

# Naomi Tutu: Lessons Learned from Apartheid

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Activist and apartheid witness Naomi Tutu spoke at UCF on Tuesday, February 7, 2017, to an audience of 500 listeners. In her speech, “Truth and Reconciliation: What We Can Learn from South Africa,” Tutu described lessons from her country’s ongoing struggle to heal the wounds of racism. Her presentation focused on the high-profile post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Tutu began her lecture by establishing her unique perspective on South Africa’s struggle against apartheid. As the daughter of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Tutu helped provide hospitality to the serious work of the commission while her mother was away. She joked that her lamb curry kept the commissioners going. Her work to this day has focused on race and gender issues around the world.

Calling the Commission a compromise between seeking retribution for human rights violations and moving forward, Tutu underscored the importance of the Commission’s slogan: “Truth: The path to reconciliation.” She then explained the roles of the three Commission committees: Amnesty, Human Rights Violations and Reparation and Rehabilitation. The Amnesty Committee held hearings of human rights violators in exchange for amnesty, on the condition that they tell the whole truth. But, as Tutu explained, the truth was difficult to attain from the violators, most of whom lied during the heavily-publicized hearings.



“It was that truth, the fact of telling the truth to themselves, that was the biggest challenge,” Tutu said, noting that many of the violators were “ordinary” people. The lesson of the Amnesty Committee, she stated, is to consider what factors “take someone who is a loving father, a caring husband and a sharing neighbor, and turn them into someone willing to torture and kill.”

On the other side, Tutu continued, the Commission’s Human Rights Violations Committee held hearings of the stories of victims and survivors. While the Amnesty Committee hearings showed the darkness within ordinary people, Tutu suggested the other two committees demonstrated the incredible light within ordinary people.

Victims and survivors also testified the truth of their experiences, abuses and losses, and then would settle on some form of reparation. Tutu suggested the reparation was often a token, and that victims often asked for parks, schools or clinics for their communities. “We have to also admit the

amazing light and wholeness that can be present in each of us,” Tutu said, underscoring the ability to forgive and dream of a better future for all.

In summary, Tutu emphasized the importance of telling the entirety of a narrative, both the dark side and the light. She applied this to American education on the history of slavery, saying that slavery, like apartheid, cannot be condensed into a single paragraph or chapter. “We need to tell the whole truth,” she said gravely. “The whole story. The whole story of how we became who we became.”

Referencing Tutu’s description of the dark and the light in society, one listener asked how one could repress the dark and encourage the light. In response, Tutu called the audience to acknowledge our shared humanity. “Every person I meet is a human being made in God’s image,” she said, and went on to encourage discussion of personal differences.

This event was the first of four in the 2017 LIFE Global Issues Series. Tutu’s visit was sponsored by the UCF Global Perspectives Office in partnership with UCF LIFE, The Burnett Honors College, the UCF Global Peace and Security Studies Program and the Global Connections Foundation.