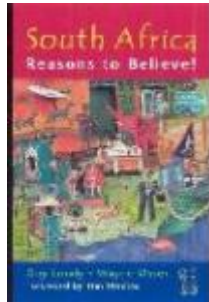


South Africa:

Reasons to Believe!

By Guy Lundy and Wayne Visser (Aardvark Press, 2003)



~ I PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE ~

We believe that all South Africans – at home and abroad – face a critical choice. It is no small matter, this choice. In fact, it is a choice upon which the very future of our young nation rests. The well-being of millions of people depends on this choice. Your own individual happiness will be determined by this choice. No small matter, indeed!

So, here it is – the choice: Either we choose to embrace South Africa with a positive, constructive and engaging spirit; or we choose to submit to pessimism, fear and misery. That's it. Nothing complicated really. A simple choice. And yet, a choice that each of us has to make, and does make (consciously or unconsciously), every day!

There is no room for 'if's' and 'but's', because the choice to be positive or negative has nothing to do with politics, or the economy, or crime. No. It has everything to do with our spirit, our heart, our attitude. Especially our attitude. In this 'cruel, crazy, beautiful world' that is embodied by South Africa, our attitude is the only thing that each of us has one hundred percent control over. Our attitude shapes our perception and our perception in turn shapes our reality. In this book we want to challenge all those who are choosing attitudes that hurt rather than heal, that destroy rather than create, that knock down rather than build up. We believe that their pessimistic attitude is neither justified nor helpful – to themselves, to others, or to the country as a whole.

On the other hand, we know that there is a rising tide of people who are fed up with all the whinging and whining; people who can see the good that is going on, but that is being ignored or downplayed by the media. These are people who want to get on and tackle the problems, rather than complain about them. They can see their own hand in shaping a better future for this country. Most of all, they feel something in their gut that is hard to explain – it is an emotion that wells up from deep inside every time they reflect on being South African. We know that these people are out there because of the way in which the idea for this book came about in the first place.

It began with the massive response from South Africans and others, living here and around the world, to a speech made by one of us (Guy), entitled 'I pledge allegiance'. The original speech was made at a Toastmasters meeting in October 2001, where it was very well received, but its real power became evident when it was sent out to a few friends by email ... who sent it out to a few of their friends by email ... who sent it on ... and on ... and on. A whole new breed of email virus! In the end, the speech was read by hundreds of

thousands of people from places as far-flung as Australia, Hong Kong, Kuwait and the USA. But they didn't just read it – it really pushed some buttons and the emails and phone calls and media interest started flooding in. The message was clear – people were thirsty for reasons to believe; to feel positive in the midst of a dry desert of pessimism that pervades the South African mindscape.

Given its pivotal role as a catalyst for this book, we want to begin our virtual journey together by quoting that speech word for word. You may even recognise it as having found its way into your own email in-box some time over the past year. Here it is ...

"I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.' Many years ago I was an exchange student in the USA, and every morning in my school, as in all schools across America, all classes came to a halt as the Pledge of Allegiance came over the loudspeaker system and every student stood to repeat these words. I was quite amazed by this display of daily brainwashing in the so-called 'land of the free'. But in hindsight it isn't actually that amazing, because we've all experienced how Americans are just so proud to be American! No matter how big their problems, and heaven knows they've got a lot of them, Americans will still spend hours telling you how fantastic their country is, and in fact how it is better than pretty much anywhere else in the world.

What a contrast then, when I later spent a few years in London, and I ended up actively avoiding other South Africans. Why? Because frankly their negativity about our homeland irritated me so much. These people, who will gladly put new South African flags on their cars and support a whole cottage industry importing biltong and NikNaks to munch on as they cheer on the Springboks at Twickenham, will spend hours telling anyone who will listen just how awful it is in South Africa, how lucky they are to be in London, and how they are never going back because it's in such a mess. At the time I put it down to the fact that they were justifying why they were holed up in their dingy little flats under grey London skies while their friends and family enjoyed the sunshine on Camps Bay beach.

However, when I came home, expecting to be greeted by the smiles of new South Africans everywhere, I was very disappointed to find that exactly the same attitude is pervasive right here. The number of people who asked me why I came back here, and why on earth I had brought my French wife with me, simply amazed me. I would have thought the answer was perfectly obvious! I was later very disturbed, although not surprised, to hear that our President found it necessary to make a point to South African businessmen that they should stop running down their own country on overseas business trips. Can anyone tell me what it is that makes sense about running down your own home to foreign people that you would like to visit here and invest here? It seems to me like inviting your boss to dinner at your house in the hope of getting a promotion but discouraging him from coming because you're a terrible cook and your dog bites.

Yes, we have problems, but so does everybody else. Sure, the Rand is down the toilet, but if you look closely enough you'll see that just about every other emerging market country has suffered from the same woes – and that includes Australia and New Zealand, which everyone seems in such a rush to get to. And aren't we lucky that we aren't living in Argentina with their currency crisis? Sure, our neighbour, Zimbabwe, is run by a mad, despotic fool, but man am I glad that I don't live in Pakistan right now. We have AIDS, and we also have an army of people trying to find a cure for it – possibly more vigorously than anywhere else since we have the most to lose from it. We do have corruption, and the Americans have George W. Bush, whether they like it or not. We've got all sorts of problems, yes, but must we be so hard on ourselves?

In many ways we are far better off in South Africa as a whole than we have been at any time in our history. Our people are getting educated and housed at a world-beating rate, we have amongst the world's cheapest electricity, our inflation is the lowest it's been in my lifetime, we have an economic growth rate, and there is development everywhere you look. We have so much going for us; we have so many good people, such an interesting mix of cultures; we have so much beautiful countryside and natural resources that we can draw from – we really have such a bright future ahead of us.

Let us concentrate on the positive things that surround us every day: the sunshine, the people, the beauty, the progress. Constantly criticising our country can only do harm – for you personally, your personal feeling of happiness and well-being, and for the country that you know from the bottom of your heart that you love, otherwise you wouldn't be here.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I implore you: do not run down South Africa, neither at home nor overseas. Become ambassadors for your country. Welcome foreign guests and point out how far we have come and how far we're going to go – how they need to watch out for us on the world stage. And if you're overseas on business or holiday (if you can afford it), tell people how much South Africa has going for it, and invite them to come and see for themselves.

I have devised my own pledge of allegiance and I'd like to repeat it to you now:

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the Republic of South Africa and to the interesting people, places and idiosyncrasies for which it stands, one nation under several religions, languages and cultures, yet indivisible, with freedom, basic needs and progress for all.

That is my pledge of allegiance to my home, our home. I pledge to help others see what is so good about it. Join me in being positive about our country and about ourselves as South Africans. Let's get out there and spread the word so that we can eradicate negativity and replace it with a wave of positive South African patriotism."

Well, as we said, people really did get out there and spread the word, but the speech was just the spark. Around the same time, a small group of visionary South Africans had organised the country's first National Be Positive (B+) Day on 2 November 2001. It was a rallying cry that even President Mbeki took up. Then we were contacted by the Proudly South African organisation, which was just getting off the ground as one of the concrete outcomes of the 1998 Presidential Jobs Summit. Next, we were introduced to the Brand South Africa initiative – an initiative proposed by President Mbeki's International Investment Council, made up of international business leaders, who recognise that South Africa needs an image overhaul. And so the fire continued to spread!

The interest in being positively South African was definitely heating up, and we sensed that it was part of something bigger. More than just a feel-good blitz, we were standing on the cusp of a turning point in attitudes. Malcolm Gladwell wrote a book called *The Tipping Point*, in which he compared the spread of 'social epidemics' such as cell phones to the spread of any other epidemic. He pointed out that just as a single person can start a flu epidemic, so too can a small but precisely targeted push start a social epidemic. We felt then (and still feel now) that South Africa is about to reach that tipping point. If we could just add some fuel to the flames, we could help push South Africans over the threshold and achieve a positive breakthrough in their enthusiasm and optimism about the future of this amazing country and themselves as South Africans.

And so the idea of our book was born. The essence of the book is in its title. There are so many reasons to believe in the future of South Africa, and we want to help people here and internationally to see past the media fog of bad news to the good things that we can

be proud and positive about. We have come so far from the days when books like Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country* encapsulated what it really meant to be South African. We can now be proud of what we have achieved and be positive about what lies ahead of us.

In the chapters to come, we take a look back at the emotional mood swings that South Africa has endured in the past two decades (chapter 2), bringing us up to the present day and the groundswell of new and exciting initiatives to rejuvenate our flagging spirits and re-brand our national image (chapter 3). Then we go on to explore seven powerful reasons why we have every right to feel both positive and proud about South Africa (chapters 4 to 10). We conclude with what we can do, collectively and as individuals, to turn the amazing potential of this country into a living reality.

We hope that, as you read this book, you too will have cause to smile and to feel the warm glow of confidence and contentment that we feel about being South African. Not to mention the blazing passion for this country and its people! We believe that, working together, not only will we create an impressive fireworks display of transformation for the whole world to see, but we will also cast much-needed light onto a whole continent that has been cast in shadows for far to long now.