

Project Porcupine: My Greatest Inspiration

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Without jumping down a spiralling rabbit hole of dictionary definitions (which in this context do not suffice anyway), it is necessary to explore the meaning of inspiration. In this context, we can define inspiration as the thoughts and feelings that spur people on to reach seemingly unachievable results or to overcome seemingly insurmountable challenges. All human beings have these thoughts and have a burning sensation somewhere in their bodies when they experience the feelings which are driving them forward – be it fear or excitement, be it a desire to escape something, or an objective they wish to attain. How people respond when they are inspired and the things that inspire them differ vastly.

Personally, it is difficult to pinpoint one thing and name it my *GREATEST* inspiration, but Jordan Peterson, a controversial character as far as his views on political correctness go, teaches that life means suffering, and instead of pursuing happiness which is fleeting, we should pursue the reduction of suffering. This sums up quite well my personal motivation to go out and be a productive and useful member of society.

This mission to reduce suffering, applies to one's personal life and expands to various spheres of influence. We start with self, so that at least we do not loathe ourselves, and at best we have a sense of personal fulfilment. We then try to provide for our loved ones – ensuring that they will survive, for them to be able to live a good life and maybe even an enjoyable one, raising our children well (so that they actually like themselves too, and that we like them and so that they grow up and can make it in the world). We find communities in which we can nurture and be nurtured, where we can be valuable members of society and contribute to reducing the suffering for people in our neighbourhoods, churches, and other social networks. And if we are particularly fortunate, we can reduce the suffering of multiple groups of communities – comprising of multiple families and individuals whose suffering would be reduced (even if it is only marginally) because of our existence. Perhaps one of the individuals touched by my efforts will take up the same mission.

In short, my greatest inspiration is when I have reached the end of my life, to look back and have a sense of personal achievement because my family is well taken care of and Africa's suffering due to poor socioeconomic conditions is reduced.

But how does one achieve this lofty mission?

I believe that first, we do so by mastering ourselves. I came across a quote by Wes Fesler in which he says, "Self-mastery is the challenge of transforming yourself from own worst enemy into your greatest ally." From my perspective there are only a few expressions of the true purpose of mastering one's self that capture it so succinctly. We are taught self-mastery in our youth through accountability to our parents, teachers, and other authoritative figures. Later in life, we become accountable to our spouses or partners, colleagues and managers, and social groups, but at some point in our lives, we are only in the truest sense accountable to ourselves. If we don't set our house in order or "clean our room" as Peterson would say, we have little opportunity to realise the great inspirational objective of reducing suffering for ourselves and others.

How I was raised, played a pivotal role in this view of self and the world. This relates to the role that I had to play with reference to accountability and partnership in the household. It has assisted me in how I raise my own family today and how I respond when called to a position of leadership.

My first experience of accountability and leadership was in the home. I was blessed by being the last of four children, with an 11-year age gap between me and my preceding brother. In our home, I observed the age old, "baba is the head, but mama is the neck" and the rest of us were either consulted or informed as the need and age appropriateness required.

If you wanted something from dad (who back then seemed to be the easier target because his answer to our requests was always "yes"), he'd first ask whether we'd spoken to our mother and if not, he'd send us back to talk to her. Sometimes, mama's first answer would be "no," other times it would be "go and ask your dad."

Being the unicorn – only daughter/lastborn/"laatlammetjie" – of the family, I had the privilege of being doted on by everyone in the family, especially by my father, and I frequently tested the resolve to their agreed strategy, but was never successful. Their implementation was watertight.

I only realised much later in life that this was their way of not only managing our expectations, it was also their way of keeping us accountable to both of them, all the while keeping each other accountable in their parenting.

We knew that if mama said “no,” The answer would not change if we asked dad; and if dad said “yes,” it was because mama had agreed that it was okay.

I also learnt that a similar tactic was applied with discipline. If she thought the message would be learnt from a hiding, mama would execute the punishment. To be honest, she would beat the living daylight out of me. Baba’s role was considerably different: He was the one who held me to account, and his strategy was more frightening than the prospect of being walloped to the point where I prayed for forgiveness. Baba was the bogey monster we were threatened to be confronted with if mama felt a beating wouldn’t suffice. His methods were cool and calculated. You would be called to the study or the private lounge (which we’d renamed “the courtroom”) and you’d be called upon to state your case and face a litany of questions:

- ◆ Why is it that we’re having this conversation?
- ◆ What did you do (or failed to do)?
- ◆ Why did you do it?
- ◆ How did you go about it?
- ◆ Do you think it was right? If not, then why did you do it?
- ◆ What do you think is a fitting punishment?
- ◆ What will you do to avoid repeating the same thing?

This is how we continued until I was empowered to negotiate for the things that I wanted, but it also entrenched a sense of accountability to myself and others, knowing that if I miss-stepped, there’d be some tough questions to answer. As I grew up, I was subjected to “the courtroom” questioning more than the hidings. I suppose this is what began to develop the accountability to self, thinking through certain actions before they became issues that the family would have to address.

I also consulted my older brothers often, particularly the oldest, assuming that at some point in their lives, they had been in similar situations – whether they wanted the exact thing that I was asking for and were refused, or were granted their request with conditions. So, they guided me on my approach – where to yield and where to hold firm. In other instances, they played advocate on my behalf. Sometimes my parents would have them shoulder the responsibility squarely, and they would agree. I learnt there about the commitment of people who were willing to stick out their neck for me. Another important life skill that I required to become successful, was: *Let your word be your bond, a commitment made is a commitment fulfilled.*

Other than the responsibility to limit TV time and extend study time so that I passed well, the most vivid memory I have of self-mastery was when I wanted to go to the Matric dance after party. My parents had agreed wholeheartedly that I could buy whatever outfit I desired, but in no uncertain terms was it clear that I would not be allowed to attend the after party.

I was distraught. After all, I had spent my entire high school career being the boring one who was never allowed out and at some point, I even stopped asking to go out with friends to events. This time I was determined that the outcome would be different. This was not some random house party that a peer had arranged, this was *MY* after party. I was adamant that I would attend both the official school dance and the after party. So, I called in the artillery and briefed my oldest brother (17 years my senior) to come and mediate between my parents and me. We all sat in “the courtroom” and he began to help me state my case. As usual, after answering a litany of questions including why this was so important to me, my brother was left with the cross to bear: “If anything goes wrong, it’s on you,” To which my brother agreed.

VICTORY!!! I exclaimed it internally and excitedly gave them all a hug and ran off to prepare for both events.

As the evening progressed at the official ball, I noticed that some of the details of the party I was initially told about were totally different. There would be no adult supervision, the location was different, and several other details differed. My gut began to churn but my insolence also began to burn. I thought that it shouldn’t be an issue since I got no conditions to my approval. Only my brother was on the hook. I really wanted to experience this kind of life for the first time.

In the end, when the time came to change and thoughts of all the things that could go wrong came rushing over me, how misfortune would affect my family – most notably the brother who accepted accountability for me – I didn’t go to the after party.

There I began affirming my sense of self-mastery, a concept to which I had never previously given any thought. The lessons imparted in my home over years of discipline and discourse finally came to bare. My parents and brother knew when I came home early that I was ready to face the world.

Today, I learn about self-mastery every day and allow a little part of self-destruction to die away from me. Life keeps teaching me that as much as we may want to do certain things because it feels liberating, that there may be much greater freedom in constraining the desires that set us back and achieve nothing.

Sometimes, we sacrifice our desires to attain something of much greater value, and by so doing we get out of our own way and become our greatest ally. As we reflect and consciously undertake internal discourse, we realise that the journey of self-mastery never ends, as we're never perfect, but the journey begins when those who are tasked with raising us say their first "NO."

The second thing I've observed to be useful to achieve the mission of reducing suffering, particularly internally, is to *maintain a teachable spirit* – trying to approach all interactions not from a place of judgement but from a curiosity to learn from people of all walks of life – to observe leaders that we admire, also prominent members of society, and try to emulate their positive qualities. If we have access to them, we could ask them how and why they do the things that they do.

It is a great inspiration for me to hear stories of individuals who have overcome enormous adversity to become the people they are today. They were often born in abject poverty and endured family dysfunctions, but they chartered their own paths to personal and communal success. Then there are the stories of addicts who acknowledge their dependency and take extraordinary steps to overcome it. There are stories of people who we'd assume have had easy lives because of their financial means, but pressed on to overcome internal battles which no one else knows about. We learn to know about these individuals who treat others humanely and exhibit humility.

I have had the good fortune of being mentored and coached by people who have imparted lessons that carried me through my life, whether they knew it or not, great leaders whose consciousness is that their actions should inspire others to take up the call to leadership and to provide the type of leadership that we can admire. One such person is Nomfundo Cebekhulu. I met her early in my career, being barely out of university, still very wet behind the ears. Having reached senior management levels in a multinational corporation (for which we were both employed at the time), she had a hardened exterior and a take-no-nonsense reputation. Her work was meticulous, and she expected the same from her team. Under her stewardship, I learnt that as a team we hadn't delivered until the last person in the team had delivered. If we recalled e-mails after sending them, we'd be reminded that tardiness reflects badly on all of us and that it is better to spend extra time refining the details than perpetually correcting errors.

We often had multiple edited versions of the same document which the team reviewed internally – we seldom sent out a first attempt. She often said,

“We’ll get it perfect before the deadline.” This frustrated me, to the point that I commented that nothing is ever perfect, and that everybody knew that fact. Her response changed my mindset forever. She recited a quote by Vince Lombardy, “*We relentlessly pursue perfection knowing we won’t catch it, but in the process, we’ll achieve excellence.*”

In that moment, I understood why all these gruelling hours mattered. It wasn’t because of what others would think of us – that was secondary – the primary reason was for the personal sense of achievement, to attain excellence. This lesson has carried me forward through my career and I am grateful to Nomfundo for imparting this to me among all the other technical skills she taught me.

Being teachable also means that it is important to reflect on the identity of the leaders we admire, what makes them who they are, and the things that inspire them. Leaders are individuals in our lives, communities, families, and workplaces who by some miracle are willing to take decisions that others may be reluctant to make. They are the individuals who take actions that have a long-lasting impact on those around them, and in many cases for a considerably long time. They are individuals who bear the burden of having people around them, looking to them for guidance, protection, provision, and inspiration. Exceptional leaders take it further and look for opportunities to inspire, to pick others out of mediocrity or even inadequacy, to raise their excellence without denigrating them.

Leaders expand their reach through the people whom they direct and provide corrections without humiliation. Appreciate those who lead others to a point that spurs everyone forward in the common objective. Leaders are also compassionate, as they see the potential of seemingly ordinary individuals that they lead and in whom they invest time and energy to elevate their potential. This compassion earns good leaders’ trust so that they may guide others through a dark forest not knowing what lies ahead but having their trust that all will be well. This is an example of leadership that I’ve had the personal benefit of receiving at Seriti Resources. This is the kind of leadership that gives me a sense of ownership of the vision that is shared, the type of leadership that has my family invested in Seriti’s success. This is inspirational leadership in action.

Leadership as an act of service it is not always glamorous. Sometimes you have to sacrifice a part of yourself for the greater good – in school we called this *service before self*, and as Nassim Taleb teaches, leaders should be willing to suffer the consequences of their own decisions. Both of these principles mean

that we must invest ourselves wholeheartedly in those that we lead. How else do we leave a lasting positive impact in their lives, leading with principles and sacrifices being likeable to get things done? Earning trust can be a trade-off of congeniality as liking you doesn't necessarily mean people respect you, which is an inevitable part of leading people. They need to respect and trust their leader, whether they like them or not. This often means taking accountability for the errors of those you lead. It is your problem to solve – that is how to bridge the gap. That is how leaders build lasting relationships that earn themselves, their family, and associates social capital well into the future.

One of my greatest inspirations is the existence of my daughter and my deep need to be the best mother I can be for her. If we were exploring inspiration shallowly, I'd easily say that she is my greatest inspiration. "Mother" is my favourite title. Knowing that there is someone totally dependent on me getting my house in order so that hers can be exceptional. Her coming into being gave me a deeper sense of purpose. "What a cliché!" I would have thought before she was born, but this is relevant because wanting to do my best for her benefit, energises me to make the necessary sacrifices required in self-mastery, teachability, growth investment, and taking on leadership as an act of service.

However, when thinking about inspiration more deeply, I recognise that the thing that spurs us on to persevere, has internal origins. All the examples set out above, form a part of legacy building to me, leaving something that future generations will thank us for. I have a deep desire to attain this goal at some significant level in my lifetime so that not just my child, but a whole generation will be able to advance themselves further than where I left off. My greatest inspiration is leaving a legacy.



STHABILE ZWANE is an ambitious young leader who believes in leaving a strong positive legacy for generations to build upon.

Personally, Sthabile is a mother of one who recognises the purpose that raising a family can contribute to a female's drive for professional success. Well supported by her family, Sthabile has been able to dedicate many hours to her personal development which has incited her vision to cultivate a career culture in South Africa that promotes individual's (female and male) choice to raise wholesome families without compromising their career prospects.

Professionally, Sthabile has 12 years in the mining industry beginning as a vocational worker at the thermal coal mines near her home town now called Emalahleni. She later graduated her undergraduate accounting studies at the University of Witwatersrand to take up a professional traineeship by her bursar, Anglo American, and serving there as a divisional treasurer. Sthabile subsequently joined Seriti Resources Holding as a group treasurer and now leads a multi-disciplinary team in governance, risk management and insurance.