

**LECTURE BY FORMER PRESIDENT KGALEMA MOTLANTHE AT THE 2ND ANNUAL WALTER SISULU
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“I Will Go Out Singing”: Walter Sisulu’s Courage and the Task of Young People Today

- The Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the Vaal University of Technology (VUT), Professor Stephen Khehla Ndlovu;
- Programme Director, Ms Carol Bower;
- Deputy Chairperson of the Sisulu Foundation for Social Justice, Dr Pali Lehohla;
- CEO of the Sisulu Foundation for Social Justice, Mr Mphumzi Mdekazi;
- Patron of the Sisulu Foundation for Social Justice, Dr Lindiwe Nonceba Sisulu;
- Leaders of the Walter and Albertina Sisulu Foundation for Social Justice;
- Members of the Sisulu family;
- Distinguished guests;
- Ladies and gentlemen:

It is a privilege to deliver this reflection as part of the 2nd Annual Walter Sisulu Lecture. This occasion assumes particular significance in a year that marks fifty years since the Soweto Uprising of 16 June 1976; the 40th Anniversary of the constitution and the 1946 African mineworkers strike amongst others.

Anniversaries are not merely dates by which societies measure the passage of time. They are moments in which the past returns to measure us. They compel us to ask whether the sacrifices of earlier generations have been translated into institutions, relationships and forms of public life worthy of their courage.

The conjunction of Walter Sisulu’s life and the fiftieth anniversary of the Soweto Uprising reveals a profound dialectic between inheritance and invention. Each generation receives a moral inheritance from those who came before it. Yet no generation can simply reproduce the past. It must give inherited principles a form appropriate to the conditions of its own time.

For instance, the students of 1976 did not inherit a completed struggle. They inherited a political tradition, a language of resistance and an unfinished responsibility. The same obligation now falls upon the young people of the present.

To remember Walter Sisulu is to confront this paradox. He was shaped by a history he did not choose, yet he became one of those rare individuals through whom history altered its direction. He was both a product and creator of history.

A memorial lecture must hold these two truths together.

If we present Sisulu only as a product of his circumstances, we diminish his agency. If we present him only as an exceptional hero, detached from the movements, relationships and institutions that sustained him, we distort the meaning of his leadership.

The purpose of remembrance is therefore not to sanctify.

Hagiography places its subject beyond judgment and, in doing so, removes that person from the human world of uncertainty, disagreement and difficult choice. Walter Sisulu does not need to be rescued from history. His stature becomes clearer when we return him to history: to changing circumstances,

contested strategies, political risk, moral responsibility and consequences that could never be known in advance.

I shall therefore not attempt to recount his life chronologically, from birth to death. Instead, I propose that we read his life through three philosophical propositions.

These propositions allow us to understand Walter Sisulu not merely as a participant in the struggle against apartheid, but as a thinker in action: a person whose philosophy was expressed less through formal treatises than through the character of his leadership, the relationships he cultivated and the consequences he was prepared to bear.

Dignity and the Refusal of Imposed Inferiority:

Walter Max Sisulu was born on 18 May 1912, in the same year in which the South African Native National Congress—later the African National Congress—was founded. His birth came two years after the formation of the Union of South Africa and one year before the passage of the Natives Land Act of 1913. These dates do not suggest that history had predetermined his life. They establish, rather, the political world into which he entered.

The Union proclaimed the political unification of South Africa while excluding the African majority from the main body politic. The Land Act did not begin the long process of dispossession, but it consolidated and legalised an older colonial practice by severely restricting African access to land. Visible conquest was increasingly supplemented by administration, classification and law. The violence of dispossession acquired the language of orderly government.

Sisulu therefore entered a society in which an African could be indigenous to the land and yet treated as an outsider within its political community. This was one of colonialism's central contradictions: those most deeply rooted in the country were rendered politically alien within it. Yet oppressive conditions do not mechanically produce a Walter Sisulu.

To some, the same conditions may produce submission, adaption, despair or rebellion. The philosophical significance of Sisulu's life lies not only in what history did to him, but in the manner in which he responded to what history placed before him.

Frantz Fanon helps us understand that colonialism is not simply the seizure of territory or the control of labour. It also attempts to reorganise the psychological and moral world of the colonised. It seeks to persuade the oppressed that their social position reflects their natural worth.

Steve Biko would later insist that political liberation must therefore include the recovery of self-definition. A people cannot become free while continuing to see themselves through categories imposed by those who dominate them.

Sisulu's life may be read as a practical expression of this struggle for human dignity. His movement from the rural Eastern Cape to Johannesburg brought him into direct contact with the exploitation of black workers and the severe limitations imposed upon African advancement. He worked in mines, factories, bakeries and domestic service. Yet Johannesburg also introduced him to an emerging world of workers, intellectuals, professionals and political organisers. His work as an estate agent is significant in this regard.

In a society in which property ownership was closely connected to social standing, independence and citizenship, assisting black families to secure homes was more than an ordinary commercial activity. It placed Sisulu at the intersection of material aspiration and racial exclusion.

The deeper point, however, is that he did not treat his own advancement as an escape from the collective condition. The relationships generated through his work became part of a wider political network. Personal achievement was converted into public responsibility. Under conditions of oppression, individual success may become either a retreat from collective struggle or a resource placed at its service. Sisulu chose the latter. He refused both the humiliation prescribed by white supremacy and the seduction of private exception. He would not accept the proposition that his own progress was sufficient while the majority remained excluded.

This definition of virtue provides a useful lens through which to understand this dimension of Sisulu's life. Virtue is not a temporary emotion or an isolated act of heroism. It is a settled disposition cultivated through repeated action and guided by practical judgment.

Courage, in this understanding, is not simply the willingness to encounter danger. It is the disciplined capacity to face danger for a worthy purpose, in an appropriate manner and with an awareness of what is at stake. Sisulu's courage was of this kind. It was cumulative rather than theatrical. It was visible in the patient work of organising meetings, recruiting members, maintaining communication, resolving disagreements and carrying collective decisions into practice. It appeared in his willingness to accept restrictions, arrest and imprisonment, but also in his willingness to listen, to reconsider his views and to preserve unity among people of sometimes competing convictions.

He joined the African National Congress in 1940, encountered many black intellectuals and professionals in Johannesburg who helped establish the ANC Youth League in 1944. He became Secretary-General of the ANC in 1949, as the Youth League's Programme of Action moved the organisation towards mass mobilisation and more assertive resistance. The historical significance of these developments is well established. Their philosophical significance deserves equal attention.

Public memory is often attracted to the most visible leader: the commanding speaker, the dramatic gesture or the person who comes to symbolise an entire movement. Institutions, however, are frequently built by another kind of leadership—the organiser who connects people, recognises ability in others, creates opportunities for their development and ensures that individual talent becomes collective capacity.

Sisulu's leadership did not consist in the absence of ambition, conviction or pride. No serious political leader is without these qualities. His achievement was that he governed the self rather than allowing the self to govern the movement. His relationship with young intellectuals and professionals illustrates this quality. Sisulu recognised political potential and created an influential network of thinkers and activists, and contributed to their political development. Yet their relationship was not one of uncritical agreement. It was sustained through discussion, disagreement, correction and mutual respect.

The same may be said of some of his prominent relationships with Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Anton Lembede, Duma Nokwe, Ahmed Kathrada, Yusuf Cachalia, Dr Nthato Motlana, Ntsu Mokhehle, Dr. Diliza Mji, Es'kia Mphahlele, Zephania Mothopeng and many others. These were not merely associations with individuals who would later become famous. They reveal a philosophy of leadership.

Sisulu became significant partly because he possessed the judgment to recognise significance in others. Madiba always emphasised that Sisulu led them from behind. This may be one of his most enduring lessons for political organisation: leadership reaches its highest form not when it produces followers, but when it produces other leaders. Nor can Walter Sisulu be understood apart from Albertina Sisulu. Yet Albertina should never be presented merely as a supporting figure in Walter's political biography. She was a leader and political actor in her own right. She endured banning, detention, harassment, separation and the burdens imposed upon families by political persecution.

She remained a source of strength not only to her family, but to a wider movement—a family who in its entirety, including the children, became involved in the struggle.

Their partnership demonstrates that solidarity within the family and solidarity within the political community need not be separate moral worlds. Their home became a place of political formation, refuge and human connection in a society designed to fragment black life.

Sisulu's greatness was relational. His leadership enlarged the capacities of others. His dignity was expressed not through distance from the people, but through responsibility towards them.

Ladies and Gentlemen;

Collective Action and the Creation of Political Power:

Sisulu had a distinctive political gift. Walter Sisulu knew how to lead in the dark, from moment to moment knowing just where the spark and just how strong it may be struck. He understood that real work is the work that no one sees, and earns no remark. He possessed the ability to convert private grievance into collective purpose.

Millions of people experienced the indignities of racial domination. But indignation, however morally justified, does not automatically become political power. Anger must acquire discipline, language, strategy and organisational form.

Sisulu understood that organisation was the bridge between suffering and agency. This understanding informed the work of the ANC Youth League and the Programme of Action. The Youth League insisted that Africans should cease being treated as junior participants in their own liberation. It sought to transform the ANC from an organisation centred largely upon petitions and deputations into a mass movement capable of disciplined mobilisation.

Thus, the 1952 Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign illustrated this proposition. The campaign was significant not because isolated individuals broke unjust laws impulsively, but because thousands of volunteers acted together in a coordinated and disciplined manner. Their collective action exposed the distinction between legality and legitimacy.

The apartheid state possessed the authority to enact laws. But the volunteers asserted that the power to legislate did not automatically confer moral legitimacy upon laws designed to degrade human beings. Through disciplined defiance, people who had been treated merely as subjects of administration appeared as political agents capable of judgment. The same principle informed the Congress of the People Campaign that culminated in the adoption of the Freedom Charter at Kliptown in 1955. The Charter was more than a collection of demands and aspirations. It advanced a philosophical claim about political authorship.

People who had been spoken for insisted upon speaking.

People who had been governed without consent asserted their right to govern.

People who had been classified as objects of policy declared themselves to be the authors of a democratic future.

Sisulu's developing commitment to nonracialism must be understood within this context. He came to understand more fully that the restoration of African dignity and the creation of a non-racial democracy were not contradictory projects. At its most principled, Sisulu's nonracialism demanded the reconstruction of the political order itself.

Sisulu's leadership enlarged the moral community of the struggle while retaining its foundation in the agency of the oppressed. This required more than tolerance. It required the difficult political virtue of

learning without surrendering oneself, changing without abandoning one's ethical purpose, and forming alliances without dissolving the historical reality of oppression.

Programme Director;

The most demanding philosophical question in Sisulu's life arose when the apartheid state progressively closed the space for lawful political activity. The Sharpeville massacre of March 21st 1960, the banning of the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress, mass arrests, restrictions and the intensification of state repression fundamentally altered the terrain of struggle. The liberation movement confronted a state that used law not merely to regulate political disagreement, but to prevent the majority from participating in political life at all.

Fanon, approaching the question from a different philosophical position, compels us to recognise that colonial society is already structured by violence. The apparent peace of colonial rule is sustained through dispossession, coercion and the systematic denial of human agency. The liberation movement's decision to establish uMkhonto we Sizwe was made within this context. The initial strategy concentrated on sabotage against state installations and sought to avoid the loss of life. Yet the decision opened a new and dangerous phase of struggle, and those who made it were obliged to accept responsibility for its possible consequences.

This is the relationship between constraint and moral responsibility. The closure of peaceful political space narrowed the choices available to the liberation movement. But constrained choice remained choice. Oppression helped to explain the decision; it did not eliminate the obligation to judge, to limit harm and to account for consequences. In this connection, Walter Sisulu did not present himself as an innocent bystander carried helplessly by historical forces.

At the Rivonia Trial, he used the witness box to explain the political conditions that had produced resistance and to accept responsibility for his own participation. During several days of cross-examination, he remained composed under sustained pressure. He refused to abandon his convictions, to implicate others or to accept the premise that Africans should regard white domination as natural or lawful. The Rivonia Trial placed Sisulu and his comrades under the shadow of the gallows. The state did not merely seek to imprison them. It possessed the power to execute them and hoped, through their removal, to decapitate the liberation movement. It was under these circumstances that the resolve to go to the gallows singing acquired its profound moral meaning.

This is captured aptly in a letter written by Braam Fischer, the lead counsel in the Rivonia Trial (1963–1964):

"I must tell you of one important event. Some days before the end of argument in court, Govan, Walter and Nelson came to an early morning consultation to tell us of a decision they had taken with regard to the sentence if it turned out to be capital punishment. They had made up their minds that in that event there was to be no appeal. Their line was that, should a death sentence be passed upon them, the political campaign around such a sentence should not be hampered by an appeal for mercy...or by raising any vain hopes...We lawyers were staggered at first, but soon realised the decision was politically unassailable. But I tell you the story not because of its political wisdom. I want you to know to what incredibly brave men you and others will have to be successors."

Their willingness to face death with dignity reversed the moral relationship between judge and accused. The state placed them on trial for violating its laws; they placed the state itself before the conscience of humanity.

The court sentenced Sisulu and his comrades to life imprisonment on 12 June 1964. The regime believed that Robben Island would remove them from history. Instead, their imprisonment exposed the moral illegitimacy of the system, contributed to international solidarity and became part of the political inheritance that later generations, including the generation of 1976, would interpret in their own way. Sisulu's courage was therefore not simply the capacity to endure isolation, pain deprivation and danger. It was the capacity to preserve moral agency when coercive power attempted to reduce the field of human choice to submission or death. As it were, prison was intended to transform political agents into forgotten numbers. This posed a severe philosophical question: can political virtue survive when action is restricted, public recognition disappears and freedom seems indefinitely postponed?

Sisulu's conduct during more than twenty-five years of imprisonment suggests that leadership is not dependent upon office, visibility or applause. Robben Island was a place of deprivation, isolation, forced separation and calculated humiliation. The prisoners were removed from their families, organisations and communities. Albertina Sisulu and other family members carried burdens that political histories have too often treated as secondary. Yet the prisoners refused to allow incarceration to possess the final authority over the meaning of their lives. They transformed confinement into a space of study, debate, political education and mutual discipline. They read, taught one another, reconsidered strategies, mediated disagreements and prepared themselves intellectually for a future they could not be certain they would live to see. Education, in this sense, is not the mechanical accumulation of information. It is the cultivation of the capacity to read the world critically, to recognise the forces that shape one's circumstances and to act upon those circumstances with others.

This insight helps us understand the relationship between Sisulu's generation and the students of 1976. The Soweto Uprising was not simply a repetition of an earlier script. The students possessed their own leaders, organisations, language and political imagination. They acted against Bantu Education, the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction and an entire system that sought to determine both what black children could learn and what they were permitted to become. When the students marched on 16 June 1976, they did not merely reject a language policy. They rejected an educational order designed to reproduce subordination. Their struggle affirmed that education is never politically neutral when a society is structured by domination.

This distinction is equally important for the young people of the present.

History should not be used as a weapon with which one generation humiliates another. To ask why young people today do not reproduce the precise forms of resistance associated with 1976 is to misunderstand historical responsibility. Each generation encounters a different configuration of power and must discover forms of courage appropriate to its own circumstances.

The obligation of the present generation is not to march into precisely the same streets, confront the same police formations or speak in exactly the same political vocabulary. It is to identify where human dignity is presently denied, where agency is constrained, where institutions no longer serve the public good and where collective action is required. Young people today confront a society marked by persistent inequality, unemployment, institutional distrust and social fragmentation. They inhabit a technological world that offers unprecedented access to knowledge while also enabling manipulation, isolation and the rapid circulation of falsehood. Their task is not simply to express frustration, but to convert frustration into ethical and organised action. This is where Sisulu's example remains indispensable.

As James Baldwin put it:

"It demands great spiritual resilience not to hate the hater whose foot is on your neck, and an even greater miracle of perception and charity not to teach your child to hate."

For no progressive cause can we ever be based on hatred.

In conclusion;

Walter Sisulu was released from prison in October 1989. He was elected Deputy President of the ANC in 1991 and slowed down from its senior leadership in 1994. Walter Sisulu believed that he slowed down rather than retired. After decades of exclusion from political power, he did not treat public office as personal compensation for suffering. This final dimension of his life returns us to the meaning of virtue.

A leader's relationship to power after victory often reveals the character of the principles proclaimed during struggle. It is easier to speak of service while excluded from office than to practise restraint once office becomes available.

Sisulu understood political leadership as stewardship rather than possession.

Authority was justified only to the extent that it remained connected to the purposes for which people had struggled.

Political suffering may confer moral authority, but it does not create a permanent entitlement to govern. A liberation movement honours its history not by claiming exemption from accountability, but by subjecting itself to the ethical standards that gave the struggle legitimacy.

Sisulu's example invites us to ask whether leadership remains connected to service once political power has been attained.

Do our institutions restore the dignity and agency of the people they serve?

Does leadership create active citizens, or does it cultivate dependency?

Do political organisations develop judgment and initiative, or do they reward silence and obedience?

Do we use the history of struggle to deepen accountability, or to protect the present from criticism?

Does our invocation of unity make room for principled disagreement?

Are we capable of revising our methods without surrendering our ethical purpose?

And do those who occupy positions of authority understand that public office is held in trust rather than owned as a reward?

These questions bring the philosophical traditions considered in this lecture into a common conversation. Sisulu's life brings these propositions together in a single moral argument: freedom is not merely the removal of an oppressive government. It is the creation of social, political and human relationships in which people can become authors of their common life. Freedom means recognition of necessity. Freedom is therefore not a possession secured once and for all. It is a practice.

The Unfinished Work of Freedom:

Walter Sisulu's life cannot be reduced to a sequence of dates, campaigns, trials and prison sentences. Its meaning lies in the moral relationship among those events. His experience of racial exclusion became a commitment to human dignity. His personal advancement became a resource for collective organisation. His African nationalism developed into a non-racial vision without abandoning African agency. His courage was disciplined by responsibility. His imprisonment became a test of character rather than the termination of political meaning. His release did not become a claim to personal reward.

To memorialise Sisulu is therefore not to place him beyond criticism. It is to recover the seriousness with which he confronted political choice. He did not possess perfect knowledge. He acted under

conditions of uncertainty. He changed his views, learned through relationships, confronted disagreement and accepted responsibility for decisions whose outcomes could not be guaranteed. That is precisely what makes his life to be a remarkable example.

History does not produce heroes according to a timetable. It produces circumstances in which ordinary human beings must decide whether they will remain spectators, beneficiaries or agents. Through habits of courage, judgment, discipline and solidarity, some become equal to the demands of their time. True courage is not the absence of fear. It is the refusal to allow fear to become the author of one's decisions.

Fifty years after 16 June 1976, the question is whether the present generation can assume authorship of the future. Every generation enters history in the middle of an unfinished sentence. Sisulu's part of that sentence was written through dispossession, organisation, sacrifice, prison and the achievement of democracy.

Ours begins where his ended. The most meaningful tribute we can offer him is therefore not repetition, but continuation—not the mechanical repetition of historical forms, but the continuation of an ethical purpose. That purpose is to restore dignity where it is denied; to build collective power without extinguishing individual judgment; to place knowledge in the service of humanity; and to ensure that the struggle for freedom does not reproduce the dehumanisation it seeks to overcome.

Memory is not a debt discharged through praise. It is a responsibility assumed through conduct. Walter Sisulu remains, in this sense, more than a figure to be remembered. He remains a measure by which we may ask whether our institutions are just, whether our leadership is ethical, whether our education is liberating, and whether we ourselves have learned how to be free.

I thank you.