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Desmond Tutu and the Language of Love

by Rushworth M. Kidder

"Concern for others is the best form of self-interest."

Coming from a management consultant, those words might raise skeptical eyebrows. But coming from retired Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Anglican prelate who was central to the abolition of apartheid in his native South Africa, they seem perfectly natural.

"The Arch," as he is affectionately called back home, was in Flint, Michigan, last week to talk to the community and to thank the board of trustees of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation (of which, to honor full disclosure, I am a member) for their help in funding the changes needed to bring democracy to South Africa. Some of us had heard him a decade before, in a meeting with our board at his official residence in Cape Town. But we hear lots of expert commentary on social, financial, political, and international issues, often from people we've heard before. What is it, I found myself asking, that makes this man's message so different?

The question was still with me as we filed into Whiting Auditorium that afternoon for his public talk to nearly 2,000 citizens of this midsized industrial city. His topic, racism, could not have been more appropriate. This once-prosperous town, long a centerpiece of General Motors manufacturing, has seen a precipitous collapse of jobs in recent years. With the flight of the middle class to the suburbs, a dense and polarizing racism has grown up, targeting the impoverished blacks in the urban center. Yet Archbishop Tutu spoke with no rage in his voice, no blaming of individuals, no rhetoric of rebellion and divisiveness. Instead, his characteristically impish mirth filled the hall with laughter and regularly prompted responses of "Amen!" and "That's right!" from a mixed-race group that at times seemed more congregation than audience.

Was this because his message centered on religion? True, he appeared in his usual clerical collar, wearing his large silver cross on a chain around his neck. True, he was not afraid to talk about God, goodness, creation, sin, and healing. But that message is regularly available in the pulpits of Flint.

Was it, then, that he was from elsewhere, the outsider who gets a hearing simply because he's assumed to be an expert? That's part of it -- bolstered mightily, in this case, by his stature as a Nobel laureate and his reputation as an uncompromising foe of oppression and tyranny in South Africa.

Was it that he was genuinely humorous? As he challenged his audience to see the absurdity of racism, he reminded them not to be so deadly serious about it. He got them chuckling over its foibles. Yet he was never glib. He left them with no doubt about the evils of racism -- the unspeakable inhumanity it engenders, the suffering it imposes. Too much the realist, he didn't hang suspended in a pious heaven of ideals. But too much the inspirer, he didn't wallow in the pathos and tragedy which, in his role as chairman of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, he has been forced to hear in the tales of his fellow South Africans.

All of these things help account for his impact. But as I listened, what stood out the most -- what I think gives him a uniquely compelling message for the twenty-first century -- is that he has found a language of public discourse to talk about a difficult subject: love. Again and again, his commentary -- easygoing, compelling, almost offhand -- returned to the need for a sense of caring, compassion, and kindness. Explaining the African concept of *ubuntu*, for example, he noted that it means that "I am me only because you are you," and that "my humanity is caught up in your humanity." So "if I dehumanize you," he concluded, "I am inexorably dehumanized."

Coming from anyone else, that might have sounded at best theoretical and at worst maudlin. From him, it sounded perfectly realistic. It was a love born out of long experience, reflection, and courage. What's more, it was sharply targeted. It had a real purpose: the healing of racism, classism, sexism, ageism, and every other *ism* that keeps people at odds with their neighbors in Flint, in Johannesburg, and elsewhere in the world.

And that, as I realized over dinner with him later that evening, is what makes him great. In today's world, we need to find ways to talk about the five core moral values that humanity holds in common. With four of them -- fairness, responsibility, respect, and honesty -- the language is beginning to come together. We're finding the powerful metaphors, the compelling analogies, the gripping anecdotes. And as each day's news unfolds, we're building a library of sad examples of their opposites.

But love? For some reason that's harder to discuss. Is it that real men don't eat quiche or use the "L" word? Is it that our pragmatism militates against something so fuzzy? Is it that our sociometric mindset dismisses anything so immeasurable and ungraphable? Is it that love is not something universities have learned how to teach, or governments to legislate, or foundations to fund?

Maybe. But then along comes this diminutive, peaceful, jovial African. By his own and others' accounts, he survived the septic brutality of apartheid not by force or fraud, nor by cunning or hatred, but by charity, empathy, and reconciliation. He has seen the power of forgiveness work firsthand. He knows what it is like to love where others hate. And he's found a way to say it.

It's a message about a core, universal value that the United States needs and -- to judge by the crowd in Flint -- wants to hear these days.