

Depression, Suicide and the Idea of Progress among Young Africans

The tragic rise of the idea of man as an economic creature, which reduces a human being to a mere consumer while eulogizing competition as the foundational ethic of human relations has resulted in the epidemics of self-harm, depression, loneliness, anxiety, phobias and disorders.

The rising cases of depression and suicide among young Africans continue to point to the fact that a lot of work needs to be done as far as educating that generation on the real meaning of human existence and on what progress in life entails. Contrary to prevailing trends, the work that needs to be done is not in teaching entrepreneurship skills, nor in expounding the necessity of science, technology and mathematics or other such academic and money-making strategies. While those are not to be discontinued in their entirety, young Africans need to first be weaned off the illusion that self-actualization lies in the individualistic pursuit of wealth, status or other such accumulations. Life, to be loved and enjoyed, has to be about cooperation, communality and community.

Prior to the spread of the Western neo-liberal agenda across the region, many traditional African societies viewed social relationships as the very essence of life and living. Interacting with fellow mortals from a place of community, cooperation and compassion, defined human existence. In being a part of a community, giving, receiving and participating in community life, life is made extraordinarily interesting and worth living.

The Ubuntu philosophy - humanity towards others - where in

practice, often ensures that children are raised with an innate consciousness that their value in life is not economic. Human beings who subscribe to Ubuntu understand that what is needed to thrive in life is a community of people who feel a strong sense of responsibility towards them, and towards whom they also feel that strong sense of responsibility. Africans need to rise again to that high level of understanding held by their forefathers, where the value and beauty of life are about community.

The quest for capitalist accumulation, if done with competition in mind, can easily lead to the flouting of one of the foundational principles necessary for a life of fulfilment, which is building and maintaining a healthy social and community life. Better jobs, education, career or career prospects and the rest of such do not make for a more fulfilling life. Those who have attained these positions and who are willing to be, sincere and open themselves to vulnerability will attest to the fact that despite these achievements, emptiness and a sense of restlessness could still gnaw at one's soul.

The Two Sides

There are two sides to a complete and fulfilling life. On the one side, life is about people who see you as a full, complete, lovely and lovable human being, just as you are, without the embellishments of material or other resources. On the other side, life is likewise about viewing one's self and other human beings as full and complete and worthy, without material or other additions. A question to ask now is, how many people do you love and accept unconditionally? How many people do you think love and accept you unconditionally, such that should you lose everything you have in life, will be all too grateful to have you around? Another question is, do you consider that if you lose everything but your health and life, you can still find reasons to see life as worth living? Do you consider the fact that you are someone's parent, sibling or

friend enough reason to be alive? Are you convinced that your very presence is needed, is loved, is exciting without any material benefits added? Are you convinced that there are people in your life who you can run to even after you have made mistakes, who can hug you and say, "it's Ok. It was a mistake, it is not who you are, now let us see how we can get out of this." Are you the kind of person who can say that to someone or to people in your life and your community?

Parenting

Many African parents make their children believe that life is about competition and achievements. These children are locked up in gated homes, sent to the best and most expensive schools while being ostracized from community life. These parents emphasize hard work for the sake of economic success but fail to lay much by way of a solid social or community foundation for their children and wards. Children are no longer exposed to community responsibilities and the fact that a well-lived life is the life invested in developing one's community. These children grow up isolated and wondering what all the success is for, because innately the human consciousness connect success with community. When this success is achieved amid strife and competition, the happiness it produces is at best short-lived, fleeting and a pathway to depression.

Created to Be

Younger Africans need to be taught what it means to be a human being, not a "human doing". We were created to be, to connect, to thrive in cooperation and relationship with others. Parents have a responsibility to introduce, lay the foundation and emphasize a healthy community-based life for their children/wards. For parents who inhabit urban spaces across Africa, these communities, outside of the family can include religious groups, town unions and others, to mention but a few. There is a need for ample time of play, relaxation and investment of time in common interests for the common good.

Outside of these wider social interactions, close friendships should be encouraged and built with likeminded people; character and empathy being central determining factors to who is brought closer and who is not.

Young African children need no longer slide from loneliness to depression to suicide when they have such rich cultural heritage as Ubuntu to inherit from the older generation. Many of these young Africans leave suicide notes that show the absence of a safe person in their lives, that one person who they can be sure accepts them unconditionally, their parents having unwittingly turned into heckling pressure builders, whose main concern is the economic success of their children.

In the times we live in, it is necessary that the younger generation get to understand the primacy and sacredness of human relationships. The joys, the laughter and happiness that interacting with a fellow mortal can bring when the burden of achievements, competitions and expectations are expelled from the cradle through to adulthood to old age.

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