

Christof and the University of Pretoria

*Norman Duncan**

In Part 1 of *The Tibetan book of living and dying*, Sogyal Rinpoche introduces the frequently quoted statement, which reads as follows:¹ ‘Death is a mirror in which the entire meaning of life is reflected.’ Perhaps this is what the function of a eulogy is – to view dying, this important life event, which each and every one of us will experience, as one of the opportunities afforded those who had been close to us to affirm and celebrate life, particularly a life well lived, a life lived to the fullest, a righteous life. Reading Sogyal Rinpoche’s statement certainly brings Christof’s life, his life contributions and the value of his contributions to society into vivid relief.

In this contribution I refer only to Christof’s contributions to the University of Pretoria and broader society that I am familiar with. I know that his significant contributions that I will not refer to in this contribution are broached by other contributors to this volume.

First, how did I come to know Christof Heyns? Well, many years ago, while I was still teaching at the University of Venda, I collaborated on various initiatives with someone who became a very close colleague and friend. His name is Murray Hofmeyr. When we first met (on the occasion of a collaborative event aimed at producing a volume of race and racism), Murray Hofmeyr spoke constantly of his close friend, Christof Heyns, and about the latter’s work for the Centre for Human Rights at the University of Pretoria as well as his inspiring work for the Southern African Student Volunteer Organisation (SASVO), an organisation that he had established. Murray impressed upon me that Christof was an academic that I simply had to meet. Well, as impressed as I was with Christof’s publications and the various civic initiatives in which he was involved, a few years passed before I eventually had the opportunity to meet Christof, first on a telephone call (some time before I had joined the University of Pretoria) about a matter that was being debated at UP at the time, and then later in person when I joined the University of Pretoria.

When I first met Christof, I realised that Murray had not exaggerated. I realised that I was engaging with, first and foremost, a razor-sharp intellect and a critical scholar of note. Of course, his extensive and impactful scholarly output, his scholarly legacy, attests to this. In our

first meeting, I also realised that, above all, I was in conversation with a person with boundless energy for initiating new ventures aimed at improving the learning opportunities provided to students; ventures aimed at advancing the interests of academia more broadly, as well as ventures involving international human rights and many other causes close to his heart.

During the course of our friendship, Christof drew me into various initiatives in which he was involved (as he did with many others, I know). For the purposes of this contribution, I single out three of these initiatives – because of their significance to my work, on the one hand, and what they illustrate about Christof, the scholar, academic activist and benefactor, on the other.

The first of these initiatives relates to a task assigned to me by the Executive of the University of Pretoria in 2016. At the time, various student formations made it known that they were unhappy about the absence of a policy on homophobia at the University of Pretoria. I immediately approached Christof for his assistance. In our subsequent discussions, we agreed that developing a policy dealing only with homophobia and then to add it to the University's policy dealing with racial discrimination would result in the University ultimately ending up with a patchwork of anti-discrimination policies. It was then agreed that we should rather develop an omnibus anti-discrimination policy that would address all forms of discrimination at the University of Pretoria. Christof immediately set to work on this project, with the assistance of a number of colleagues, including Anton Kok, Mary Crewe, Pierre Brouard, and myself, as well as student representatives from various student organisation. The current UP Anti-discrimination policy, which was finalised by the Registrar, Professor Caroline Nicholson, is a result of Christof's initial conceptualisation and input.

A second initiative in which I was involved with Christof is a reading group of sorts. Books written by Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee,² Yuval Harari,³ and Rutger Bregman⁴ were among those that Christoff introduced to the group. It was our discussions on the implications of the arguments proposed by Brynjolfsson and McAfee, as well as Harari, in respect of the implications of the rapid technological changes the world will witness during the twenty-first century that influenced many of my endeavours in relation to my Teaching and Learning portfolio at the University of Pretoria. Our discussions certainly inspired me to encourage a greater future directedness in our teaching and learning programmes, an orientation that certainly stood the University in good stead these past two years.

The third initiative was an internship project aimed at offering UP students an opportunity to obtain practical work experience through exposure to the work of the African Union, the United Nations,

metropolitan governance structures and the higher education sector through an internship initiative. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this initiative has not yet come to full fruition. Certainly, this year we had taken a significant first step with this project through the creation of an internship project that allows for law students to offer legal assistance to faculties at the University of Pretoria while enhancing their work readiness competencies. However, much more will have to be done to fully actualise Christoff's aspirations in respect of this project.

Of course, I am keenly aware of Christoff's many other important contributions to academia and society more broadly, including his contributions to the University of Pretoria as the Director of the Centre for Human Rights, then the Dean of the Faculty of Law, and most recently, as the Director of the Institute for International and Comparative Law in Africa (ICLA). I am also aware of and here wish to acknowledge his signally influential role in the African Human Rights Moot Court Competition (recently renamed the Christof Heyns African Human Rights Moot Court Competition) and his role in the establishment of the Nelson Mandela World Human Rights Moot Court Competition and the South African National Schools Moot Court Competition.

Christoff's exceptional and seminal contributions to human rights internationally have been written about extensively and I will consequently not detail these here. Suffice it to state that, as Shenilla Mohamed, the Executive Director of Amnesty International South Africa, put it at the time of Christoff's passing:⁵

A mighty baobab has fallen ... In Africa the Baobab tree is considered a symbol of power, longevity, presence, strength and grace. Professor Heyns was a baobab in the human rights world. A giant in his field, he fought hard for a just world.

On a more personal note, with the passage of time, I also realised that Christoff did not only care deeply for the issues that I mentioned, but that he also cared deeply about his family and friends. And anyone who spent any significant period of time with Christoff would also have realised that he was remarkably caring and humble – a 'mensch', as Thuli Madonsela recently described him.⁶ One of his former students, Patrick Eba, then UNAIDS Country Director for the Central African Republic, says of Christoff:⁷

He was a thought leader who embodied the values of excellence with ubuntu.

As most of us know, especially those of us who work in the field of psychology, that authentically and unconditionally caring for others in the way that Christoff did, is very frequently reciprocated by a similar engagement on the part of those at whom this caring is directed. So, those who knew Christoff invariably cared deeply for him.

The event for which this eulogy was prepared was meant to be a celebratory occasion. And while I fully endorsed this laudable intention on the part of the Faculty of Law, it will be remiss of me if I do not also acknowledge that celebrating the life of Christof Heyns comes on the back of a sense of intense loss on the part of those who cared deeply for him, particularly his family and close friends. It is largely in acknowledgment of this sense of loss (and perhaps in an effort – however inadequate – to assuage it) that I here quote a few lines from Maya Angelou’s poem, *When great trees fall*.⁸ Earlier I quoted Amnesty International’s reference to Christof as a baobab tree. It was when I read this quote that I was reminded of Angelou’s poem, *When great trees fall*. Here I present abstracts from the poem – specifically the first, third and fifth stanzas of the poem.

When great trees fall (Maya Angelou)

First stanza

When great trees fall,
rocks on distant hills shudder ...

Third stanza

When great souls die,
the air around us becomes
light, rare, sterile.
We breathe, briefly.
Our eyes, briefly,
see with
a hurtful clarity.
Our memory, suddenly sharpened,
examines,
gnaws on kind words
unsaid,
promised walks
never taken.

Fifth and final stanza

And when great souls die,
after a period peace blooms,
slowly and always
irregularly. Spaces fill
with a kind of
soothing electric vibration.
Our senses, restored, never
to be the same, whisper to us.
They existed. They existed.
We can be. Be and be
better. For they existed.

I here urge the indulgence of you, the reader. I invite you to re-read this poem by Angelou. However, when you get to the last line above, replace the pronoun, ‘they’, with the name Christof Heyns.

- * Vice-Principal: Academic, University of Pretoria; this contribution is based on a eulogy delivered on 16 April 2021, Faculty of Law, University of Pretoria.
- 1 R Sogyal *The Tibetan book of living and dying* (Harper 1992) <https://www.rigpa.ie/the-tibetan-book-of-living-and-dying/> (accessed 31 March 2021).
- 2 E Brynjolfsson & A McAfee (2014) *The Second Machine Age: work, progress, and prosperity in a time of brilliant technologies* (WW Norton 2014).
- 3 YN Harari *21 Lessons for the 21st century* (Jonathan Cape 2018); YN Harari *Homo deus. A brief history of tomorrow* (Vintage 2016); YN Harari *Sapiens. A brief history of humankind* (Vintage 2014).
- 4 R Bregman *Humankind. A hopeful history* (Bloomsbury 2019).
- 5 S Mohamed ‘Christof Heyns: a tribute to a giant of human rights’ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/03/christof-heyns-tribute/> (accessed 29 March 2021).
- 6 In M Heywood ‘Professor Christof Heyns was a mensch devoted to developing leaders to advance democracy and human rights’ *Daily Maverick* (accessed 29 March 2021).
- 7 P Eba *UNAIDS joins human rights community in mourning Christof Heyns, legal academic and expert*. UNAIDS https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/featurestories/2021/march/20210331_christof-heyns (accessed 31 March 2021).
- 8 M Angelou *The complete poetry* (Random House 2015). Also see <https://africa.si.edu/2014/05/when-great-trees-fall%E2%80%A8%E2%80%A8-by-maya-angelou/> (accessed 29 March 2021).