



HILTON COLLEGE

A letter from

The Head

No. 19-16/ 6 November 2020

Dear Parents and friends of Hilton,

I am currently reading a book by Ariel Burger, a life-long student of Elie Wiesel.

Elie Wiesel is best known for his Holocaust testimony and for the universal lessons he drew from his particular experience of tragedy. Author of *Night* and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, Wiesel worked tirelessly on behalf of suffering people everywhere.

An excerpt from his chapter on Memory:

At the heart of Elie Wiesel's mission as a teacher was a phrase his students heard him repeat time and again: "Listening to a witness makes you a witness." Like propaganda, its evil twin, moral education is contagious. And to be effective, it *must* be contagious. Unlike propaganda, though, which tells people what they want to hear or feeds their existing fears, moral education tells people what they need to hear, even when it is painful. "Here is how you can tell the difference between false prophets and true ones," he explained to the class more than once. "The former comfort, the latter disturb."

When moral education works, students investigate and embrace new ways of thinking, learn new habits of questioning, and, ultimately, find a deeper sense of common humanity. Students who experience this become sensitised to suffering. They read the news differently. They are no longer able to pass a homeless person on the street without offering at least a smile. They speak up when they overhear a bigoted word or see a bully. Inaction is no longer an option.

In order to transform, moral education must entail more than a transactional exchange of information. It is not only the content of what is taught - the history, the data - but the context that defines impact. It is the emotional relationship between student, teacher and subject. It is the implicit *Why?* at the heart of learning.

Living in South Africa and indeed being South African conjures up so many juxtaposed emotions when we look both to the future and to the past. These emotions are so evident at times of great celebration - the triumphant Rugby World Cup campaign - and at times of great despair - Moody's downgrade of our investment grading.

The privilege of living the South African experience is exactly this: the undeniable euphoria and despair we learn to navigate daily. There must be few countries on earth that can claim such gargantuan mood swings!

All of us living in South Africa are witnesses, in the definition of Wiesel. All of us have seen and know people who have lived through the devastating ravages of our past. Those of us who are counted among the privileged have also been affected by the trauma of our past. We cannot escape this.

A letter from **The Head**

Just as the Springboks have reminded us of the possible, I believe we must remind ourselves, especially our young people, of from whence we came - a country on the brink of civil war - and be bold once again to imagine a future of providence and prosperity for all. I am aware that this rhetoric may seem hollow or fragile at best, and I could agree yet, as an educator, a parent, an adult, I am bound to peddle hope.

Yet, if we are able to encourage our youth to dream of a future of prosperity and then provide them with the framework wherein they can enact these dreams, we will always have a bright future. It seems our role as adults must be to ensure our world is receptive to their dreaming by creating the environment which allows these dreams to become realities. We must surely live our lives such that our children enjoy better opportunities and even greater hope.

The implications of this World Cup win may yet surpass the wins of 1995 and 2007; wouldn't that be a wonderful advertisement for the spirit of hope? I fear, however, that it may easily feel hollow and an inflated propagandist moment if we do not follow it up with an urgency to fix that which is broken in our communities and in our society.

The memory of our tragic and divided past must be an ever-present signpost along our journey to a moral education. The world seems to be crying out for a generation alive to our moral obligation towards our fellow man and towards our environment. There are many sign-posts in our collective journey thus far that must remind us of what not to succumb to; the moments of euphoria must catapult our collective psyche into a stronger belief of a world of promise and indeed hope. *"When moral education works, students investigate and embrace new ways of thinking, learn new habits of questioning, and, ultimately, find a deeper sense of common humanity."*

South Africa needs everyone with skill and heart to build our future together; I cannot allow the Doubting Thomas in me to have the loudest voice at this time. Thank you to the Springbok team who silenced the naysayers by focusing on their task at hand and by accomplishing this feat with such clinical passion.

We need moments such as this to lift our spirits and to believe in the possible.