

## **Rustenburg Girls' High School 125 Founders' Day Speech**

by Marianne Thamm - 15 March 2019

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Good morning all

To those of you who have come from afar to be here to attend this special 125<sup>th</sup> Founders Day assembly of Rustenburg Girls' High School.

To Principal Michael Gates the Founders Day committee,

Geila Wills for cornering me in the park while we walked our dogs

All teachers, staff, and past pupils

And the most important people in the room – you the learners

For you I have a gift

Not like the Oprah type of gift where you find something under your chair.

There is nothing under your chair (well I hope there is nothing under your chair)

This morning I would like to give each and every one of you a gift.

It is, I am afraid, a second-hand gift – but one that must be passed on.

Before I do so, however, I would like to apologise for the condition it is in.

Our generation and those before us, messed it up a bit.

Well, actually, a lot.

For while it is still beautiful, magical and filled with limitless potential, the world today needs healing, it needs care, it needs action, it needs resistance, it needs

vision, it needs love, it needs eternal vigilance.

Eternal Vigilance

So right here, right now, I am officially handing over to all of you

THE WORLD

This world is heavy with history...just like this school.

Today you are celebrating 125 years of the existence of this beautiful institution - Rustenburg Girls High School - but while we drink our tea and eat our cake, we must not forget the uncomfortable truth that until 1991 this school was exclusively for white children.

Many of the parents of present-day Rustenburg learners were forbidden from studying here, from living in the leafy suburbs surrounding the school and were forcibly removed to areas outside of the city designated for so-called coloured and black citizens.

There, the government applied apartheid law with violence and vigour on every aspect of life...down to who you could love, what job you could do, where you could move, how you were educated...

Today, Rustenburg Girls High School is ranked highly among the top ten schools in the Western Cape and it is open to all South Africans.

The South Africa you live in today – free and democratic and which guarantees the rights of all its citizens did not happen by accident or without considerable effort by South Africans themselves – black and white - to change the world they lived in, to fight for the right to equality, justice, freedom and dignity.

It was a battle that was finally won, at great cost, in 1994 when we, as one nation went to vote for the first time in a democratic South Africa.

But, the thing about history is that if you don't know it, it comes back to haunt you.

Every waking moment, history is bothering someone somewhere.

And the thing about history is that it is like a needy friend, if you ignore it, it repeats itself.

Each generation finds itself trapped or part of specific historical currents.

South Africa remains a country whose modern Constitution is the envy of the world. It is an extraordinary document, which embodies the rights and ideals as set out in the Freedom Charter signed in Kliptown in 1955.

Many were imprisoned, tortured and died for the ideal of a Free South Africa for all of us... and while we may have embarked on the beginning of the journey in 1994, we have not yet arrived.

Those who were are the forefront of our liberation were those arrested, imprisoned, banned, silenced and separated from family, home, friends and country. The most famous of course is the father of our new nation, Nelson Mandela.

There are many other names in that illustrious generation – black and white – who fought for justice and democracy.

South Africa today exists in a global context.

We are no longer an isolated corner of the world.

We never were.

Apartheid's South Africa found itself on a world stage dominated by the so-called Cold War, between the USSR and the United States, each one attempting to display to the world – using it as a battlefield – that their particular ideology and system of beliefs was the correct one.

Western Liberal Capitalist democracy versus Communism.

Both of them failed spectacularly.

Communism with the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

And Capitalism with the collapse of the financial system in 2008, when bankers and the financial sector stole the money of ordinary people and were bailed out by governments.

This was a turning point in the post-9/11 world.

A turning point in a world no longer guided by ideologies that pertain to human

freedom, but guided now by money and markets, profit and plunder...

A world where a political and economic elite hope to set us upon each other as we compete for ever diminishing resources and jobs.

The result is a world that is increasingly polarised – for the dark forces of history – the moneymen and women, the gun-runners, the diamond smugglers, the drug merchants, the greedy and those who lust for control over our lives are still alive and well.

With each new epoch they mutate into another shape and form and do what they have always done – prey on and antagonise ordinary people.

To accomplish this, politicians the world over, need to distract us.

They need us to fight each other while they engineer a new and sprawling global empire where a rich financial and political elite work in the shadows to undermine democracy and the will of the people.

Today we find ourselves in South Africa – fragile as we are – caught up in another global battle between superpowers but only this time it is taking place in a liminal space – the internet.

You are the first generation to find yourselves existing in two places at the same time, the real physical world, and Cyberspace.

You need only look at the global rise of strongmen like Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Jacob Zuma, Turkey's Recep Erdoğan, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Victor Orban in Hungary...

The right wing is on the rise in Austria, England, France, Germany, Sweden, Italy.

And South Africa?

Here we see the final desperate kicks of a parasite, which grew in the heart of our democracy.

We are at a pivotal moment in South Africa.

What has happened here is that this global network of wealthy criminal syndicates targeted our young Democracy...from all over the world they came to

sell us guns and armaments we could not afford and did not need.

They came to do business – to corrupt a political class in order to Hoover up billions in public funds to enrich themselves.

These so-called businessmen and politicians exist in a moral vacuum.

They do not care about the wellbeing of the citizens who have elected them. They are endeavoring to carve up the world into nationalist enclaves – enclaves that exclude people and render them “refugees” or “immigrants” - enclaves where a small group of people decide who belongs and who does not.

This is a swing towards dangerous Ethnic Nationalism.

This is the most dangerous form of nationalism as it always inevitably leads to violence, war, disruption and the dismantling of what passes for everyday life.

This morning we woke to the horrible news of an attack on two mosques in New Zealand. 40 people died in the attack.

In Europe – a genocidal continent where 55 million people died in World War 2, that is more than are alive in South Africa today, there is rising anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, homophobia and racism.

Someone somewhere needs us to hate each other.

When it comes to this, South Africa is ahead of the global curve.

We are a country of extraordinary diversity – what is required of us here, then is not murderous Ethnic nationalism – like that of the Nazis, the apartheid government, Stalin in the USSR...

What is required is Civic Nationalism.

Civic Nationalism is one in which everybody – no matter your culture, your religious beliefs, your sexual orientation, the colour of your skin, - belongs to the greater body of the “nation”.

Civic Nationalism binds people in a unity that is loyal to the Constitution and the rule of law, where each one of us is protected and guaranteed rights and freedoms.

It is important then for you, as the custodians of this South Africa and world that I have just gifted you today to ensure that these important Human Rights are not eroded; that we do not allow politicians to set us upon each other and while we fight and bicker, they steal...and plunder.

I am extremely heartened by your generation. When I look at you and your hopes and dreams, I find comfort in that you do not want the world to continue along its present course.

You must never forget it was young people, scholars and learners like yourself, who rose up in 1976 to resist the imposition by the Apartheid government of Afrikaans as a language of instruction.

Today it is young people, like the 16-year-old Swedish climate change activist, Gretha Thunberg, who has ignited a Global Movement for Climate Action. For this, she has been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize.

Hers is a movement that has spread rapidly into an international movement for change, a prod to the conscience of ruthless consumer markets to find a new way of being in the world, one that does not encourage consumption and with it, the destruction of the environment.

Who can forget Pakistani activist Malala Yousafzai, who rose to prominence in 2009 when she began to document her life in Pakistan after the Taliban occupation.

Gunmen who feared her bravery and resistance shot her in the face in 2012 in an attempt to assassinate her.

She almost died but survived and is today one of the world's most inspiring young leaders – fighting for equality in all spheres of life. She has addressed the United Nations, Harvard – she has met presidents and kings...

We think also of young people of Parkland in the United States who rose up to protest mass shootings at schools in that country.

There is Elin Ersson, another Swede, who refused to sit down on a Gothenburg flight until a man being sent to Afghanistan was removed, as he would most certainly be killed on arrival.

There is American Football star Colin Kaepernick, the American football star who started the “take the Knee” movement in the United States in protest of

police brutality towards the black citizens of the United States.

South Africa today is at another turning point.

I am privileged to be part of a much wider group of South Africans, inspired by the ideals of freedom of Nelson Mandela and the ANC he once led, who have fought back against the capture of our country by a global network of criminals.

These criminals, businessmen – white and black – politicians, white and black slowly established themselves in all spheres of life after 1994. Many of those in the system were leftovers from the apartheid regime and today they are working with some in the ANC government that was Jacob Zuma's to undermine democracy and return us to an era of lawlessness and disrespect.

They have not won the battle yet, although make no mistake they will fight back...and in their fightback they hope we will turn on each other.

Do not fall for it.

I want to leave you with the thought that it was brave South Africans, young and old, black and white, who fought back against State Capture.

Civil society, the good cops, the good lawyers, the good public servants the good politicians and – I might add – journalists – who exposed the State Capture project and the damage it has done to South Africa.

These are South Africans who believe in Civic Nationalism...that together, in all our glorious diversity, - we are one South Africa.

All around us are commissions of enquiry, which is bringing what those of us who are journalists have known, into the light...

It is the rule of law and the constitution that allows this.

Never before has the world stood on the threshold of such extraordinary change...There is a cascade of information there for the taking at your fingertips.

But, that is not enough.

Information itself means nothing if you do not have the critical ability to examine and explore it.

You will be targeted by fake news, fake people and a fake economy.

Lastly, as I end

I wish you strength in the struggle ahead, for it will be that, a struggle. I hope that on this journey the extraordinary South Africans who have come before you, four of which are recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize, will inspire you: Luthuli, Mandela, de Klerk and Tutu.

I also hope the spirit of the generation of 1976 will inspire you.

I hope that history does not hobble you...that if you were part of a class or race that was privileged you will come to understand the struggle of those, who for centuries were oppressed and dispossessed...and to align yourselves with the new struggle for economic justice.

South Africa is not a poor country – it is an unequal one.

Politicians, sadly, have worked hard to keep it that way.

Do not let them win.

Wherever you go, uphold the values of the Constitution and what makes you uniquely South African.

Be proud, do not be afraid, help where you can, give where you can, speak out where you must.

Learn to speak each other's languages, explore the wisdoms of African cosmology and philosophy...celebrate the differences that make us unique.

The four values of Rustenburg Girls' High School will help to carry you through life: Integrity, acceptance, respect and kindness

Most important of them all is kindness... for without kindness you cannot have respect, acceptance or integrity.

Go forth into the world young hearts and minds...hold these values close...rely on each other... do not let anyone divide you along any line...your deepest connection is your humanity.



