

Source: STAR

Date: 12-Oct-2006

Topic: 15

Ref No: 14608



1

ID: 03394271-01 Source Page: 16

'Take what you want, just don't hurt us'

COMMENT

JONATHAN JANSEN



We have raised our tolerance bar on crime to an absurd level

The sickening sound of breaking glass at 4am shocked us from a deep sleep to the realisation that we were about to become the latest victims of gratuitous violence in South Africa.

Panic buttons are pressed to summons security companies and police alike, and hopefully to scare the brazen thieves into flight. And then you wait, and pray.

Within minutes the security company arrives; five hours later, the Brooklyn police show-up. I am beyond angry ...

"I could have been dead by now," I tell the two nonplussed policemen. To which one replies: "I know what you mean ... but we could not find the keys to the van."

In those moments when your life hangs in the balance, you begin to gain insights that do not come easily in the humdrum of life. I understood clearly that security companies are 100 times more efficient than the police bureaucracy - and that the middle classes are paying, yet again, for something that every South African should enjoy: the right to security.

South African citizens are being picked off daily by fearless criminals with unprecedented ease. What we are seeing is

akin to snipers taking their time to randomly hit innocent civilians, knowing that they will not be caught. If they are caught, they are very likely to be released because of the incapacity and incompetence of the police. "Should we take fingerprints?" the police ask me.

Day after day, the morning newspapers carry brutalising stories of yet another family held ransom in their homes while thieves took their time collecting their material possessions. Why rush? The police are not going to show-up. These days, families are simply relieved to still be alive after a robbery; they hope their daughters and wives are not raped; they pray that debilitating, life-long injury is not their fate. We have raised the tolerance bar to "take what you want, just leave us alone".

Is this the kind of democracy we should be prepared to settle for? I don't think so.

One of the joys of my life is to work with high school youth on the subject of our country, their future and the importance of hope.

At my annual workshop with girls from a prominent Afrikaans high school in Pretoria, I took them through the importance of learning to cross borders in a racially

divided society and in a very dangerous world.

These bright young women were, as usual, delightfully honest and brutally frank at the same time. Then I got one of those questions that usually compel me to call for a short break while I recover and take time to think about my response.

"Professor," said the Grade 10 student, "I agree with what you say... but how am I supposed to cross borders to someone who represents to me the people who almost killed me in a violent hijacking?"

I choked up, recognising the pain in her voice and the unquestionable desire to reconcile. This was not the moment to tell the young girl that one black face does not represent all of us; it certainly was not the time to give her statistics instructing that more black citizens are victims of violent crime than white South Africans; or that some categories of crime, if you can believe the minister of safety and security, are in decline.

No, her question went to the heart of a problem we seldom recognise: the impact of crime and violence on the prospects for reconciliation.

It is difficult enough to bring South Africans together after our violent and divisive past; it is infinitely more difficult when prejudices and stereotypes are inflamed through violent experiences with the other. The quality and durability of our democracy is directly threatened by the inability of government to stem this rising tide of violence.

What is clear to me is that there is a distinct lack of urgency on the part of government to resolve the crime problem. When a few children get shot at an Amish school, the American president calls for a summit on school violence. When South Africans get killed and maimed, the politicians contest the crime statistics in the media. It is hard not to conclude that such attitudes demonstrate official contempt for ordinary people.

A doctor gets killed in her surgery; a prosecutor is stabbed in the courts; a baby is shot on her mother's back; a driver is killed in her car. The fatal stabbing of one student by another in a Johannesburg school is not a school problem. It is the problem of a violent country.

■ Professor Jonathan Jansen is dean in the faculty of education at the University of Pretoria.