

Paradise Lost: Navigating in Search of a National Moral Compass



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South Africa is in a state of ferment and the country is struggling to overcome a fractured political, economic, social and moral landscape. It is the social malaise of crime, in all its negative ramifications that unremittingly violates the majority of the population. On a daily basis we hear about the excesses of crime against person and property.

We are moving towards a state of anarchy and lawlessness where value for life is diminishing frighteningly and moral degeneration has surreptitiously snuck in through the back door to undermine the very foundations of the nation's soul. We have lost our humanity, our streets and our neighbourhoods. We are in a perpetual state of *déjà vu* - we hear about crime, read about crime and have either experienced the horrors of crime first hand or know of someone or a close relative who was brutalised by violent crime. It has become a way of life, as morbid as it may seem. We are relentlessly enveloped by reports of criminal activity that at times leaves one feeling violated, exasperated, and desperate.

The critical question is what drives the criminal who has lost his or her moral bearing to commit crime, whether petty or violent? In a quest to respond to this rhetorical question and shed some light on the subject matter, I refer to a conversation I had with a colleague who left academia to find a niche in the corporate world dealing with white collar crime.

He related the story of a young recruit whom a corporate had hired. He had shown promise. Within a few months of settling into his position, the employee committed fraud and was the subject of an internal investigation. In an attempt to understand the mindset of the fraudster, my colleague began to delve into the background of the culprit, only to find that he was living a 'high' lifestyle. He was the owner of a new and well-known brand of car. The lifestyle audit revealed that the monthly payment of his car exceeded his monthly salary. His family background review also suggested that he had come from a 'broken' family and his life growing up was difficult, fraught with many socio-economic problems. My colleague then enquired whether the employee felt any remorse for the crime he had committed. His response was curt but telling. He replied that whilst he felt remorse for the misdeed he had committed, he needed to 'live' – similar to his peers and role models who were living the good life - in most cases, a lifestyle sponsored by the outcomes of crime.

My colleague's prognosis for the fraudster's future was even more worrying. He was of the opinion that the youngster was part of a 'lost generation' and that due to circumstances beyond his control he would most likely continue towards a life of criminal behavior. For example, in South Africa, a study conducted by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention showed that young people, who have been victims of crime were six times more likely to commit a crime than those who have not been victimised. Mamphela Ramphele in her book *Laying Ghosts to Rest* views this as living with 'ghosts of the past'. The majority of the so called 'lost generation' is living with the horrors of the present. They are living against the

backdrop of unemployment, poverty, hunger and countless social ills. According to Ramphele,” we are now living in a society permeated by a culture of egoism, personal entitlement, personal enrichment, corruption and moral relativism” where *ubuntu* has been thrown out of the proverbial door.

Reversing the decline of society as a force for moral regeneration and positive transformation will be exceptionally difficult. But since the youth and a promising future free from crime are ours to lose, they are also ours to reclaim. Our recent experience has shown that the destruction of the social and moral fabric of society through crime is easy. Its re-creation is much more difficult – it will take patience, tolerance and a concerted effort on the part of all concerned about the future of our country. There are no silver bullets.

Moreover, crime prevention measures with a strong focus on youth therefore have great potential to reduce violence and crime rates across society. By addressing the root causes of youth crime and strengthening young people's resilience to risk factors, prevention efforts can reduce youth's susceptibility to crime, and thus increase safety for all of society.

As much as the prevailing fractured social milieu of South Africa is disconcerting, in hope, I revert to the Chinese meaning of the word ‘crisis’ which also suggests ‘opportunity’. Whilst we may not be able to do much in terms of mitigating the trauma of the present generation's past, we certainly should as parents, guardians, other concerned stakeholders, and civil society at large intervene in the education process in order to foster a moral and values-based civic education.

It is imperative as a nation to realise that civic and values-based education is essential to sustain our country's future. The habits of the mind, as well as the habits of the heart are the dispositions that inform not only the democratic and human rights ethos of a country but also the intrinsic values of good citizenship. They are not simply inherited. Each new generation is a new cohort of population that must acquire intrinsic ethical and moral values and knowledge, learn the skills, and develop the traits of character that are underscored by a constitutional democracy. These dispositions must be fostered and nurtured by word and study and by the power of example. Democracy and respect for life, human rights and social justice must be consciously reproduced, generation after generation.

Civic and a values-based education, therefore, should be a prime concern in our education system – at all levels. There is no more important task than the development of an informed, effective, and responsible citizenry. Democracies are sustained by citizens who have the requisite knowledge, skills, dispositions and intrinsic values. It is critical, therefore, that parents, educators, and members of civil society make the case and demand for the support of civic and values-based education from all segments of society and from the widest range of institutions and governments. Failure to do so will condemn our nation to the backwaters of the global community.

As the late President of India, Dr. Abdul Kalam said, “If a country is to be corruption and crime free and become a nation of beautiful minds, I strongly feel there are three key societal members who can make a difference. They are the father, the mother and the teacher”.

Finally, this article has aimed to provide one response to the ongoing malaise of national crime and elaboration of some of the best ways to address the issue.

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