

# A little thought goes a long way

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Age brings wisdom, or so the adage goes. But it is, in fact, less true in some societies than in others, according to research by a Canadian professor of psychology.

Dr Igor Grossman, in a study two years ago, found that older Americans were indeed wiser than younger Americans. But he then extended his research to Asia, particularly Japan, where he found that the young were as wise as their elders, suggesting that Japanese learned wisdom faster than Americans.

The aspect of the studies published in *Psychological Science* and reported by the *Economist* that fascinated me the most was the criteria Grossman used to do his analysis: How do you measure wisdom?

He used five aspects that psychologists consider crucial components of wise reasoning. These are willingness to seek opportunities to resolve conflict, willingness to search for compromise, recognition of the limits of personal knowledge, awareness that more than one perspective on a problem can exist, and appreciation that things may get worse before they get better.

The question that struck me immediately was: How do we as a nation measure up to the five pillars of wisdom? As South Africans, do we project Zen like qualities in confronting the many problems we face as a nation? For the purpose of this analysis I will be generous and use a 20-year time frame.

## **We are not dimwits**

Once upon a time we scored pretty well on our willingness to seek opportunities to resolve conflicts and our willingness to search for compromise. In fact, we were quite brilliant at the beginning as we set about establishing our new nation. We stopped killing one another and started talking. Warring parties set aside their entrenched positions and negotiated by giving ground and adjusting their time-honoured positions, and nudged one another along until we could settle on the terms of peace.

Then, somewhere along the line, we began to lose the plot. We retreated into trenches and the sniping

began. It is difficult to name the last major compromise moment. The World Cup does not count – messing that up would have been stupid and, although we may be a stubborn nation, we are not dimwits.

On the third pillar of wisdom recognising the limits of personal knowledge – we again started off pretty well. White people began lifting their veils of ignorance and black people began the painful process of forgiving but not forgetting. A great number of Marxists as well as free marketers abandoned their blinkered boasts that there was only one true path and began tasting ideas and solutions they once considered anathema. We struck accords in the mid-1990s that would have been unthinkable in the mid-1980s.

Mercifully, much of this early legacy remains. But the masks slip from time to time and the old hectoring returns. Take Blade Nzimande's recent broadside against the banks. If he had paused, even for a moment, to consider how little he knew about the financial stability of the institutions he was attacking he might have kept quiet. But then his motive was to do damage and a desire to hit back at a man deemed to be a political opponent. This overrode whatever common sense he possesses.

### **More than one perspective**

It is harsh to judge a nation on the utterances of one man. But Nzimande's broadside was not an isolated incident. All manner of people in power forget that their knowledge is limited and pronounce on things they know little about. The media, too, sometimes forgets that there are limits to what it knows and that a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing.

Are we any better at accepting that there can be more than one perspective on a problem? It has never been a truly strong point. Since the ANC has taken up residence in the Union Buildings, there has been a singular lack of open-mindedness about alternative perspectives. Where are the alternative voices in the Cabinet? Where are the non-ANC voices in the governing of the country? Admittedly, the ANC has always been a broad church. But loyalty to the party makes lackeys of even the most thoughtful and unorthodox minds. There is clearly not a great deal of wisdom in that.

A rather stark and ugly presentation of this was the reaction of government ministers – all women – to the rape of a 17-year-old girl in Soweto. Their outrage was genuine and shared by all South Africans. But before they could gather all the facts, they went on the attack.

In the first 24 hours after the story broke condemnation was heaped on two parties: the young men, mostly boys, responsible for the horrendous incident and the girl's mother, who was accused of neglect. The first target was understandable, though arguably not very helpful; the second was unforgivable. The girl's family is considering suing Gauteng safety and security MEC Faith Mazibuko for defamation.

### **A detached approach**

The charge of neglect was a cheap shot. The facts tell a different story: of a mother without recourse to protection for her mentally disabled child; of a callous police service, which derided and ridiculed her earlier attempts to protect her child against rape; of a social security service so flimsy it cannot take care of the most vulnerable.

Why could the ministers not foresee that there may be more than one perspective on the tragedy? That, in fact, they too could face charges of neglect. Trying to score political points from the misfortune of others is more common than we might want to admit. There is nothing particularly Zen like in that.

The most difficult of the five measures of wisdom is accepting that things may get worse before they get better. I know it refers to the need to avoid frenetic and kneejerk responses to situations and demands that we take a longer-term and more detached approach.

### **Building solutions**

If we accepted that we cannot fix something this minute, this week, this month, this year, this decade, we

would be drawn into a much wiser frame of mind. We would be better positioned to build solutions bit by bit, painstakingly making sure that each piece is the right piece and in the right place. This is an eminently sensible approach, but it runs against the grain somehow. Is it not just an excuse to do nothing? Does it not simply make the continued deterioration of, say, our education system okay?

I suspect this last measure of wisdom comes as part of a package and cannot be seen in isolation. If we managed to fulfil the other preconditions to wisdom, the fifth would come naturally. Because we would know we need to seek compromises and accommodate one another; we would know we do not have all the answers and accept that a different perspective to our own might shed better light on a problem.

It would mean the end of short-termism and political point scoring. It would stop the shouting and get us started on the real stuff of fixing the broken bits bit by bit. It would take time and it would require patience because, indeed, things might get worse before they get better.