

I AM UBUNTU

Wesley Douglas

“Where you begin in life does not define where you end up”

My journey of self-reinvention in a changing South Africa

An Autobiography

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Table of Contents

Author's Note	5
Prologue	11
1. A Beginning	18
2. Escaping Victim Mentality	25
3. Change Your Environment	36
4. The Power of Volunteerism	41
5. Rainbow Nation	47
6. Highs & Lows	53
7. Whatever It Takes	61
8. Grab Hold of Opportunity	67
9. Don't Lose Sight of Your Dream	72
10. Take a Stand	81
11. Origins	88
12. Parenthood, the Ultimate Reinvention	96
13. Aftermath, the NCOP Seat	104
14. Life & Limb	111
15. Things Aren't Always as They Seem	120
16. Vindication	128
17. Fulfilling a Lifelong Dream	134
18. Africa on the Rise	146
19. Reinvention, Ambitions Can Change	157
20. Helping Humanity	170
21. Hand Up not Hand Out	175
22. Falling on Hard Times	180
23. Bouncing Back	187
24. Economic Equality Hitman	195
25. New Start in Pretoria	212
26. Five Stages of Grief	218
27. The African Carbon Trade Exchange	225
28. A New Turning Point	233
29. Thirteen Guiding Principles of Ubuntuism	243
Generosity	245
Hospitality	246
Friendliness	247

Respect	249
Honesty, Openness and Transparency	255
Love, Compassion, Empathy and Patience	258
Self-sacrifice	261
Communitiy	264
People Who Embody the Spirit of Ubuntu	267
Conclusion	274
Acknowledgment	278
About Wesley Douglas	279
Sources	281

AUTHOR'S NOTE

“Where you begin in life does not define where you end up”

I am an African and though I have travelled extensively I have lived in Southern Africa all my life. It is the birthplace of Ubuntu where it is more than just a philosophy or passing fad, it is a way of life. Ubuntu can be seen both as a worldview, philosophy and life lens and is also a derivative of a collection of African principles and sayings that have permeated African daily life for generations. Ubuntu is an Nguni Bantu word which roughly translated means “Humanness; being human; or oneness” I come from South Africa that is an immensely diverse country where we have 11 official languages and several distinctly different tribes, ethnic groups, religions and defined racial groups to which immigrants from all over the continent have flocked for generations. As Africans Ubuntu speaks to a shared core value and an ancient principle of togetherness, neighbourliness and goodwill to all humankind where we place the interests of the individual on par with the interest of all of us as a group. It is a principle that has helped us heal the wounds of the apartheid past in our very recent history and helped us unify our once deeply divided nation.

I was born into apartheid South Africa as a product of a date rape, a crime of passion and hatred so vile I was orphaned and given up for adoption in the Cape Flats. If I were born today I would have been aborted and would never have existed and the knowledge of being given up for adoption was with me for most of my life with the inner understanding that I was not good enough and was a mistake. Despite this inauspicious start in life I was adopted into a family of six children where I was the youngest and only boy. My sisters and mother were the strength and love of my life. Growing up I have managed to achieve great things a child from my community in Africa during that period should never have been able to and I believe that sharing my story will help thousands of others in similar or worse backgrounds

transcend the natural order of things and the cycle of poverty and unfulfilled potential and dreams they face daily. I was fortunate to be adopted into a family that took me in knowing my circumstances and loved me despite it but this was only the start of my life journey and it is what comes next that will hopefully inspire and encourage you to pursue your hopes, dreams and desires by showing you how I did it and how I still do it till today.

Through applying the principles of self-reinvention and adhering to the values of Ubuntu and my personal faith, I was able to escape the systemic cycle of poverty, gangsterism, drugs and the destructive environment I was born into and exposed to growing up on the Cape Flats in South Africa. My life's journey will take you from being a luggage car driver and chauffeur on the gang and drug infested flat plains of the Cape Flats to being a bodyguard to the worlds celebrities and stars, from being a spin doctor for the Deputy Mayor of Cape Town to being elected as the youngest Senator in our countries Senate, the NCOP (National Council of Provinces), at the time. I was privileged to run our city's AIDS Orphans and Street kids program yet I was also exposed to the horrors of working as a close protection operative in Baghdad (Iraq) in 2004/2005. My journey took me to stand on church platforms and speak to tens of thousands every week for years and speak into the lives of millions through the mediums of television and radio. I built an orphanage for physically challenged children which stands in Gugulethu till today and have helped thousands of business owners and entrepreneurs expand and start their own businesses. My journey took me from being a young student activist in the 1980's fighting for the political freedom of our country and the liberation of Nelson Mandela from prison as a young student to fighting for the economic liberation of our nation in a post Mandela era several decades later. I've looked after our countries prisoners and tried to reintegrate ex-offenders into society. I've been married and divorced, was poor and well off, was both powerless and unemployed and then found myself in the seat of political power in our country and each of these left an indelible mark on my life. Having escaped apartheid's grip on my mind I want to share some

of the life lessons and values like Ubuntu with the world as I believe it is a key to growing closer as a species and unifying as the human race, regardless of race, economic status, faith or creed.

Apartheid was a system of governance that tried to destroy and divide us and place one race above the rest and it was only the act of forgiveness and spirit of Ubuntu that has helped us have a bloodless transfer of power from a brutal regime to a peaceful and democratic state without a civil war or revolution. It was Ubuntu that helped us heal the wounds of deep racial division and gave birth to the concept of the Rainbow Nation. It was the spirit of Ubuntu that created the first government of national unity which produced one of the most progressive constitutions in the world and brought about reconciliation through the Truth and reconciliation Commission.

Whilst we are all different in South Africa, the notion that under all the obvious racial, tribal and religious differences, we are all the same and are co-dependent on each other in the land of our birth, has underpinned South Africa's rise from darkness and obscurity and being a global pariah into being a globally recognised example of unity in the midst of diversity and a nation of people with the national will to collectively deal with controversial issues that affect the whole.

Ubuntu to me and many Africans is about seeing ourselves as more than just individuals chasing our individual dreams and desires in the rat race of life, it is also about seeing ourselves as part of a community impacted by what others do around us as well and finding a way to balance out each other's rights versus the rights of the whole.

There is a phrase in Sesotho that says "Motho ke motho ka batho." which roughly means "A person is a person through other people." In other words our personhood is tied up in the personhood of others and that we should treat others as we would want ourselves to be treated. The spirit of Ubuntu is found even in day to day life and mundane everyday conversation such as greetings in Shona (quoted after Nussbaum 2003):

“Mangwani, marara sei?” — “Good morning, did you sleep well?”

“Ndarara, kana mararawo.” — “I slept well, if you slept well.”

“Marara sei?” — “How has your day been?”

“Ndarara, kana mararawo.” — “My day has been good if your day has been good.”

As can be seen by the greetings the interdependence is carried through the manner of the greeting where one person’s wellbeing is connected to the others.

Ubuntuism espouses that we are all intrinsically interconnected, made to function as one cohesive unit across the globe. In other words whether as a person or as a business what we do impacts others and whilst we pursue our own visions and dreams and goals we have to be cognisant of the community we are a part of and fit what we do into what’s in the best interest of the community as a whole. We have to be mindful of others and consider our impact on others even right down to the environment we live in, the animals and plants we depend on and the planet we live in.

John Mbiti was quoted as saying about Ubuntu:

“I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.”

Also, “I am, because of who we all are”, meaning I am an amalgamation of the influence of all the humans I’ve experienced.

In an African community we are not asked to sacrifice our own good for the sake of others but are asked to live our own lives with a greater good of the community in mind. I would like to equate “community” as meaning a group of people, collective or a business. Ubuntu is a way of life for us as Africans and as such filters into every part of our daily lives. I therefore am writing this book using Ubuntu as a lens through which I have looked at my life and lived my life both knowingly and unknowingly over decades.

I can paint you a rose coloured picture of my life and try and just be inspiring and pretend as if I am mostly a man of great character and integrity and am innocent of wrong doing and try and hide my flaws. But in truth I am a very flawed and conflicted man and yet, I believe I have done the best I could with what I had despite making mistakes along the way and have a platform based on that to make an input into others' lives. I am now content and happy and at peace because I have learned that no matter what you achieve or what you do, the world keeps turning with or without you and all we can do is find our place within it. The truth is that we are born into the world as blank slates or empty canvasses. None of us are born as racists or bigots or anti-Semites or religious fundamentalists, we are conditioned to think this way and it is the people and society around us that paint the mental picture we are raised with us children. I am not an entirely good or bad man, I am somewhere in the middle and I have had to make peace with that because for the longest time I felt I had to be or project the best most exemplary beyond reproach version of myself, whether it was the truth or not, as long as I kept up the appearance of being the perfect leader or politician or pastor or husband. The pendulum of life has swung from one extreme to another and I have seen amazing highs and terrible lows. All in all the majority of us all judge ourselves harshly in life and sometimes we are our own worst enemy but we are also our greatest strength, our own greatest motivator and greatest mental liberators.

I know that whilst I made mistakes I also did good and often made lemonade from the lemons life gave me. Some circumstances were thrust upon me by external things outside of my control but some things were a consequence of choices I made. All in all my life does not make sense in the traditional societal order of things. I should have stayed a poor uneducated black kid from the dusty gang and drug infested streets of Cape Town, South Africa but I managed to escape that. My journey at times is inexplicably inspirational and at times extremely vulnerable and honest. I have learnt that it is the war within and how I responded to the battle for my own soul that has determined what kind of man I am and will become and caused either greatness to shine from within or depression and

darkness to cloud my life. Courage is not the absence of fear but the ability to stand strong in the face of fear and overwhelming odds. Similarly a man cannot be judged by whether he succeeds or fails or rises or falls, it is what we do when we get to the top or when we find ourselves broken and laid low that defines our character and determines what kind of person we are. The will to get up when we are knocked down is more telling than how we celebrate our success. I believe that life is a journey, not a destination and that at times we take wrong turns, get waylaid in life and get lost but then there are also times where we arrive at the most amazing and beautiful places and meet the most amazing people that enrich and fulfil us as human beings.