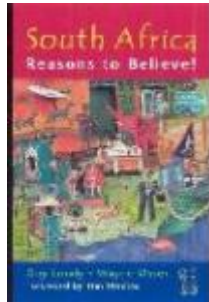


South Africa:

Reasons to Believe!

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



~ 2 MODERN DAY ALCHEMISTS ~

Our innovation as a nation is shown in more than just the business world. Our very existence as a free and democratic country is a spectacular display of innovation and creativity. The alchemists of centuries gone by used to put cocktails of seemingly incompatible ingredients together in a quest to make gold. The result was that they came up with an unprecedented number of chemical compounds that furthered the ends of science and medicine to the benefit of humankind. Similarly, South Africans have taken the cocktail of ethnic groups, languages, religions and cultures in our country and produced an incredible outcome against all the odds.

When one compares our recent history to the less positive outcomes of so many other nations that have undergone changes of similar magnitude, our metamorphosis is almost as incredible as the realisation of the old alchemists' dreams of gold. The alchemists were also regarded as a somewhat mystical bunch, with the transformation of base metals into gold serving as a metaphor for a deeper spiritual quest. Similarly, our rebirth in South Africa has been fuelled by a more fundamental triumph of humanitarian values. We don't need to hail revolutionary war heroes like George Washington, Mao Tse Tung or Che Guevara here. Instead we can celebrate four winners of the Nobel Peace Prize in as many decades – Albert Luthuli (1960), Desmond Tutu (1984), and Nelson Mandela and FW de Klerk (1993) – and a host of other harbingers of peace, hope and reconciliation. This chapter salutes these modern day alchemists, the transformers of our society through their selfless contributions to building our nation.

Talking our way into the future

Of course, our original alchemists were in the political arena. In 1986 after the government imposed a State of Emergency, those in charge began to realise that there was no other way forward than to talk to their supposed number one enemy, Nelson Mandela, who had initiated discussions with the government at around the same time. In 1987 a secret committee of senior government officials was formed to hold private discussions with Mandela about the future of the country. Also in 1987, leaders of business and the Afrikaner establishment had a highly publicised meeting with exiled leaders of the ANC in Dakar. After decades of misery and violence, this was a watershed moment. People across the political spectrum had realised that they needed to talk to each other if anything was going to be left of our beautiful country.

In 1990 Nelson Mandela was released from prison and the ANC and 33 other illegal organisations were unbanned. Other political prisoners were freed and exiles began to return home after as many as 30 years away. So began the arduous process of multi-party talks called CODESA (the Convention for a Democratic South Africa) to prepare a future dispensation based on peace, freedom and dignity for all of South Africa's people.

CODESA consisted of eighteen delegations from across the political playing field that would thrash out plans for a future dispensation. It was the biggest gathering of different political groups South Africa had ever experienced, although it was not the first time that South Africans had talked their way to a peaceful solution. In 1909 the white portion of the population settled the differences that had been fought out during the Anglo-Boer war to create the Union of South Africa. Although those talks did not include any black representatives and were therefore very different to CODESA, they were at least an example of how South Africans could work together to put a turbulent past behind them. The Boer generals, Louis Botha and Jan Smuts led the way to a new era of co-operation amongst white South Africans.

While CODESA was by no means an easy process, the political mudslinging and intense negotiations were infinitely preferable to the alternative of a civil war. The result of the talks was the agreement to draw up an interim constitution and establish an elected assembly that would draft a new, permanent constitution to replace it. To ensure that the final constitution embodied the principles agreed upon by the negotiators, there would also be a Constitutional Court consisting of eleven of the best legal experts in the country (black and white, female and male). If the new constitution did not satisfy the agreed principles, the Court could send it back for redrafting – an arrangement that had never been seen anywhere else in the world.

Today we see the happy result of that process, and it is very easy for us to forget how hard it was to get to the point of our country's first democratic election. But a lot of other countries with similar situations have not forgotten how good South Africans are at coming to a creative solution and what a miracle we have managed to perform. South Africans are regularly asked to join observer missions and negotiating committees to help these countries out of their impasses, whether Northern Ireland, Israel or the Democratic Republic of Congo. Potential investors are also seeing how this spirit of negotiation continues in our country and consistently triumphs over inflexibility, as was the case with the controversial and passionately negotiated Minerals and Petroleum Resources Development Bill.

Choosing our future

Another outcome of the CODESA negotiations was the establishment of an Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) with the mandate to conduct elections at a national and provincial level. Sixteen high profile individuals, eleven local and five international, were appointed as commissioners to oversee the process and ensure that elections were free and fair. After much frantic preparation, the country's first democratic election was held on 26 April 1994 and continued until 29 April to give everyone who wanted to vote the chance to do so, many for the first time in their lives.

Aside from the overcoming of logistical headaches like inaccurate census figures and inadequate infrastructure in rural areas, the elections provided the world with some of history's most moving images, which brought tears to eyes around the world. Old ladies being taken to polling stations in wheelbarrows, swelling with pride. Afrikaner farmers and their workers standing side by side as they waited patiently for several days to mark their crosses. Army helicopters delivering fresh ballot papers to mountainous areas that had run out.

The result of that first election was that the ANC won 63%, the National Party 20% and Inkatha 11% of the poll, consisting of almost twenty million votes. For the first time, it clearly reflected the will of the majority of South Africa's people. There were no long, drawn-out attempts to declare the result invalid or go to war over what was seen as an unfair process. Instead a Government of National Unity was established and it went to work immediately to draft the new constitution.

By the time the second elections came around in 1999, things were quite different. The IEC, since established as one of six permanent state institutions supporting constitutional democracy, prepared and delivered the national and provincial elections in an unprecedented period of only 13 months. After initial problems getting people to register as voters, the election itself ran so smoothly that international news agencies, hoping as always for something sensational to report on, actually described it as 'boring'. The IEC partnered with private sector organisations to undertake monumental tasks like developing a satellite-based Wide Area Network (WAN) to 526 locations in only three months, creating the first comprehensive and accurate Geographic Information System (GIS) in South Africa, and registering 18.4 million voters in 14 650 voting districts in just nine days. The result was not only a smooth election, but also receipt by the IEC of a host of international and national awards for their work. These included America's prestigious Computerworld Smithsonian Award in 2000 for the powerful use of technology. The other four finalists for the award were all American organisations. What a far cry from what had been predicted during our darkest days.

Your rights are secure

Our constitution is one of the institutions that is now firmly in place to ensure that we don't go the way of countries like India, Columbia or Zimbabwe, who are regularly wracked by political violence and instability. After an initial adoption by the Constitutional Assembly on 8 May 1996, the constitution was referred to the Constitutional Court for acceptance and ended up actually being sent back for reconsideration. This in itself was a fascinating development – an independent panel of legal experts had rejected the new constitution as not being totally in line with the spirit and principles of the new South Africa. But the Court had already established great credibility amongst all political parties, the government and the public, and the judges' decision was accepted without question. The Assembly duly went back to redrafting the offending portions, and the new constitution, with its Bill of Rights, was finally signed into law on 10 December 1996.

Not only is our constitution one of the newest in the world, but it is also one of the most progressive. The process of writing it included the largest public participation programme ever conducted in South Africa, involving intensive consultations with ordinary citizens, civil society and political parties. The constitution is a living document which exists to prevent abuses of government privilege as were seen before. The general public has begun to take ownership of it, and they have learnt to think in terms of government actions and policies having to be in line with the constitution, which is what should happen since it exists for their protection. Hence the recent cases in which government has been taken to court over policies such as immigration of spouses of South African citizens or distribution of free anti-retroviral medication for HIV-positive pregnant women.

The rights of all South Africans are protected by the Bill of Rights, which "affirms the democratic values of human dignity, equality and freedom". It includes rights to such basics as adequate housing, freedom of expression and a clean environment, and it protects all the people from abuses such as being deprived of their property, their children being used in armed conflict, or being detained without trial. No longer will anyone be subjected to being dragged out of our homes in the middle of the night, given a thrashing

by a burly policeman who doesn't have a warrant, thrown into the back of a van and dragged off to a cold, damp cell without being told why. For anyone who has been arrested lately and were wondering, the police of today are not impersonating Hollywood actors; they are required by the Bill of Rights to promptly inform you of your right to remain silent and the consequences of not remaining silent.

Once again, the constitution and Bill of Rights are such a far cry from what existed, or more accurately what did not exist, under the old dispensation. And yet people find it so easy to forget how good things are in comparison.

“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us”

Yet another of the miracles of South Africa's transition is the miracle of reconciliation. So often around the world the victor has subjected the vanquished to the most terrible indignities – witness the heavy penalties imposed upon Germany after the First World War, and the result in the form of the rise of Hitler and the start of the Second World War. Just as often, past wrongs have been virtually ignored, and the victims have been left to 'get over it' by themselves – as in the case of freed slaves after the American Civil War. South Africa after apartheid was not prepared to make either of these mistakes.

In 1995, the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act made provision for the establishment of a commission that would investigate gross violations of human rights that took place between 1960 and 1994, grant amnesty to perpetrators of those acts if they could show that they had been carried out with a political aim, and consider ways of affecting reparations to victims. The goal was to achieve reconciliation between perpetrators and victims, and to record the details of what had happened to ensure that they would never happen again. The result was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), headed by former Anglican Archbishop and Nobel Peace Prize holder, Desmond Tutu.

The TRC carried out its mandate by way of three committees. The Human Rights Violations Committee investigated the nature, extent and reasons for human rights abuses, and once it had established the identity and whereabouts of victims, passed the information over to the Reparation and Rehabilitation (R&R) Committee. The R&R Committee considered payment of reparations and support of victims, their families and their communities where appropriate to ensure that reconciliation was achieved and that the acts would not be repeated ever again in the name of political ideology. The Amnesty Committee considered applications by the perpetrators of human rights violations to be freed from prosecution for the acts that they had committed.

The TRC was a very painful experience for everyone involved - the victims and their families, the perpetrators, the commissioners and the observers. Antjie Krog, the well-known Afrikaans author and poet who covered the proceedings for the SABC, described in her book, *Country of my skull*, how everyone was either “breaking down, cracking up or freaking out”. But the people broke through the pain, overcoming the hatred and disgust that they must have felt for so many years, to work towards a better future together. Former political prisoners shook hands with their former torturers and those that had killed civilians for their beliefs broke down and cried as they embraced the families of their victims and asked for forgiveness. The whole TRC process was peppered with moving examples of human beings triumphing over the natural desire for revenge and replacing it with absolution for people who today are living free in the new South Africa.

One of the most outstanding examples of such triumph actually comes from a family who are not South African, the family of the American Fulbright Scholar, Amy Biehl, who was stoned to death in Guguletu, Cape Town, in August 1993. Amy had come to South Africa to

take part in voter registration education for the first election, but after dropping some black friends off at their homes, she was killed by youths who had just attended an 'anti-white' political rally. During the TRC proceedings, Amy's parents displayed the most amazing spirit of forgiveness by supporting amnesty for her four killers, who were later released from jail where they were to have served an 18 year sentence. Amy's father, Peter, gave up a career in marketing to establish the Amy Biehl Foundation, which raised money in the US for disadvantaged communities in South Africa. He and his wife, Linda, spent their time shuttling back and forth between Los Angeles and Cape Town, and in 1997 the Amy Biehl Foundation Trust was launched in South Africa. Today the Trust employs 87 South Africans, including two of the men convicted for Amy's murder, and it runs various projects which employ even more people and benefit thousands of disadvantaged children. One of these projects makes Amy's Bread, which is baked in two bakeries in the Western Cape and sold in major supermarket chains that donate the profit on the bread to the Trust so that it can continue its development work. On the death of Peter Biehl from cancer, his wife Linda said that "Peter saw great hope in South Africa and also acquired strength from the South African people. He truly believed that it was a miraculous country." Miraculous indeed. This is one of the many examples that have led other countries with similar histories, like Chile, to look to South Africa as an example of what can be done to put the past behind us and work towards a better future for all.

Another outcome of the TRC was the Register of Reconciliation, which caused a good deal of controversy and indignation amongst whites when it was first proposed by one of the Commissioners, Mary Burton. The Register was established to give ordinary members of the public a chance to express their regret at failing to prevent human rights violations, and to demonstrate their commitment to reconciliation and a brighter future for South Africa. Mary Burton explains that "the register has been established in response to a deep wish for reconciliation in the hearts of many South Africans". A look through some of the entries in the register, available online at <http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/ror/index.htm>, brings a lump to the throat. An Afrikaner from Pretoria wrote simply, "I am sorry for what I did during the bush war. I am sorry for being a racist during the apartheid years." Another entry reads "I pray that, as the truth about our country's past is being exposed, the Lord will grant us all His wonderful forgiving spirit and His grace to move forward."

Black gold

Moving forward does not simply mean forgetting the past and leaving it behind, it also means righting the wrongs and creating an environment in which the majority of the population can play an active role in the economic success of the country. This is the only way in which those who have suffered will improve their lives. Zimbabwe made the mistake of not doing this after independence in 1980, and we are seeing the consequences of that mistake today. The United States made the same mistake after slaves were freed over a hundred years ago, and the poorest section of their population is still black because the former slaves were never given a hand up to ensure that they could improve their lot.

The South African government is determined not to make the same mistake. They have a policy to promote black economic empowerment, based on recommendations made after two years of research by the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) Commission, headed by Cyril Ramaphosa. Much criticism is levelled at the concept of black economic empowerment, like the idea that all it is doing is replacing a white business elite with a black business elite, or that efficiencies are decreasing as token black managers are put into positions for which they are unprepared. No doubt, there are cases where both of these have happened, but we should look past the fear and unwillingness to change and concentrate on the positive.

There is going to be some degree of short-term pain for a great deal of long-term gain, and the gain is not that far off. The number of black matriculants and graduates has been increasing steadily, according to the SA Institute for Race Relations (SAIRR). Between 1991 and 1998, the number of degrees going to Africans increased by 173%, from 14 798 in 1991 to 40 333 in 1998. And the number is likely to continue to increase. By the time that South Africa has been a true democracy for twenty years, a policy of black economic empowerment may even be unnecessary, because the black graduates of today and yesterday will have gained several years of solid market experience and will be in a strong position to mentor the increased number of graduates of tomorrow. They will also be in a position to create greater wealth for the whole country, thus continuing to uplift those that are still poor.

We can learn from the example of other countries with a positive outcome to their affirmative action policies too, like Malaysia. At the time of independence from Britain forty five years ago, Malaysia was a desperately poor nation. The Chinese population, which today makes up 33% of the population, controlled the economy, while the indigenous Malaysians, who make up over 50%, controlled the government. The Malaysian government put a strict affirmative action policy into place with the aim of ensuring that the indigenous population controlled at least 20% of the economy within 30 years. So their economic situation was not that different to ours, and they too experienced problems and resistance implementing the policy. But over the decade leading up to 1998 the Malaysian economy experienced an average 8% annual growth. Today, the world's highest building is in Kuala Lumpur, they are one of the leading new investors in the South African economy, and they have a programme called Vision 2020 which aims to get them to developed nation status by 2020.

No alchemist ever exposed a winning chemical formula without scalding his hands at least once. We need to learn from the problems that we have had so far in affecting black economic empowerment and look forward to the bright future when we are nothing like Zimbabwe and very much like Malaysia.

Service delivery

The new government took over a country with some severe problems in terms of distribution of not only wealth, but of access to basic necessities as well. Lest we forget, South Africa has the second worst distribution of wealth in the world after Brazil. The government's priorities were essentially quite simple, although not at all easy to achieve. They needed to provide decent housing, education, health and other basic services for all the people, most of whom had always been denied access to those services. Taking into account the task that lay ahead of them, the statistics tell the story of an amazing amount of service delivery in a relatively short space of time.

The South African Advertising Research Foundation (SAARF), an independent research company, has been measuring standards of living in the country since 1994, and they have found that between 1994 and 2001 there has been a vast improvement in the quality of life for all South Africans. 1.5 million houses have been built over this period, and today 77% of South Africans own their homes, as opposed to 64% in 1994. In 1994, 58% of houses had electricity and 68% piped water, compared to a figure of 80% and 76% respectively in 2001.

The equitable distribution of wealth has also improved. The percentage of the population that falls into the category LSM1, the poorest of the poor, fell from 20% in 1994 to 5% in 2001. Over the same period, the percentage of people falling into the higher income brackets has grown, with those earning between R2500 and R6000 increasing from 16% to 20%, and those earning over R6000 increasing from 10% to 18%.

And what about education? Literacy has increased from 87% of the population to 92%, while the percentage of South Africans with matric (secondary school graduation) increased from 14% in 1994 to 23% in 2001. The majority of schools have also seen a marked improvement in their infrastructures. The 2000 School Register of Needs Survey showed that between 1996 and 2000 the number of schools with no water fell from 34% to 27%, those without electricity fell from 58% to 43%, those with no telephone fell from 61% to 35% and those with no toilets fell from 12% to 9%. Over the same period, the number of schools with access to computers and libraries increased and, while the total number of schools rose, the average classroom size (student to teacher ratio) dropped.

Granted, there is still a long way to go, but these are encouraging trends when one considers how far we have come in such a short time. Particularly when taken in the context of the fact that the government has been economically conservative until now in order to win the confidence of the international investment community. As mentioned earlier in the book, now that this has been achieved the government can actually start spending even more on social improvement than they already have.

Social entrepreneurs

South Africa is rich not only in great leaders who win Nobel Peace Prizes, but also in thousands of ordinary people who look around them, see how much potential is lying just beneath the surface waiting for a chance to come out, and believe that they must make a difference. These are the alchemists who will take us into the next era. They are not philanthropists who sit in luxurious homes donating money to charities helping people they have never even seen; they are social entrepreneurs who get out there and get their hands dirty. They pursue their social ventures with all the energy, innovation and organisation of private sector businesses, with the notable difference that they often do more with less, their return on investment is a better life for their fellow citizens and their dividends are increased hope for the future.

Street Universe

One such social entrepreneur is Linzi Thomas, who in 1999 gave up a good career in the film industry to start Street Universe because she believed that someone had to do something concrete to help the street children of Cape Town. She was joined six months later by Paddy Upton, who had previously been the physical trainer for the South African cricket team. Using their joint business knowledge and contacts, they built an organisation that seeks to build long-lasting relationships with hardened street kids by offering sporting, recreational and educational alternatives to street life. They also aimed to intervene in cases where children had just arrived on the street, seeking to immediately relocate them to a safe 'home' environment.

Street Universe estimates that there are around 450 street kids in Cape Town, and they have identified and gathered information on about 250 of them by getting out onto the street, often at night, and talking to all of them face to face. They work closely only with the children who show a real commitment to building a life away from the streets, and their results have been beyond all expectations. National cricketers like Jacques Kallis, Paul Adams, Roger Telemachus and Herschelle Gibbs have worked with the children, and Jacques Kallis has chosen Street Universe as his designated charity. He will sponsor kids who show cricketing potential to develop it away from the streets. A good example of their success is the story of an eleven year old boy who attended the Ryan Maron Cricket School despite having received 9 stitches from a stab wound the night before. He was voted by his peers as best senior fielder. This opportunity to realise his own potential gave him the courage to phone his mother soon afterwards and ask if he could come home after two years of life on the street.

Recently Street Universe received a boost from the international Laureus Sport for Good Foundation, which by way of some of their ambassadors like former 400 metre hurdles world champion Edwin Moses, decathlete Daley Thompson and rugby heroes Hugo Porta and Morne du Plessis, pledged almost \$80,000 to provide sports coaches and development clinics for the kids.

But it isn't only on the sports front where the kids are shining. In the recent Coca-Cola Popstars reality TV show, 18 year old Frieda Darvel, who sleeps on the pavement outside a shop in Long Street, made it to the Cape Town finals. She sang her way into the top 50 out of 900 hopefuls; quite an achievement for someone who lives on the street and has no formal training. It is examples like this that leads those running the organisation to believe that these survivors of street life, who are after all just children, "are diamonds in the rough, and, if given the chance, will be our future leaders."

Linzi Thomas, who started the organization with nothing but a passionate belief that these children deserve a future, was awarded the Cape Times/V&A Waterfront Woman of Worth in 2001. The police in Cape Town have also expressed their gratitude for the work being done to uplift the city's street children and keep them away from crime. In a letter to the organization, they wrote "It must be said that the magnanimous work you do without salaries and little help at your disposal can do little else but inspire wonder." You can find out more about Street Universe by visiting <http://www.streetuniverse.org.za/>.

Angels in Prisons

One of the ways in which South Africa is beginning to differentiate itself globally is as a leader in human rights culture. This is ironic, but not coincidental, given the abysmal track record of human rights abuses during the apartheid era. The human rights challenge is nowhere more difficult to uphold than in our prison system, where criminals are often scathingly viewed as having forfeited all their rights the moment they chose to commit violence against society. It takes a special person to be able to reach beyond this typical 'they deserve what they get' reaction and to see hardened criminals instead as human beings worthy of respect and compassion, no matter how much destruction or pain they have caused. Thankfully, such people do exist in South Africa. They are people like Johnny Jansen and Joanna Flanders Thomas, whose story was told in Fair Lady's June 2001 article, 'Where Angels Fear'.

Johnny Jansen took over as head of Pollsmoor prison's maximum security section in 1997 and was determined to change the culture of brutality that existed there. Johnny's aim was not only to reduce levels of violence but also to introduce more humane processes in dealing with inmates. He requested the Centre for Conflict Resolution (CCR) in Cape Town to help implement his vision and in the few years since the Prison Transformation Programme has been running, there has been a marked drop in violent assaults and gang activity. Attacks have been reduced from about 300 a year in 1997 to approximately 12 a year at present.

Joanna Flanders Thomas, a trainer and facilitator with the CCR, is one of the 'angels' behind this remarkable turnaround at Pollsmoor, as she daily works small miracles with the inmates, most of whom have links to the deadly legacy of gang warfare of the Cape Flats. Her extraordinary bravery and commitment has seen many prisoners respond successfully and positively to her programme titled 'Change is possible, change begins with me.' She holds steadfastly to her belief that "the only proven method of trying to rehabilitate criminals is to do so with compassion and to treat people as human beings. It doesn't mean we condone what they have done or that we reinforce their bad behaviour," she is quick to qualify, "but it goes hand in hand with enabling people to take responsibility for themselves, their lives and how their actions affect others."

Guardians of the Children

There are some social entrepreneurs in South Africa that inspire us because they do so much with so little. They do not come from privileged backgrounds, or have substantial resources at their disposal. But they see the needs of the community and they respond, in whatever way they can.

Pauline Seroto and Moipone Sekolo are two such national treasures – role models of the power of compassion. They have made it their mission to look after the welfare of destitute children of their dusty township of Kagiso on the West Rand near Johannesburg. Every day they walk from home to home, checking up on about 80 children living with their grannies, mothers ailing with HIV/AIDS and caregivers, offering a variety of assistance – medical advice (Pauline is an ex-nurse), food and clothing that they have fundraised, help with social service applications, not to mention good old-fashioned moral support.

Their efforts are under the umbrella of the Sinethemba Community Project, which they started out of a sense of duty as Christians. The project is run from Pauline's living room and the money to fund the work largely comes from their own pockets. Unlike others, who blame government for its inadequate service delivery, these two remarkable women believe the government is doing its best under adverse circumstances, but that there is a great need for members of the community to rally round and assist.

Their positive attitude in the face of often-desperate odds is a lesson to us all. "This is a poor area and people battle to live, but we do what we can," says Moipone. "But for everyone who thinks they are suffering, there is someone down the road who's in a worse situation. Sometimes the work can be heart-breaking and we often sit and cry with frustration." They say their biggest dream would be to afford a house to act as a Place of Safety, where they would like to protect needy children on a temporary basis until proper care has been arranged. But they are not waiting around for handouts. They continue with their charitable activities irrespective of any support they may, or may not, get.

Examples like these, and others cited in this chapter, are just a few among many that demonstrate how dedicated individuals are steadily transforming South Africa, improving the lives of its people, one at a time. They have realised that the pot of gold at the end of this rainbow nation will only materialise if we each do what we can to make the future brighter. Like Dorothy, they know that getting to that place – 'somewhere over the rainbow' – is a journey; a journey that requires the full engagement of our heart, our mind and, perhaps most of all, our courage.