

## THINKING ABOUT RESTITUTION

**I AM AN OLD, WHITE AMERICAN** living in South Africa. In Africa, I am seen by many here as a “White,” part of an evil tribe that took the land, culture, and souls of the continent’s original settlers; a tribe that makes me privileged the world over just because I am white. Now, restitution rages as an idea whose time has come, and an increasingly common belief is that anyone with non-native ancestors and some economic status—especially white people—owes something to those whose ancestors would be considered of the local tribe. I have been asked what I think about it.

**PAUL SUTHERLAND** is a Professor at Nelson Mandela University and Chairman of Utopia Foundation & STEPi, which works to create a world where every child and every adult can go to bed feeling happy, well fed, safe, and optimistic about tomorrow. He can be reached at paul@stepiedu.com.

Paul engaging with students and parents in Soweto South Africa.



UMINATHI MACINGWANE

Let me say first that I do not identify with the “White” tribe label. I see myself as part of a tribe that includes each person in the world. Seeing an individual white, Black, Muslim, or Republican person or any group as a cohesive culture is easier than seeing ourselves reflected in each person, each person being a unique child of creation. But such ease is not helpful in solving our real problems. Quite the opposite.

Secondly, I do believe we owe something. We owe the truth.

We owe taking the time to know the deep, long, hard, exhausting, nuanced, complex, and unknowable truth. An overused proverb sourced here as ancient African wisdom holds true everywhere: “A lie has many variations. The truth—none.” As a Professor at Nelson Mandela University in South Africa’s Eastern Cape, I could be tempted to create a story claiming that those words were first spoken in Xhosa thousands of years ago by a Thembu elder who just happened to be one of Mandela’s own ancestors. Making such stuff up is fun. But I owe the truth. And so do you. Such hard-earned wisdom is likely much older than any person anyone has heard of today.

Worldwide, there is a movement to reconcile past injustices—which is admirable—but the best we can do now is to discover and to teach what happened: the truth, something our best intentions cannot change. We should also accept that trying to figure out who was a victim and who should benefit today is a matter of perception, circumstances, and opinion, and is anchored in our culture and view of the world. Each and every person can look back and

# The truth is that we must quit dividing up the world into those who have lost and those that haven't, victims and perpetrators, blessed and not blessed.

find injustice. In the vast expanse of human time, our forbearers have all cherished and lost sacred lands, been slaves and masters, won and lost wars, and have made up countless stories about how we are better or worse than others.

The truth is that we must quit dividing up the world into those who have lost and those that haven't, victims and perpetrators, blessed and not blessed. We need to tell the fundamental truth—that we are one family living on one earth—and we need to figure out what we want for our entire human family. We are not starting from scratch. The United Nations has already come up with goals for all humanity: basic human rights including liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work, and the right to education. Arguing about who is the biggest victim and thus deserves more now gets us farther from those goals. It does not heal wounds. It leads to indifference, entitlement, and anger.

## WHAT IS APPROPRIATE RESTITUTION?

I am an educator and the son of two educators. I worked in finance for my career, helping people be financially successful. What I know from experience is that giving someone with little self-control, humility, or financial education a million dollars is not giving them financial security. On the other hand, providing a character-building education—one that scaffolds good relationship and communication skills, nurtures curiosity and self-discipline, provides everyday math, reading, writing, and problem-solving skills, and lets them know that they

are important, worthy, and on this earth for a purpose—will allow any person to succeed without being given a dime.

I also know that even if you teach kids well but let them think they are a special victim—singling them out as broken and thus deserving something from others—they will wallow in self-pity and victimhood and make little progress toward a responsible, happy, successful life.

As Americans, we should quit pretending that we all have anywhere near the same opportunities. We don't share opportunities because we don't provide the same education. When you consider our "haves" and "have-nots," all you need to look at is their education. As a society, the US spends around \$14,000 a year educating our young—and wealthy families spend much more all the way through college. Nevertheless, kids in America have enormous opportunities compared to many other kids around the world.

I am biased toward virtue-infused, character-based education in part because I live in South Africa now and have lived in Uganda and Nicaragua. I am a biased because I have been immersed in countries that could be kind, happy, just, and compassionate Edens for all—but are not. In Uganda, the average spent on education per child is \$57. In Uganda, 80 percent of teachers teaching 10-year-olds are illiterate. In South Africa, 80 percent of 10-year-olds can't answer basic questions or draw inferences from what they read. So how do Uganda and South Africa build workable societies when their own governments and external "partners" like Russia and China wish to plunder and exploit

their people and natural resources? They don't. Instead, the governments keep people ignorant and control the "truth." World leaders know that an educated populace would have second thoughts about what is happening around them. These are places where education is rare, and a few dollars will buy votes for people who will continue to steal from them.

## CHANGE THE WORLD

To change the world, I vote for education, starting with early childhood education. Countless studies show that success comes from what happens in the early years of our lives. Did we receive love from and feel connected to caregivers that nurtured us, listened to us, talked to us, made us feel safe, and were delighted in having us be a part of their lives? We know that if a child grows up in an environment with threats and violence and without enough food, surrounded by loud music, drugs, alcohol, filth, and anger, they will have a tough time learning in school, forming healthy relationships, finding good consistent employment, and raising their own kids.

When I ask mothers in Uganda or South Africa what they want for their kids, they say education. They realize education is the key to success—not money, food, or a handout for some past injustice. These children need to be who we see in our mind's eye when we think about fairness and restitution—and how we can love the world better. We who have been given much must see beyond victimhood and see the potential of each child, and know in our hearts that they are part of "our family"—and do something about it. **S+H**