

## JOHN HOLTMAN

### Lessons from June 16 1976

Seeing that it is June, Youth Month in our country because of Youth Day next week Thursday, I thought it appropriate to examine the event itself. As a species, we tend to remember and, at times, celebrate, the tragic events of our history. Last year we commemorated the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Jewish Holocaust during the Second World War, and this year we will commemorate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the student uprisings which started on June 16, 1976. Why do we do this? It strikes me that we tend to hold on to these tragic events in our history for many reasons (all valid), but while we remember the victims of those tragic events, we also tend to hold onto our position as victims. Why is this so? I think as victims we always have the moral high ground: no one would dare to tell Jewish people to get over the Holocaust; it happened 75 years ago so we need to move on. In the same vein, we are told here in South Africa to forget about the atrocities of Apartheid. That is all over now; it ended 24 years ago so we have to get over it now and move on. We resist that because giving up our victim status is tantamount to giving away our moral high ground. Some of us enjoy being victims; we hold on to the pain for dear life. It's what drives and sustains some of us. We feed off it. So why am I saying all of this? It's because I have a right to. I was there, in the midst of it. I was an observer, then a participant, and then a victim.

In 1976 I was 18 years old. I was a first-year university student at the University of the Western Cape. I was enjoying great success: I had top-class grades and was playing competitive university hockey. I was 1100 km from my home in East London and I was having a ball. During the June holidays I went home and one evening I was watching the news with my mother and brother when I witnessed a phenomenon I had never seen before: I saw a township erupt in flames. It was June 16, 1976. Approximately 15000 school children between the ages of 10 and 18 were marching down Vilakazi Street in Soweto to protest against being taught Mathematics, amongst other subjects, in Afrikaans. At that moment I knew that life would never be the same again. I turned to my mother (who was a widow as my father had died the previous year when I was in matric), knowing how she struggled to keep me at university, and told her what I was thinking, and warned her that our university would not remain neutral. I was right. On my first day back at UWC, a mass meeting (my first) was called and 2500 students gathered in a hall to thrash out a response to the Soweto uprisings and the "system's" brutality. I then witnessed my first mass march down Modderdam Road with students singing freedom songs and waving placards. I witnessed a lone traffic officer on a Honda motorcycle try to restore order with his siren blaring and waving a revolver. I also witnessed how quickly a motorbike could be ripped apart by an angry crowd. Then all hell broke loose – windscreens shattered; glass everywhere; traffic mayhem. Something in me shifted and I was no longer just a witness; I became an active participant. The traffic officer, though, had radioed for help, and soon a convoy of police vehicles arrived and delivered more than 100 police officers dressed in camouflage fatigues and carrying newly-issued R1 rifles still sporting tags hanging from the muzzles. Then another first: the taste of teargas. Blinded and gagging, we were baton-charged by these men wearing gas masks and brutally beaten, both with batons and rifle butts. Many of us fled across the campus to the bushes and returned when the shooting had stopped. Some students had been corralled into a quad outside the cafeteria and were singing 'Nkosi Sikelele', which was a banned song at the time. I then saw a policeman smash a female colleague's jaw with his rifle because she wouldn't stop singing. Later, dozens of students were loaded into huge vans and shipped off to the Bellville police holding cells. By September that year my first year at UWC ended and I returned home. By the end of that year around 700 young people had been killed, and upward of 2000 had fled the country and were readily taken up mostly by the armed wings of the banned ANC and PAC, namely Mkhonto we Sizwe and APLA

respectively. Many never returned, and of those who returned, many were killed for participating in various ANC and PAC linked acts of bombings, etc. It is safe to say that almost an entire generation of (black) youth was lost as a result of the 1976 student uprisings.

Given all of this negativity, what were some of the positives that can be taken from this? What have we gained and what have we learned?

Firstly, we learnt that, contrary to the beliefs of adults, the youth can change the world. Some may view this differently and may even have alternative understandings, and they have every right to, but as a direct result of the events of June 1976, and their publication in news media around the world, huge pressure was generated by the international community on South Africa to change its apartheid policies. Secondly, the apartheid government were forced to revisit their new language policy and revoke their decision on making Afrikaans the medium of instruction in Black schools, and schooling became much more structured and formal as a result. Thirdly, there was a new awakening among the youth of their right to humanness and dignity, and that blackness was neither ugly nor a curse. And they were willing to fight for it – to the death if necessary. From that fateful June day in 1976, it took just 18 years for apartheid to fall, and while that may seem like a long time, in relation to 350 years of oppression and 48 years of institutionalized racism, it was not so long after all. So for you sitting here today, learn from those in 1976 on whose shoulders we have arrived at this point in our history. I know that when South Africans are angry, they march. We march for everything: anti-abortion, anti-the-president, Rhodes-Must-Fall, Fees-Must-Fall, but these days marching often achieves little more than mindless violence. Do something positive. Don't just accept the status quo: if something in your society is wrong, don't allow it to pass you by like the parents of the youth in 1976 did, and were resented for it; do whatever it takes to change your world. Many of you are already, or will be 18 when the next elections come around. Use your vote. Use that hard-earned right to make a difference. Your own children will thank and admire you for your action someday. Our parents were wrong in 1976, and they would still be wrong today if they disagree: **YOUNG PEOPLE, YOU, CAN CHANGE YOUR WORLD**