone else through difficulty is where civilization starts, Mead said. Byock ends by saying: We are at our best when we serve others. Be civilized." End quote

This is the essence of UBUNTU.

We need to nurture the whole person. Mental health is not about the mind alone. The mind is a facet of our being that cannot function in isolation. The mind swims in the vast ocean of our spiritual make-up, and, like a fish, dies when taken out of its enveloping environment.

When we vibrate in resonance with the fullness of being ourselves, it is like disparate shallow puddles filling up and rising to become a lake. This coalescence of consciousness signifies a state of wellbeing that is the destination of the journey into the horizon of our lives. The arts are naturally calibrated to serve this purpose through their inspiration. The correlation of the arts and healing is a manifestation of the mutuality of creative expression and wellbeing. An assured outcome of this is positive mental health.

Theatre, music, poetry, dance, etc were not separate before the Europeanisation of African arts. Improvised theatre is not new to South Africa. It has just been hidden under layers of European imposition of form. A case in point is the Kenyan woman who was afflicted by some malady. She was healed by her community forming a circle around her, while she was in the centre with a ngoma drum placed gently on her head while someone played the drum and the people in the circle clapped, sang and danced in time to the central gravitational rhythm. (See Drums The Heartbeat of Africa, by Esther Dagan - https://www.biblio.com/book/drums-heartbeat-africa-dagan-esther/d/1410450332?aid=frg&gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAjw-eKpBhAbEiwAqFL0miOIItGwv2uSvz94YvJz0dqA6oJba91h5pnPg91gzPNFtoKn2JCM4-xoCXGgQAvD_BwE)

Let us soften the barriers that stand between us and instil a greater osmotic transmission.

There's been a lot of talk recently among scientists around the world in support of the Australian biologist Jeremy Griffith's claim to have come up with the biological explanation of the human condition. He purportedly

provides solutions for - I quote - "the psychological rehabilitation of the human race". But the understanding of the human mind is not the prerogative of Western science. African healers have always known that the creative arts possess an innate predisposition for healing the mind or restoring the afflicted person's balance in the world. A simple insight into this can be found in the Nguni word **ngoma**, which has several meanings including drum, song, dance and divine healing energy.

The transformative power of the arts transcends ideology or dogma. It affects all humans at a much deeper level than tendencies such as aggression, competitiveness or egotism. At base, the arts are social. They foster gregarious behaviour among us, leading us to find that which brings us together to celebrate our commonalities, as opposed to driving us apart. This is particularly the case when the arts are not driven by limiting ideas, but motivated by our natural predisposition for the collective celebration of life in its unadulterated form. Herein will always be found the core remedy for our misalignment.

In contemporary society, overwhelmed as it is by conflict and a profound lack of tolerance among humans, the healing benefits of the arts can be witnessed in starker relief. We see more and more arts practitioners honing in more on these beneficial attributes of their craft for more productive results. There is an increased prominence of a variety of artist in our midst who is less concerned about mere entertainment, but more interested in activating the healing properties of their creative practice. Our contemporary world needs this outlook more and more.

The arts possess the power to place us at different points in the cycle of time and space so that we can tap into more fulfilling moments and recycle these into the present for our meaningful benefit. This is a form of meditation that the creative arts are imbued with. Every experience of life starts from within. The original source of our creation is within the infinite womb of the cosmos, before it sprouts its new beginning within our mother's womb, which is the microcosmic re-membering of our origination. So, we sense our world first from within, before our life emerges into the wider world. Our experience of love, compassion, peace, comfort, the reassurance of our safety all begin within the womb. When our embryonic state is threatened, more often than not by external triggers, our vulnerability is compensated for by our mother, whose heartbeat assumes a rhythmic pace that reassures the foetus. When we leave the womb at birth, we enter into the outer womb of the world; and this transition is administered by midwives and women elders in the community, who make sure that the baby is protected from too sudden exposure to influences that may impair its smooth entry. In many African cultural traditions, the baby is kept in an enclosure that is occupied exclusively by these women, and all men are prohibited from entering. During the ritual ceremony of transition, which lasts around seven days,

the baby's character will be discerned by the wise women and he or she will be given a name in accordance with these emerging qualities that tell of a deeper resonance of being. The family are at liberty to change the name at a later stage if they so wish.

These resonances from within are the key to our spiritual and mental wellbeing. The maintenance of the harmony and balance between our inner and outer environs becomes the key to the sustenance of our whole being. So that when there is conflict in the outside world around us, it will disturb our inner peace; and we will not be able to contribute to the restoration of peace outside until we attend to our own inner harmony.

The arts, as a gift of creative human expression devoted to the attainment of existential harmony, can play an important role in healing the trauma caused by war. This is possible when we consider that the arts possess an inbuilt mechanism, by virtue of their nature, to cultivate the kind of social coalescence that benefits those who suffer from mental health problems. The cyclical rhythm of constant reintegration into the community through access to the arts leads to the absorption, and therefore dilution, of mental health problems, where everyone in the community or family shares the burden and deposits it in the dance of the healing circle.

We should never stop dreaming in our search for harmony, balance and alignment. In dreams we can stroll along a precipice without fear of falling off the edge; but in our waking state we would not normally abandon caution. The arts can transport us into a place of waking dreams without having to fall asleep, so that we may float like an abandoned ribbon that has come undone from the gift that we wish to receive. For the arts help us to lose our minds without losing our sanity.

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