

OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES

Being similar, different,
and coexistent



By Jannie Malan

ISSUE 3, 2011



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ACCORD

The African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) is a non-governmental organisation working throughout Africa to bring creative solutions to the challenges posed by conflict on the continent. ACCORD's primary aim is to influence political developments by bringing conflict resolution, dialogue and institutional development to the forefront as an alternative to armed violence and protracted conflict.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to express his sincere appreciation to the then Coexistence Initiative in New York (Executive Director, Helen Chauncey) for inviting ACCORD to undertake a research project on coexistence in South Africa jointly with them, and for participating in the community consultations and report writing (Sarah Peterson); colleagues at ACCORD for facilitating the organising of the project (Cedric de Coning), participating in its implementation (Britt de Klerk and Karabo Rajuili) and in the launching of *Views and visions of coexistence in South Africa* (Angela Ndinga-Muvumba); and the communities and community leaders at Mpumalanga, Muden and Stutterheim for frankly sharing their stories of talking things out and resolving their violent and protracted conflicts.

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ISSN 1608-3954

ACCORD, Private Bag X018, Umhlanga Rocks 4320, South Africa

Layout and design: Shuaib Dadabhoy

Printer: Fishwicks

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Abstract

Remarkably meaningful sayings that have emerged out of real life in Africa highlight our inherent interrelatedness as fellow human beings. In the life situations where we happen to find ourselves, there are similarities that bind us together, but also differences that tend to drive us apart. When a group of us becomes concerned about who we are, and who others are, such an 'identity' search may tempt us to think that our own group is better than other groups. Various pressures from our cultures, groups and personalities can create and strengthen feelings and habits of being against other groups. It is possible, however, to be liberated from such polarisation and to become turned towards others. The valid belongingness to one's own group can be retained and promoted, but dominating and discriminating own-groupishness should be rejected. A transformation from contraexistential to coexistential mindsets and attitudes can be experienced, and such inner changes can obviously lead to changed interaction with others. It should constantly be emphasised, however, that switching to coexisting does not at all mean going to the extreme of loving-kindness. According to the situation, coexistence may range from merely understanding each other, and perhaps agreeing to differ, to cooperating in real friendship or intimate love. Findings used in this paper were obtained from fieldwork research in communities who have managed to transform brutal, homicidal conflicts into peaceful cooperation. What they shared about the ways they talked things out, understood and trusted each other, changed their mindsets and attitudes, and began doing things together showed clearly that a realistic level of coexistence can become a lived reality where it was never expected. During follow-up visits they frankly shared their experience of new problems but also of sustained coexistential relations.

Introduction: Wisdom from Africa about our human interrelatedness

Several years after exploring and recommending conflict resolution wisdom from Africa (Malan 1997), this follow-up paper may hopefully contribute to promoting more wisdom from Africa.

Probably the most appropriate starting point is the very apt three-word saying about our essential human interrelatedness. In Xhosa, the most prevalent African language where I am living and working, it is phrased as follows: *Umntu ngumntu ngabantu*. A fairly direct translation is: A person is a person through [other] persons (Prinsloo 1991:43).¹ As a paraphrased version, the following may be suggested: Every single human being can only exist as a truly human being by interrelating with other human beings. Although it seems to be just a brief statement, it is filled with life-oriented meaning. And, with its rhyme and alliteration, it reaches the listener or reader with attention-catching impact.

Readers who are not particularly interested in grammar may skip the grammatical notes in the next paragraph and simply concentrate on the meaning apparently communicated by the saying, and on the inferences that may be drawn from it.

The rhyming endings are actually repetitions of the word stem for human beings ('-ntu'), which make it very clear that the message is one about us as human beings. The singular and plural prefixes ('um-' and 'aba-', respectively) indicate that both our individual separateness and our societal integratedness are taken into account. The alliterative beginnings of the last two words (actually phrases written as single words in Xhosa) contain the verbal and adverbial links that make the sentence as striking and meaningful as it is. The first 'ng-' is an abbreviated copulative construction signifying 'is', but before the repeated noun it conveys a powerful definitional thrust: 'is what she/he is meant to be'. The second 'ng-' is a prepositional particle ('nga-', here with its 'a' contracted to the first 'a' of 'abantu') which is joined to the name of the 'instrument' 'by means of', 'through' or 'with' which something is done (McLaren 1963:39). The last 'word' of the three therefore serves the double purpose of concluding the description of a human being in the fullest sense

1 Quoting from Makhudu, N. 1993, Cultivating a climate of co-operation through Ubuntu, *Enterprise* 68, pp. 40–41.

of the name, and showing *how* this becomes a reality through interhuman interaction.

What makes this saying, that has emerged out of real life in the context of Africa, so remarkably appropriate in a discussion of diversity and coexistence is that it places *an unequivocal emphasis on our interrelatedness as human beings*.

In addition to this core emphasis, however, a few accompanying thoughts may also be found in and between the three words:

- Our interrelatedness is stated as an existential reality. It is not phrased as a recommendation or an exhortation – as if we were to strive towards an idealistic objective. The verb is not ‘should’ or ‘must’, but ‘is’. According to the context in which the saying is normally used, its main thrust is towards coexistential interrelatedness, but the reality is that there is a whole spectrum of kinds of interrelatedness, ranging from amity to enmity.
- Such a realistic – and non-idealistic – perspective therefore includes the acknowledgement that the interrelatedness is there in peace and conflict. In everyday life, with regard to which the saying is mostly used, there are of course both peaceful and conflictual situations. And in Africa’s traditional methods of dealing with conflict, interrelatedness is usually taken seriously when resolving the conflict and when planning the post-conflict situation.
- Our similarities as human beings are implied. With each of the three words being built on the word stem for ‘human being(s)’, it is perfectly clear that the statement is about human beings – who, on account of their commonalities, make up one group of living beings.
- Our differences are also implied, however. The subject about whom the statement is made is a single human individual – with all his/her individual uniqueness. In a saying from Africa, this is particularly striking, since African cultures are well known for the priority given to social cohesion (Gyekye 1991:317–318, 334). In this saying, social

cohesion is indeed the climax, but the realistic starting point is that of human individuals with their similarities and differences.

Concise enough as three words are, there is also a single word we should include in our discussion from the very beginning. When the word stem for human beings, ‘-ntu’, is used with the prefix for group quality, ‘ubu-’, we have the concept of *ubuntu*, signifying human-ness in its essentiality.

From this intensely human starting point and reference point, we² may proceed to explore our being there with our similarities and differences, and our interacting in peaceful settings and in conflictual circumstances.

1. Existing as human beings – with our similarities and differences

1.1 Being there where we happen to be

Focusing our attention on our being there can be done from various perspectives or combinations of perspectives.

- In the field of Philosophy much has already been thought, said and debated about our human existence. There has even developed a sub-field called existentialist Philosophy. But in various other sub-fields, known by ‘-ism’ labels or the names of their originators, views on being human have also been suggested.
- In Sociology and Anthropology, the findings from studying human beings in their social context are available, and Psychology can provide relevant results of exploring the human mind and mental processes.
- In the vast dimension of exploring human societal and individual life, more specific perspectives may be focused on, as the socio-economic, the political and the cultural.
- And within cultural studies, a further concentration on religious and spiritual aspects may be of great importance.

2 Instead of alternatively or jointly referring to me as author and others as readers, I prefer to use an inclusive ‘we’ wherever possible. So, when I would say, for instance, ‘We may now discuss another aspect of our topic’, I have in mind that I am writing to interested readers, who are not only reading but also participating in a virtual dialogue and/or discussion on a topic they are interested in and probably committed to.

When such a variety of perspectives is available, each with its specific results and recommendations, there is the temptation to merely gather and compile an eclectic assortment of fragments. There are also ways, however, of responsibly and effectively integrating relevant contributions from different disciplines. The eventual product may then be one that is theory-based, practice-oriented, common-sensically endorsed and creatively enhanced with innovative insights.

With the necessary precautions in mind, we may embark on a wide and deep search towards understanding as much as possible about coexisting as the interrelated but diverse humans we happen to be.

Without realising it, most of us may be 'lovers of wisdom' ('philosophers') in everyday life. We do ask penetrating questions about ourselves and the world around us. In a modest way we may have, in common with the professional philosophers, a sincere interest in existence, in being. Two thousand five hundred years ago, Greek philosophers began exploring the phenomenon of *being*, trying to determine its mysterious origins and remarkable sustainability. For this sector of their philosophy, in which they speculated about basic elements of being, they coined the term 'ontology' ('science of being'). Fairly soon, hypotheses of numbers and atoms began paving the way for mathematics and physics. But in its own unique dimension, philosophy kept growing, without being limited to certain objects or areas of study. It became concerned with problems and questions at the very borders of the separate sciences (Von Aster 1963:x).

At one point, however, an apparently unavoidable and unyielding limit was encountered, which still challenges us today: the *being* of a person or thing is an ineffable reality. All we can do, is to use existing words or coin new ones, and annotate them with explanations of the meanings they are intended to communicate (as distinguished from meanings that are not applicable). If such a communication succeeds, both the sender and the receiver will experience something inexpressible. It may be a momentary shudder or other 'feeling'. It may be almost nothing, but it may make all the difference between merely *thinking a thought* about the 'being' of someone or something and *experiencing the thrill of the presence* of someone or something.

‘Presence’ may be a helpful word. It has been used by Eckhart Tolle in *The power of now* (Tolle 1997) and in *A new earth: Awakening to your life’s purpose* (Tolle 2005). For instance: ‘Awareness is the power that is concealed within the present moment. That is why we may also call it Presence’ (Tolle 2005:78).

If being in touch with being is such a rare and furtive experience, it should be understandable that we tend to be oriented – also – to a more concrete version of this special occurrence. First of all, we expand ‘being’ to ‘being there’ and focus on the actual place where the ‘being’ of the person or thing manifests itself. Due to the impact of several German philosophers and the word economy of their language, the German equivalent, ‘Dasein’ has become widely known. It is used in the semantic field of ‘existing’, ‘being in the world’, ‘being present’ (cf Schmidt 1961:523). It is distinguished from ‘Sosein’, which is used for ‘being so’ or ‘having characteristics’ (cf Schmidt 1961:90–91).³

As already mentioned above, each of us enters human life as a baby born in a particular situation at a particular time, but none of us could select the situation or the time. We simply found ourselves *there* and *then*. Usually, but not necessarily, the situation is comprised of parents and family, a dwelling and its environment, playmates and playthings. Interrelated with one’s ‘Dasein’, however, there is always also your ‘Sosein’ (Schmidt 1961:60–61). From your parents and ancestors you inherit particular characteristics, and from your parents, family members, friends and teachers you learn and acquire more such particular characteristics. For these two processes we use the convenient pair of terms: *nature* and *nurture*.

1.2 Being so as we happen to be by nature

Our remotest ancestors already gained the experiential knowledge that a baby resembles her/his parents, although usually not in equal proportions. Some babies do appear to be a perfect ‘mix’ of the looks and the personalities of their parents, but some may be closer to one of them in certain respects and to the other in other respects. Some children may even show little resemblance to their parents, but definite traits of

3 All the letters ‘s’ in ‘Dasein’ and ‘Sosein’ are pronounced ‘z’. Both words are capitalised as are all nouns in German.

grandparents or great grandparents. Today, with all the available knowledge on genetics in general and on DNA⁴ in particular, we can understand much more about the coming into being of a new human being – who is at the same time the offspring of parents, and a unique individual. We know something about how two genetic codes can through duplications and permutations give rise to a new genetic code.⁵ In spite of all the advanced knowledge and expertise, however, the situation is still basically the same it was in ancient times: at the birth of each human child, there are realities that simply have to be accepted – by the child and by those around her or him.

About one's birthday, and therefore about one's place in human history, nothing can be changed. Parents may of course plan the arrival of a child in the light of various considerations they might have, but from the child's perspective, the birthday is a fixed point of reference.

Gender is the next unchangeable⁶ feature to be accepted by parents and child. In our technological days, some parents may get a sonar prediction beforehand, but the great girl-or-boy question is mostly only answered at birth. Some parents (as well as grandparents and relatives) are ready to welcome the child irrespective of gender. But those who have set their mind on one gender, almost as if it were their right to get a child of their preferred gender, can be very disappointed if the child happens to be of the other gender. The child may not know how its gender was initially accepted or rejected, but may later pick up clues. As the child grows up, however, she or he gradually becomes accustomed to the gender role she or he is supposed to play or fulfil according to the culture concerned (Jordaan and Jordaan 1998:659).

Related to one's gender, but also very specifically related to the genetic inheritance from one's parents, is one's physical appearance, which is another given element. Apart from some cosmetic 'improvements', not much can be altered with regard to one's looks. Facial features resembling those of one or both parents are there to stay. So is skin colour, which may in many cases be no

4 Deoxyribonucleic Acid

5 Nowadays there are also possibilities of manipulation, with limitations and risks, but for our present train of thought this aspect is not relevant.

6 Except in very rare cases.

issue at all, but in some cases a very sensitive one. In a situation where everyone has the same skin colour, or where everyone accepts the diversity of skin colours as a self-evident reality, no one should have any reason to feel uneasy about her/his own skin colour or that of anyone else. In other situations, however, there are people who seem to be harbouring stereotyped feelings about each of the skin colour groups present. People with such a mindset tend to be favourably inclined to the group they happen to belong to and less favourably or even unfavourably to other groups. In such a situation, it is understandable if individuals and groups have feelings about skin colours – their own and those of others. This issue may become even more complicated when two parents have different colours and each of their children has either an ‘average’ shade or one closer to one of the parents.

More can be said and discussed about the matter-of-factness of our life situations, but the few examples already mentioned may hopefully serve the purpose of *compelling us to take our being there where we are and our being so as we are as seriously as we can*. And this we are obliged to do not only with regard to the position of each one of us, but *also and especially with regard to the position of each and everyone around us*.

A further and very sobering thought we should occasionally remind ourselves about, is that each of us could have been there as someone else – in a different culture or country. Often, it may be useful to scale down this thought to your immediate surroundings and to tell yourself that you could have been that person you find to be so irritatingly different or difficult.

1.3 Being so as we have become by nurture

There is, however, *a crucially important distinction between how we happen to be by nature and how we happen to become by nurture*.

Elements that are nurtured into us usually become so deeply embedded in our innermost life that they almost appear to be natural features. But they are *not*. There *are* possibilities of undoing the results of one kind of cultural conditioning and adopting the inputs of another kind. Such a cultural transformation (or adaptation or integration) does not take place easily, but it can happen.

It is understandable that the typical nurturing process can be so overwhelmingly powerful, since it takes place so subtly and unconsciously, from the very beginning of one's being there.⁷ It may be a justified generalisation to say that in each culture every new member is moulded into the convictions and customs of the culture concerned.

We get our norms, our notions of how to behave, from the people around us, and especially from those who raise us....

... 'teach' is too formal a word to describe the process of cultural conditioning. As a rule, parents don't actually sit down and explain these values to children; most parents aren't even aware they hold them. Rather, these cultural attitudes are merely inherent in the things parents do and say (which they learned from *their* parents), and children, imitating what parents do and say, absorb the values with the behaviors (Storti 1994:4–5).

Apart from non-verbal exemplifying and imitating, verbal communication may also play a role. This usually happens in the language associated with the culture concerned. A bit of explanation, reminding or encouragement given to a youngster in the mother tongue has the advantage of being quite clear. The use of a mother tongue, which in most cases is not an international language, may also bring about a disadvantage, however. It may contribute to the formation and solidifying of a 'national bond', which 'ultimately bifurcates humanity into "us" and "them"' (Connor 1994:207).

The handing down of a group's deeply embedded ethno-nationalism to the next generation may indeed be an important objective of the entire nurturing process. It is, however, an objective that is usually not mentioned at all, and the process is mostly unobserved. It does not operate consciously and rationally, but unconsciously and emotionally (Connor 1994:xiii). The outcome is usually

7 There are cases where a group's culture begins to function immediately after the birth of a newcomer (Gbadegesin 1991:292–293), in a way clearly showing that the parents, family and community are committed to observing cultural customs and want the child to follow their example. In other cultural settings, including those imported into Africa from the North and the West, the nurturing process may start differently, but probably almost as soon.

quite clear, however: the younger generation is very effectively nurtured into being 'so' as fellow-members of their ethnic group are.

In a group where ethnic loyalty is linked to or even based on a religious commitment, the nurturing process can become more complicated and more pressurising. In the days of apartheid, for instance, South African whites were conditioned by a 'Christian-national education' in which a particular version of whites-only 'nationalism' was revered as divinely sanctioned, and in which a particular version of Christianity was strongly propagated.

Whether coupled to ethnicity or not, religion may anyway figure prominently in a nurturing programme. Nurturing by parents, family and community would concentrate upon that group's particular religion. In a public school, however, the focus may be on multi-faith information and understanding.

As we undergo all this cultural upbringing,⁸ our 'being so' is affected outwardly and inwardly. And the inner changes are obviously the most important. It is not merely a superficial matter of behaving according to the customs of a kin group, ethno-cultural group⁹ or religious group; it is the deeply rooted reality of having *internalised* the core values embraced by such groups, and being motivated and inspired by these values.

1.4 Being aware of our similarities and differences

Every day, between waking up and falling asleep, millions of bits of observation rush in through our senses. We do have the faculties, however, of sifting and concentrating. Although our eyes have a wide field of vision, and although we sometimes pick up someone or something that just begins moving into this field, we normally focus on what we are directly looking at. When one's ears pick up a huge number of sounds, as in a busy street, one tries to concentrate on those you really want to listen to – for instance what someone walking next to you is saying.

8 Bearing in mind a convenient synopsis of 'culture': 'Sum total of ways of living including behavioural norms, linguistic expression, styles of communication, patterns of thinking, and beliefs and values of a group...' (Stavenhagen 1986:457).

9 Or *culturo-ethnic group*.

What each one of us focuses and concentrates on is of course determined by the circumstances of the particular situation and by one's individual interests. When a couple and their children are walking down a street, they will have to take note of other pedestrians on the sidewalk and of the traffic at crossings. According to their interests, however, each will especially be looking at specific things – for instance, dresses, cars, toys, books, other people, flowers, trees, buildings.

Particularly important with regard to the topic we are discussing is the way in which our observations are oriented towards similarities, differences, or both. The interesting phenomenon is that our interests usually prompt us to observe *differences* and take the similarities for granted. A bird-watcher, for instance, will study the amazing differences among birds, without paying much attention to obvious similarities – such as being covered by feathers and having a pair of wings. A motorcar enthusiast will notice the mechanical and design features of different makes and models, without thinking so much about similarities as wheels, engines, drive shafts, steering and braking mechanisms.

This understandable preoccupation with differences while ignoring similarities can be reinforced in various everyday situations. When we want to buy an article, for instance, we often decide on one with a particular difference compared with those of other makes. We also tend to apply this orientation to differences in our dealings with other human beings. We pay more attention to differences of physical appearance, language and accent, culture and behaviour, than to the similarities of our bodies, needs, desires and emotions.

There are the cases, of course, when we do focus more on similarities. This happens especially when we choose friends and partners. Generally speaking, however, most of us may have a special need to become more aware of *similarities*.

Being aware of similarity and likeness

There are cases where differences may not be so important after all. It is interesting to note how youngsters want expensive clothes with a popular brand name as long as their parents pay, but become less concerned about the branding when they begin to pay themselves.

Amongst all of us as human beings there are remarkable similarities. An obvious first example is the set of similarities with regard to the way we come into being. All of us originate from the fusion of two microscopic reproductive cells that contain the genetic codes of our parents. The more that is revealed by research into the combinations of molecules in each DNA string, the more we stand astounded by the apparent simplicity but extreme complexity of the very beginning of every human life. Equally astonishing is the process in which the division of the fertilised cell starts a chain of cell divisions, each time doubling the number of cells, and eventually producing the 10 trillion cells (or more) of a grown-up human body. In this process the different parts, organs and systems of the body are formed, but every single one of the innumerable cells contains the genetic code that came into being from the codes of the parents. This has happened in each and every one of all of us.

Relatively few pregnant mothers and their partners may think about the development of their babies in such biochemical terms, but during the nine months each couple (or at least the mother) is indeed aware of the remarkable presence and growth of the unborn baby. After the birth of each baby more similarities follow, but differences also appear on the scene. There are the similarities of feeding, protecting, caring and clothing, but how these things are done will depend on the socio-economic and cultural circumstances into which the particular baby was born.¹⁰

This brings us to one of the most important similarities of all human beings – if not *the* most important one. *All of us simply found ourselves as **being there** in a particular situation, ‘in’ a particular body, and ‘with’ a particular personality. We could not choose our parents, gender or date of birth. Each of us therefore had to*

10 In order ‘to better understand the meaning of the individual in relation to the community’, Gbadegesin (1991:292–293) outlines ‘the coming-to-being of the new member of the family and community’, describing how according to Yoruba custom experienced elderly women ‘introduce the baby into the family with cheerfulness, joy and prayers’. Initially, the baby’s mother is only responsible for breast feeding, while other mothers take care of the baby. As the child grows, others in the family and community participate in the task of educating. It so happens, therefore ‘that a man in an African tribe calls many women “my mother”, though he knows quite well who his own mother is, and she is closest to him’ (Gluckman 1973:61). (In today’s gender-balanced phrasing, the same can surely be said of a woman in an African tribe.)

accept her or his parents and siblings, looks and gender, in-born characteristics, interests and abilities, and time of life.

There is something else we may bear in mind with regard to similarities – and this will even be more important with regard to differences. There are, namely, semantic fields to choose from. In addition to the general and emotionless term for the mere phenomenon – ‘similarity’ in this case – there are also terms expressing an emotional value – for instance ‘aliqueness’ and ‘resemblance’. When we use one of these, we show that we find something interesting or something to appreciate in a particular similarity.

Being aware of difference and diversity

Although in our daily life we are surrounded by an apparently limitless amount of differences, we normally do not become too preoccupied with differences. In fact, it is usually only in our particular fields of interest that we develop a keen sense of noticing differences and making good use of them. In other areas we simply take note, sometimes rather casually, of differences.

As reasons or motivations for our consciousness of difference, we may think of the following:

- The most obvious reason is probably that all our observations are full of differences. While on the one hand we do observe similar kinds of things and living beings around us, we cannot help noticing the differences within each kind. Houses in general have differing designs and sizes, although those in a housing scheme may all have the same shape. Trees have their great variety, and each particular kind of tree appears in different shapes. And as human beings we have our individually different appearances, although identical twins provide an exception in this regard.
- Sometimes there may be a practical reason for taking note of differences. When looking for a house, we tend to pay attention to the various designs and the different orientations with regard to the sun and prevailing winds.
- In many cases our personal taste plays an important role in our choice between different possibilities. One may even allow it to overrule a

practical consideration, as when you decide on an ‘impractical’ colour for a piece of clothing or a carpet.

- One’s interests can be a strong inner motivation for noticing differences. To someone with little or no interest in gardening, flowers are just flowers, but the committed gardener knows the names and characteristics of the different types and varieties. To an urban visitor on a farm, the cows are just cows, but the farmer may distinguish their faces and their ways of behaving. When visiting the city, the farmer may take note of all the cars and trucks, while city-dwellers may know more about makes and models. To these and many more such examples may be added the striking one of a shared environmental interest. While people in temperate climate zones just know about snow, Eskimos distinguish nine different types of snow and have coined a word for each type.

When a specific reason – practicality, taste or interest – prompts the observing and discussing of differences, the semantic factor comes into play. ‘Different/difference/differences’ may be used in an emotionally neutral, matter-of-fact way, or in a critical way; while ‘diverse/diversity’ is often used in an approving or even appreciative way. For this positive perspective, the ‘various/variety’ set is also used, and the well known metaphor ‘variety is the spice of life’.

2. Being concerned about our ‘identities’ (who we are and who they are)

At all stages of our human history, there could have been individuals or groups who somehow reflected on who they should regard themselves to be. Also, whenever one particular group observed or made contact with another group, each of the two probably formed an impression of who the other group could be perceived to be. At certain stages of our more recent history, some situations apparently developed in which humans felt prompted or urged to make more of their self-knowledge and other-knowledge. In the early days of Greek philosophy, for instance, Socrates, in his dialogical teaching, shared the recommendation, ‘Know yourself’, and the rationale for asking penetrating questions: ‘The untested life is not worth living’ (cf Schmidt 1961:536; Von Aster 1963:104).

Half a century ago, when the change took place from widely spread colonial domination to local, ‘independent’ states, the liberated people turned to the question of who they were (Niezen 2004:150), but struggled to choose between, or integrate, answers from the perspectives of (African) continental identity, black identity, national identity and local ethnic identities (Romanucci-Ross and De Vos 1995:352). In the world of our time, where local establishments and certainties are more and more challenged by global concerns and probabilities, we, as human beings, seem to be increasingly asking the ‘who are we’ question (cf Niezen 2004:141). In both these cases, an obvious common element is that when people are confronted with uncertainty or insecurity, they begin searching for and struggling towards their ‘identity’.

If insecurity is the context in which ‘identity’ tends to become a prominent and even popular concept, we should not expect it to be an easily manageable concept. People who are uncertain about who they are and/or where they belong often allow emotional concerns to overrule logical thinking. A striking example is cited by Connor (1994:203). While in solitary confinement, an ethno-nationalist activist in a large, ethnically heterogeneous state¹¹ wrote the following revealing lines:

I know that all people are equal.
My reason tells me that.
But at the same time I know that my nation is unique...
My heart tells me so.

‘Identity’ may indeed be regarded as an ‘uneasy concept’ (Taylor and Spencer 2004:1). At the same time, however, it has to be regarded as a non-ignorable concept. If fellow-humans, when troubled by all sorts of uncertainty, take refuge in the haven of identity, we cannot turn away from their plight or their prospect. We simply have to explore the ways in which this concept is used and the meanings it is supposed to communicate.

2.1 Finding our way in the semantics around ‘identity’

Dictionaries may help to guide us into the semantic fields in which the concept of ‘identity’ may function.

11 A Ukrainian, in the Soviet Union, in the early 1970s.

The most straightforward field of meaning is probably the one focusing on the scientific notion of exact *sameness*. In Chemistry, there is, for instance, the sameness of the atoms of an element (but there are also elements with isotopes, and atoms of the same element with minute differences or unpredictable probabilities in their sub-nuclear components). In Physics, one may refer to objects or phenomena that are identical. Where science and technology are applied in manufacturing, identical products come from production lines. In Mathematics, we get congruent geometrical figures and equations in which the symbol '=' signifies equality for all values of the variables involved (cf Robinson 1999:669b).

What is more important for our purpose, however, is the very complex notion of our human *who-ness*, and, with regard to the things around us, the notion of *what-ness*. These terms with their interrogative pronouns may be unusual, but they can be helpful as abbreviations for shorter or longer phrases used in this semantic field. In dictionaries we find basic phrases, as 'who somebody is' or 'what something is' (Hornby 1982:421a), or brief descriptions, as 'the state or quality of being a specified person or thing; who or what a person or thing is' (Robinson 1999:669b).

'Who someone is' can indeed function as a core phrase in our discussion of the meaning of 'identity' or 'identities' on the human scene. But it needs three important kinds of enhancement.

First of all, it cannot be limited to the mere singular 'someone'. In the social context of human beings – where people are shaped (Anderson and Taylor 2004:10)¹² – each 'someone' inevitably belongs to 'a group' or 'a community', and therefore the phrase 'who someone is' implies also taking into account 'who the community concerned is'.

Secondly, 'who someone is' cannot be explained in isolation. It may indeed be said that 'identity is a consequence of the interaction of self-conception and the perceptions of others' (Alpersen 2002:68). Moreover, the perceptions of others are formed in two directions. The self forms perceptions of others, and takes note of the perceptions others apparently have of him or her. Psychologists

12 'Perhaps the most basic lesson of sociology is that people are shaped by the social context around them' (Anderson and Taylor 2004:10).

therefore remind us that between two of us, there are six perspectives (Jordaan and Jordaan 1998:644):

| | |
|-------------------|-------------------------|
| I as I see myself | You as you see yourself |
| I as you see me | You as I see you |
| I as I really am | You as you really are |

Such sets of observations and realities can of course be present, implicitly or explicitly, in all kinds of encounters between two or more people. For any particular situation, the above list can be rewritten with the appropriate combination of pronouns – for instance: I-she, I-he, I-they, we-you, we-they. In all cases, but especially in the we-they situation, it is important to remember that there are four *perceptions* and two **realities**:

| | |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <i>We as we see ourselves</i> | <i>They as they see themselves</i> |
| <i>We as they see us</i> | <i>They as we see them</i> |
| We as we really are | They as they really are |

Thirdly, who someone or some group is, can be broken down into sub-questions, just as identity as a comprehensive term can be analysed into subdivisions. It is indeed often useful to focus on gender identity, racial, ethnic or national identity, cultural identity, religious identity, class identity, language identity (Schirch 2000:2), or local and global identity (cf Niezen 2004:177). So, when the who-ness of an individual or group is being explored, it can be very worthwhile to gain insights into these distinguishable ‘identities’, or at least into those most relevant. Obviously, of course, analysis should never be an end in itself; it should rather be a stepping stone on the way to a better informed and better synthesised holistic view.

Understanding ‘who somebody is’ can therefore be a quite complicated task. There are the merely administrative cases in which an ID (identity) book ‘identification’ may be sufficient. This little book has one’s unique picture and identity number, as well as your date of birth, family and first names, and the country of which you are a (born or naturalised) citizen. Directly or indirectly, however, it may also indicate to which population group you belong. In the old South Africa, ID numbers included a two-digit ethnic code, but this has now been replaced by a single national code for all. Still, one’s picture – and of course

one's appearance as bearer of the ID book – may disclose your group 'identity'. And if there happen to be strained or hostile relations between your group and any other group(s), the 'who you are' question inevitably implies questions as 'how is who you are affected by the enemies – and the friends – of your group?'

From this venture into semantic fields we may draw a few conclusions:

- The field of meaning in which human 'identity' is usually used, is not that of exact likeness in the physical or mathematical sense, but that of *who* individuals or groups *are*.
- In this field, however, it is usually necessary to distinguish between who individuals or groups *are perceived to be* by themselves, who they *are perceived to be* by others, and *who they really are*.
- Penetrating attention should therefore be given to the *content and correctness* of the self-perceptions and other-perceptions concerned.

In addition to the semantics of 'identity' we therefore also need to explore the theoretics of 'identity'.

2.2 Finding our way among the theories on 'identity'

Much study has already been devoted to the fascinating phenomenon of our so-called human 'identity' or 'identities'. Theories have been propounded and debates have been conducted – in which approaches and convictions have been labelled as one '-ism' or another. But decisive conclusions are apparently not easy to reach in this complicated field of study. Slocum-Bradley (2008:2) introduces a section on 'The Study of Identity' with a few sobering sentences:

Multifarious theories either directly or indirectly have attempted to capture the nature, process and consequences of identities. Many have either begun their reflections with a statement regarding the complex or elusive nature of identity.... Other authors have entirely eschewed any attempt at articulating their definition of, or approach to, studying the concept.

She then adds a very helpful remark, however (Slocum-Bradley 2008:3):

The main debate about the nature of identities can be portrayed

as running parallel to the *nature* versus *nurture* debate... In other words, different views can be placed along a continuum that stipulates the extent to which 'identities' are pre-determined by some sort of 'structure', or, alternatively, are the product of human agency.

In one of the opposing pairs of theories, primordialism and constructivism, the nature-nurture distinction is clearly discernible. *Primordialism* focuses on cultural traditions that appear to be handed down from antiquity, based on genetic (or divine?) origins, and owned by ethnic groups (Slocum-Bradley 2008:10). And *constructivism* argues that cultural traditions are more recent social constructions which cannot claim any sacrosanctity and can be changed or exchanged.¹³

In another pair, essentialism and processualism, the emphasis on either fixity or flexibility may also be seen in the contexts of nature or nurture, respectively. In essentialism, elements of culture are viewed as absolutes we have at our disposal, equipping us with strategies to argue or fight for rights, demands and group privileges (Baumann 1999:84–87).¹⁴ In processualism, on the other hand, culture and aspects of culture are seen as modifiable (cf Baumann 1999:24–26):

Ethnic and cultural identity mutates over generations, losing some of its elements and refocusing on others, while still others lie dormant for a time only to spring up again when we least expect them (McCready 1983:xxi).

For our present purpose, we need not go into discussing and debating these and other theories. We may, however, explore findings and insights that emerge from the various approaches and theories. There are, after all, situations in which an approach of adhering to traditional meaning and/or one of accepting innovative meaning may be relevant. We may therefore keep considering the three options that have very succinctly been captured in a question-marked chapter heading: 'Culture: Having, Making, or Both?' (Baumann 1999:81):

13 Dubois (2008:21) states that in the social sciences the majority opinion is in favour of attributing national identity to modern instead of primordial phenomena.

14 'We fight wars and watch Olympic games as nationals, we fight discrimination as ethnics, and contest moral issues as members of religious, or antireligious, communities' (Baumann 1999:86).

- Maintaining a cultural identity may be perceived as having ownership of a set of values and behaviours entrusted to the group one belongs to. Preferably, however, such ‘having’ should not, or not only, be understood as possessing a ‘thing’, but rather as having adopted a commitment. We may compare this expression with the one of ‘having knowledge’. To have knowledge of a subject means more than having books on that subject. It usually means that such knowledge has been acquired by the persons concerned, and that they are ready to put it into practice whenever needed.
- Although a cultural identity, or a particular aspect of it, may appear to be a constantly upheld tradition, it may sooner or later have to succumb under increasing pressure from a changing environment. Such pressurising may be due to merely chronological factors (as when clothing becomes old-fashioned) or to ethical considerations (as when unjust discrimination has to be rectified).
- In some situations, a firmly established and time-proven element of a cultural identity may be challenged by an apparently valid call for change. Then the thrusts towards both constancy and reform have to be taken into account, and either consensus or at least compromise has to be reached.

2.3 Being oriented against or towards other identities

Identity thinking can lead to more than perceptions, semantics and theories. It can lead to, or form part of, *orientations* towards others who happen to exist with *their* identities.

We have taken note of the obvious fact that identity thinking is not a one-sided phenomenon. Its two-sidedness is of such importance, however, that it deserves more than casual attention. Exploring the typical situation in which we as human beings tend to ask *who we are* and *who they are* may lead to meaningful insights. What may be asked, for instance, is whether these two identity questions arise exactly simultaneously or in a split-second sequence. If one seems to be first,

which one is it? And is it always the same one? Or do the two form a pair that simply keeps on interacting?

According to the examples mentioned above, ranging from Socrates through post-colonial independence to current globalisation, the perspective of what is grammatically called the first person (I, we) may indeed be chronologically first in most cases. But it seems to be logical that the question 'Who are we?' or 'Who am I?' immediately and inevitably implies the directly related question: 'How are we, or am I, different from the others.' We may therefore be inclined to assume that regardless of whether the initial question is about 'we/I' or 'they', the answers will tend to invoke an ongoing alternating of the two perspectives.

We may think of the metaphor of an alternating electric current, but the to-and-froing of identity questions can be much more complicated. We have to remember that these questions about who-ness are asked and responded to in a relational context. Previous experiences, current situations and future expectations are very rapidly factored into the process by our eavesdropping brains and emotions.

What is usually particularly important, is the relational dimension. Two rather extreme but representative examples are the following. When a disadvantaged group tries to find its bearings in its identity, and to work its way towards the betterment of its politico-socio-economic situation, it will probably find itself in a conflictual relationship with a despised, dominating group. When one member of a loving couple is exploring his/her own identity and the identity of his/her partner in order to appreciate their togetherness even more, he/she will probably be thrilled and inspired by their existing and growing relationship of mutual commitment, dependence and love.

The inferences we may draw from such situations, and from almost all situations, may reach further than just ad hoc inter-personal or inter-group relationships. There may be signs pointing to existential orientations. A group or an individual may seem to have an enduring inclination to repulsion or attraction – almost as if that is the default option of the group or individual concerned.

Especially if a particular orientation functions almost unconsciously, it can communicate a powerful message. Body language, as communication scientists tell us, conveys about two thirds of what we communicate (De Vito 1971:89),

and when mouth and body language clash, it is the body language that is believed by the receiver.

It can therefore be of great significance to be aware of this orientedness and of a frame of reference in this regard. What seems to be a useful way of thinking about this attitudinal orientation is the following.

On the one hand, there is *the disposition of being against, separate or exclusive*. On the other hand, we have *the disposition of being turned towards, being together and/or being inclusive*. And between the extremes there are various degrees of being indifferent, unconcerned or uncaring. For the sake of some simplifying, we can use *coexistence* as a convenient term for turned-towardness, and its opposite, *contraexistence*,¹⁵ for turned-againstness.¹⁶

The purpose of this paper, as stated in its title, is to focus on and propagate *coexistence*, but in the next section we will first look at the contrasting phenomenon of *contraexistence*.

3. Being conditioned into contraexistence (the *we/they* polarisation)

A necessary starting point may be to refrain from loading these terms – contraexistence and coexistence – with ethical connotations. When such terms or their synonyms are used in a relational context, the tendency is often to label the ‘co-’ ones as good and the ‘contra-’ ones as bad. For our present purpose, however, especially when describing and discussing the two orientations, we should preferably approach them in a neutral way and from the perspective of everyday living in all its realism.

It is of course so that the mode of contraexisting is present wherever any sort of conflict is taking shape or taking place. It should be remembered, however, that conflict cannot be declared as always bad. The axiom ‘all conflict is about change’ (Anstey 1999:1) is relevant in most, if not all cases. Conflict can be

15 ‘Contraexistence’ (existence *against*) may be less known than ‘coexistence’ (existence *together with*), but is not at all unknown. Internet searches for these two terms lead to 2 million and 25 million results, respectively.

16 When using these terms, we should guard against over-simplification, however, and remember that an apparently indifferent middle position may conceal elements of an extreme orientation.

initiated with a justified purpose (cf Anstey 1999:5–6), and can be conducted constructively (Kriesberg 1998:1–3).

Contraexistence, however violent and destructive it might be, may therefore be approached in an unprejudiced way. We can try to understand how everyday experiences can cause or contribute to attitudes and mindsets of being in opposition to others or other ideas.

3.1 Cultural nurturing can have segregating side-effects

When discussing our cultural upbringing, which usually takes place informally but forcefully, we were reminded of its well-intentioned effects and its inevitable side-effects. As children, we were brought up according to the customs of our group, so that we could do everything ‘as it should be done’ and get the approval of our families and communities. At the same time, however, our doing of things according to the habits and peculiarities of our own cultural group distinguished us from other groups – and made us aware of the different ways of the other groups.

So, although the unspoken but assumed objective of this cultural conditioning is to confirm our belonging to our group and our loyalty to our group, it has the dual side-effect of ‘othering’ us from other groups and ‘othering’ other groups from us. This effect may be very decently concealed, but it can have a very powerful influence on inner thoughts and feelings. Interestingly, but very meaningfully, the thoughts and feelings are not so much directed against the things that are quite different, but rather against those that are comparable and almost similar.

If the other group has another mother tongue and another nationality, these obvious differences are readily accepted. Moreover, if the other group has acquired the language of the observing group but speaks it with some errors and an accent, the observing group will probably not mind very much. They will rather appreciate the effort of the other group to have learnt the observing group’s language. But, if both these groups have learnt a third, common language, and inevitably speak it each with their own accent, each of the two groups may (inwardly) frown upon the ‘wrong’ accent of the other. Without venturing to say it, each group may be *thinking* something like: ‘How *can* they

say this word in such a distorted way? Why can't they learn (as we did) how it should be pronounced *properly*?

With regard to cultural behaviour, symbols and customs that are markedly different may from both sides be regarded as strangely different but quite interesting. But when it comes to common activities such as eating or drinking, relatively small differences may cause implicit frowns and silent thoughts: 'To eat like *that*! And to do this in *such* a way!'

While many people, possibly the majority, in each group may manage to keep their cross-cultural criticising and ridiculing for themselves, there are usually those who cannot refrain from frankly telling cross-cultural jokes, or at least heartily laughing about them.

Whether latent or patent, culturality can indeed function in polarising and conflict-causing ways. Culture has become an integral part of the human scene, however. It cannot be denigrated or eliminated. All we can do, is to be aware of and make each other aware of its potentially divisive role, and to promote cultural concord and cooperation as far as possible (Malan 2001:4–8).

3.2 Group conformity may provide additional incentives towards polarised existence

Bearing in mind the binding power of belongingness and commitment to one's own group, it is understandable that feelings towards other groups usually range from moderate affinity through casual indifference and forbearing tolerance to camouflaged aversion or even blatant enmity. Group-inspired attitudes can therefore be of a rather polarising and pressurising kind, and group perceptions and convictions can be very rigid and overpowering (cf Jordaan and Jordaan 1998:359). This is not only the case in the cultural contexts of the East, Africa and Latin America, where the self is regarded as interdependent, but also in the West, where the self is allowed to be independent (Jordaan and Jordaan 1998:659–660).

While all these examples of apartness and aloofness are often blamed on 'culture' or 'identity', they may in many cases be traced back to a group mentality of superiority. A group tends to observe its customs without any criticism, and to regard themselves as undoubtedly better than other groups. And so the

members of a group tend to become the people the group determines them to be (Jordaan and Jordaan 1998:753).

The process of conforming to group attitudes, feelings and mindsets takes place in a subtly but strongly pressurising way. Shared meanings are derived from social interaction, 'internalised in corresponding inner worlds' and 'are embedded in rules which give to people's actions a rule-following character' (Jordaan and Jordaan 1997:701). Such interpretations and prescriptions may be very valuable as common-sensical and life-orientational equipment, but some of them may also provide rationales for defending the own group and discriminating against other groups.

3.3 Perceptions, stereotypes and mindsets tend to be biased

Self-perceptions tend to be more favourable and other-perceptions less favourable

Since perception is inevitably a subjective process in which the experiencing person is reconstructing reality (Jordaan and Jordaan 1997:399), such preferential manipulation of impressions can be expected. In loyalty to one's own group and oneself, priority is given to the most positive self-perceptions, while the more negative ones are connived at. And in spontaneous or rationalised competitiveness with other groups or individuals, one's perceptions of them are regarded as 'not so good' as the perceptions you have about your own group and yourself.

When differences are observed objectively and unemotionally, they may lead to matter-of-fact we/they distinctions. But when the differences are labelled with evaluations of 'better' or 'worse', the we/they distinctions become more pronounced and more polarised.

Generalisations and prejudices are usually focused on the weaknesses of others

Generalising and stereotyping¹⁷ are inherently unfair processes. First, we focus on an unrepresentative sample of a whole group, either because this small part of the group happens to be there, or because we have singled out a number

17 Which is basically an over-generalisation (Radford and Gavier 1982:611)

of the group's members who have disappointed us. Second, we then draw the unsubstantiated inference that most, or even all, members of the group are so. The metaphor 'stereotyping' calls up the vivid image of identical copies made from one original pattern.

These processes can then lead to another unfair practice: forming a particular prejudice. The general impression thereby turns into a sweeping judgment which is not, or not yet, based on proper evidence. As already discussed, such unfair procedures cannot be expected to have positive outcomes. They usually lead to the forming of negative perceptions and predispositions, and therefore to polarisation or increased polarisation.

Prejudiced thoughts or actions are often accompanied by a feeling of uneasiness, which is probably due to a guilty admission that we are *generalising* unjustifiably. This feeling may be endorsed by signals of unhappiness from the objects of our generalising. On a small scale and in a family context, the message may come across tactfully. A pair of twins may simply show by their body language that each of them prefers to be treated as a unique individual. On a large scale and in a context of tense relations, however, the members of an ethnic group may vent their disapproval much more assertively.

There are cases in which a degree of generalising may be justifiable and even useful. When tools or furniture are designed ergonomically, the *average* shape and dimensions of the human body are taken into account. When studying African culture in its extreme diversity, a case may be made for 'attempt[ing] some degree of generalisation and categorisation' (Solanke 1982:16). The problem is, however, that there often is a small and tempting step from a scientifically neutral method to an emotionally partisan approach. The same people who in their profession will process survey data with statistical correctness may in their daily life allow biased 'averages' to influence their thoughts and behaviour.

The further and main problem is that the bias is usually positive in the case of one's own group, but *negative* in the case of other groups. If in a hundred people there are ten very friendly ones and ten very unfriendly ones, the group will probably be labelled by outsiders as 'unfriendly' and by insiders as 'friendly'. And if this fault-finding tendency is indeed more prevalent than an inclination to be on the lookout for the strong points of others, it explains why it is commonly

accepted that ‘generalising’ is a negative term. In most cases we would use it without the adjective ‘negative’, assuming that the context of human life is enough to qualify generalising as negative. The same can be said about other words functioning in the same semantic field. ‘Stereotyping’ and ‘prejudice’ are usually understood in an unfavourable sense (cf Jordaan and Jordaan 1998:768, 771). If, in a particular case, any of these almost-synonyms is used in a *positive* sense, it has to be explicitly stated.

‘Good-we’/ ‘bad-they’ mindsets tend to become more prominent in conflict situations

What seems to lurk behind this negative bias is a good-we/bad-they mindset, which can be ‘decently’ kept in check in most circumstances, but can easily be allowed free scope in conflictual situations.

Such negative stereotyping, or identifications, evident in conflict... entails identifying oneself (or one’s group) as the ‘victim’¹⁸ and identifying others using stable traits with highly negative connotations, such as hypocritical, untrustworthy, intolerant, uncooperative, negligent, arrogant, manipulative, totalitarian, discriminating, greedy, abusive, egoistic, extremist, and so forth (Slocum-Bradley 2008:12).

It is important to remember, however, that although ‘[i]n nonconflict situations, people are less likely to stereotype others or categorize them according to one social group’ (Schirch 2000:3), the predisposition may be there all the time. Moreover, this mindset is not just a differentiating one, but also a distance-increasing one. Its pattern of thinking is one of pushing away into greater social distance (cf Jordaan and Jordaan 1998:769) and even into an area of exclusion.

3.4 Identity thinking harbours an orientation of *against-ness*

The concern about ‘identity’ may appear to be an innocent interest in the attributes of one’s group, and sometimes this may indeed be the case. Often, however, identity thinking arises from comparing one’s own group with another

18 Although it is bad to be a victim, victimhood can be part of a ‘good-we’ perspective. The implied assumption is that the victim does not have the bad characteristics of the oppressor, and does not retaliate, but simply bears the suffering.

group. The differences may be relatively small issues of habits or accents, but they are noted.

The problem with such comparisons is of course that they are made by insiders who tend to be partial to their own group. When comparing accents, for instance, they do not do it as an impartial expert in Phonetics would. They simply assume that their own pronunciation is the correct one and that the other group has to be criticised and corrected.

There are the cases, of course, where identity exploration is prompted by an already existing polarisation. In such cases, identity thoughts and attitudes do not arise from the mere observation of differences, but from the actual experience of discrimination. Even then, however, differences between the groups may be exaggerated, by both sides, and exploited to widen the disparity between the ‘identities’.

The uneasiness of the concept of ‘identity’, already referred to in part 2 above, may, at least partly, be attributed to the against-ness that appears to be an integral and inherent part of our identity-oriented thought and actions. We have already taken note of the fact that notions of identity arise out of perceptions, which are usually at least two-directional. It is when one human being or group of human beings perceives and is perceived by another that both become concerned about their ‘identities’. It is in interaction and not in isolation that the concept of ‘identity’ comes to the fore:

...the concept of identity...is only one side of the coin, for every act of identification implies a ‘we’ as well as a ‘they’ (Epstein 1978:xii).

In defining themselves, groups also define others; and in defining their opponents, they also define themselves. Each self-conscious collectivity defines nonmembers; indeed, identity is in good measure established in contrast to others (Kriesberg 1998:64–65).

It may (partially?) be due to this inherent against-ness that the concept of ‘identity’ is beset with difficulties and sensitivities and that it often seems to be regarded as an unseemly topic of discussion.

3.5 Attitudes of disliking may be the deep-seated core of the orientation of againstness

The core of thinking against and behaving against others with a different ‘identity’ may very well be some form of disliking. It may be concealed behind a façade of civility or it may be shamelessly exposed. It may be justified by convenient rationales or by alleged reasons. But, since dislike is an attitude that may be based on biased convictions and/or emotive feelings, it may in many cases be true that ‘[m]uch of our so-called reason consists of finding reasons to go on believing as we already do.’¹⁹

We may therefore take the risk of saying that the dynamics which makes ‘identity’ such a problematical term may to a large extent actually be the dynamics of disliking. In the context of our daily living with all its choices and decisions we are constantly dealing with our likes and dislikes. We obviously find it more pleasant to communicate our likes, and more difficult to convey our dislikes to others. Taking the relatively simple example of our taste for foods, fashions or colours, we know that it is easy to appreciate those one likes. But when you have to give your opinion on something you do not like, you have to choose between hiding or revealing your own taste, or falling back on the time-tested Roman saying that tastes are not to be argued about.²⁰

In the case of disliking fellow-humans, however, we cannot simply claim that our likes and dislikes are inherent realities that cannot be argued about. Here we can anyway not take refuge in the old saying, because the Latin word for taste (‘gustus’) was apparently only used for tastes about kinds of food or other things.

Arguing in a field bristling with emotions and prejudices will obviously never be straightforward. Clear and honest reasoning may be challenged from various perspectives and distorted into several deviations and tangents. Still, we may and should organise our thoughts, experiences, confessions, expectations and recommendations around the dynamic concept of ‘identity’ – in the sense of ‘who we are’ and ‘who they are’.

19 J.H. Robinson, quoted in Jordaan and Jordaan 1997:451.

20 In the Latin phrase ‘non disputandum est’ we can recognise ‘not to be *disputed*’.

3.6 Some personality traits can cause antipathy towards others and other groups

Above-ness and against-ness may not only be the results of cultural conditioning or group pressurising, however. Such orientations may also be the manifestation of inherited and inborn personality traits. Those with a choleric type of personality may be easily provoked to touchiness, impulsiveness and aggressiveness. Those with a melancholic temperament may be anxious, moody and unsociable, but in many cases they may manage to disguise their feelings against others under a quiet sadness (Allen 1998:15).

People with more stable personality types may of course also have anti-attitudes, but may succeed in keeping them under control. Those who are inclined to introversion may be able to reserve their feelings for themselves, while those who function in an extrovert way may manage to share their contra feelings in quite sociable ways.

In our everyday life most of us may be giving little thought to the ways in which our personalities affect our relationships. Each of us tends to take our own personality as a given inner make-up according to which we function in life. We may be more subjected to the pressures towards contraexisting that come from around us than to those coming from within ourselves. If, however, one does become aware of an antagonistic streak in your own personality, it is possible to admit it and do something about it.

Allen (1998:18–19) ensures us that ‘your personality is not something fixed like, say, your shoe size, but something that, within certain limits, is capable of change’. It is therefore not necessary to merely resign oneself to antipathetic personality traits and simply rationalise about them and perhaps apologise for them. But if one decides to begin working on problematic aspects, Allen’s advice is to take things slowly, since a dramatic change is unlikely to last. And ‘[i]n any case, what is most attractive about a person is that part that is most natural and honest’ (Allen 1998:19).

3.7 Being prepared to counteract all the conditioning into contraexisting

At the end of part 3, it may be useful to review the ways we have discussed in which attitudes and acts of being against some others become embedded in our minds and behaviour.

Our identity-oriented thinking may begin as a well-intentioned search for clarity about our own being there and being so, but inevitably implies comparisons with the also being there of others and their being so in different ways. Differences often interest and impress us more than similarities (section 2.3 above), and such impressions can prompt feelings of aversion. In our own groups, however, we normally do focus on similarities, and we tend to develop feelings of affinity.

Being of a comparative nature, an identity quest as such can already lead to dislikes and likes. Often, however, it is through nurture that emotions of againstness, aversion and even enmity are inculcated into us. But, whether our dislikes are the result of loyalty to cultural upbringing, or of identity concerns, or just of unhappy personal experiences, they can lead to unfortunate consequences and complications.

What has also emerged from our discussion of the complexities of perspectives and feelings is the constantly recurring relevance of nature and nurture – lines of thinking which can lead to partial clarification but not to comprehensive explanation.

We regard our psycho-somatic existence and our inborn characteristics as inherited nature. And we usually accept our belongingness to our group as a natural characteristic. When it comes to rating our own group as superior and other groups as inferior, however, we seem to be unsure whether we should regard this tendency as part of our nature or whether we should blame it on our nurture.

We seem to agree quite easily that loyalty to our cultures is acquired nurture. But when we venture into critical thinking about our own culture and discover discriminating and/or domineering aspects, we may begin to hesitate. To get rid of feelings of guilt, we may declare such aspects to be nature-based – or even divinely ordained.²¹ Or, we may acknowledge our collective guilt and frankly criticise the elements in our own group's culture that are unfair to other groups.

For most of us, therefore, our perspective of nature and nurture may be comprised of three parts: one where we have a fair amount of clarity on our

21 As the apartheid theologians did.

nature, one where we have a similar degree of clarity on our nurture, and one where a lack of clarity leaves us groping around between ascribing something to nature or to nurture (or to both).

4. Being liberated into the dimension of coexistence (*we, they, and all of us*)

In part 3 we have tried to understand why contraexistential thinking and behaving are so prevalent and popular, and how it happens that we are so easily caught up in the mode of contraexisting. We have tried to avoid unnecessary prejudice against contraexistence. There are after all situations in which being *against* unfair people and/or policies may undoubtedly be justified, and in which such an approach may lead to the rectification of wrongs. Nevertheless, we should remind ourselves of our starting point of coexistential human interrelatedness, and admit that contraexistence is essentially an antagonistic phenomenon. Its divisiveness cannot be condoned.

In part 4 we should therefore explore how we may become liberated from the clutch of contraexistence and move into the contrasting life-style of coexisting. We cannot ignore the causes and excuses for contraexisting, or connive at them. But if we understand the deep-seated influence and pressure of cultural upbringing, group loyalty, inter-group partiality, identity images and feelings of dislike, we can search for ways of effectively overcoming the polarising power of these realities. When a reason is found to be merely or mainly a social or individual construction, it should not be allowed to bar the way to necessary change. When an alleged rationale is exposed as a defensive or even an aggressive mechanism for own advantage, it should be dismissed.

4.1 Approaching natural and cultural differences in a realistic and receptive way

It can take just a few detached thoughts to realise how relatively unimportant many differences really are. With regard to *things*, we usually observe and accept differences in shape, colour and qualities in a matter-of-fact way, without becoming emotional. We do have our preferences, of course, and we do have (and often share) our comparative opinions, but we usually refrain from antagonistic criticism. We buy an article of our choice

and realise that the others on the shelves are there to cater for the needs and tastes of other shoppers. When travelling, we may prefer scenic landscapes to desert-like expanses, but our knowledge of climate zones may prevent us from blaming a particular countryside for being what it happens to be.

With regard to *people*, similar bits of realism and objectivity can help us to tolerate differences. First of all, there is the obvious insight that each one of us exists according to a genetically determined design. In this context, the ‘sobering thought’ (section 1.2 above) may be repeated: you could have been a member of the group you find so annoying, or the person you find so irritating. And that, if you were in any of those positions, you could have been just as annoying to some others.

Secondly, there is the insight that each one of us has been subtly but successfully programmed to think, speak and behave according to the instructions of the culture concerned. In most cases, these two insights should go together, because the differences we have to deal with are not only based on nature but also on nurture.

What the two insights have in common is their realistic and unemotional approach. They differ, however, in the discoveries they lead to. The first one reveals the *inevitability* of what we have been endowed with by *nature*. And the second one discloses the *subjugating power* – but also the *relativity* – of what has been inculcated into us by *nurture*. When we do understand how, as ‘cultivated’ human beings, we are subservient to cultural conditioning, we can feel a kind of considerateness with people who have been moulded into a different cultural matrix. And if a particular aspect of their culture appears to be a questionable one, we can even have sympathy with them. At the same time, however, we can remind ourselves, and communicate with our body language, that cultural commandments do not need to be absolutes dominating everyone’s whole life. There are usually no easy ways of escape from cultural predicaments, but with courage and/or creativity escape routes may often be found and ventured.

Such an open-minded approach to differences, especially cultural differences, can lead to a very significant attitudinal change. *An attitude of being irritated by ‘unacceptable’ differences may turn into one of being intrigued*

by the interesting diversity around us. Such a mind-shift can liberate us from finding life so ‘difficult’ and lead us into experiencing it as fascinating.

4.2 Exposing and rejecting self-centred or own-group-centred dispositions

However strong the external and/or internal pressures may be to follow the line of least resistance and go along with the group- or self-centred crowd, there *are* possibilities of breaking away and escaping into the freedom of coexisting with fellow-human beings. For such possibilities, however, no prescriptions or guidelines can or should be given. Each situation will inevitably be different and complex. Going against one’s group may be difficult and daunting, and going against one’s own personality may seem to be improper and impossible. What we can do in our discussion, however, is to suggest questions that may be asked, mention options that might be considered and give examples of particular approaches and their outcomes.

A first and helpful question could be one about *the main factor that keeps one’s group or oneself locked in in a polarised antagonism.* A feeling, an attitude and a mindset may be inextricably intermingled, but sometimes it may be possible to focus on the predominant one of the three.

The second and crucial question, however, is the one about *why the feeling, attitude or mindset is persistently there.* To become liberated from the disposition of againstness, much more is needed than a short-lived new-year type of resolution. The origins and actual reasons – not only alleged reasons – for the orientation should be identified.

In the struggle against the selfishly white-centred system of apartheid in South Africa,²² we get a meaningful example of opposition from within the

22 This notorious political system of ethnic compartmentalising was the institutionalised culmination of a socio-cultural practice that had begun to take shape in the 17th century. That was when the meeting of the cultures of the South African inhabitants and the European settlers resulted in a clash of disliked differences, and when the settlers and their descendants began regarding their own culture, and themselves, as superior. Over a few centuries a rationale for this social aloofness of whites was constructed out of a convenient mixture of conservative Christian theology and white Afrikaner nationalism. It was on account of this ideology that the all-white ‘National’ Party came into power in 1948 and began enacting a series of apartheid laws to entrench their ‘divinely ordained’ system in an apparently unassailable position.

ethnic group of the perpetrators. Fierce opposition obviously came from black South Africans, especially through a defiance campaign and an armed struggle of the African National Congress (ANC), and from the rest of the world through economic sanctions, disinvestment and sports boycotts. But opposition also came from some white South Africans. Critical thinkers among 'liberal' English-speaking whites *and* 'enlightened' Afrikaans-speaking whites uncovered the injustice of discrimination and inequality. They began unmasking the cultural idol of apartheid as a political fallacy and a theological heresy. These insights and their implications were disseminated through informal discussions, discussion groups and meetings, letters in the press, open letters and other opportunities that presented themselves. As a white, Afrikaans-speaking South African, I was grateful that I could also participate in such meetings and writings, and contribute to some of the attempts to expose the immorality and criminality of apartheid. It was a liberating experience to counteract the untenable injustices of the culture I was supposed to uphold.

In spite of all the criticism and ostracism levelled at everyone who ventured to reveal this disposition, the changed attitude became adopted by more and more whites. It enabled them to understand the plight of black South Africans and to think themselves empathetically into their situations and feelings. It prompted them to begin dissociating themselves from the firmly entrenched policy. Later, when in the new South Africa the apartheid structures and practices were being eradicated, more and more of the former supporters of the system revealed how their eyes had been opened by ahead-of-the-time opposers of apartheid.

The institutionalised racial discrimination in the old South Africa was an extreme example of cultural own-groupishness. Fortunately, it is not all cultures that harbour such fanatical excesses, but in any culture there may develop milder degrees of unfair treatment inflicted upon other cultural groups. Adherents of all cultures may therefore benefit from the lesson that *when the dissent against a cultural wrong comes from cultural insiders, it may have a powerful effect*. In spite of the establishment's clamping down on those who caused the original stir, the ripples may gain momentum and grow into irresistible waves.

It is of course also possible for cultural leaders, and followers, to become pro-actively open-minded in this regard. Thought patterns based on

own-cultural perceptions, meanings and convictions (cf. Deutscher and Lindsey 2004:4–5) may be revisited and adapted. From a pastoralist group in Kenya, we have a probably rare but very commendable example of meditation and introspection: ‘...the Borana community spends much of its time thinking about their culture and making deliberate attempts to modify their customs’ (Duba et al 1997:16).²³ And in a particular training manual we find a set of exercises on culture that can ‘help a group to understand more fully the dynamic nature of culture, to look both appreciatively and critically at their own culture, and to become more sensitive to the values in other cultures’ (Hope and Timmel 1999:186).

What should also be emphasised in the lesson from South Africa is the reciprocal empowering that took place. Daring initiatives at grass-roots level encouraged some leaders, and brave moves by such leaders persuaded many of their followers to turn against apartheid. After the way had been partially paved by anti-apartheid voices, writings and decisions, even in the National Party²⁴ and the Dutch Reformed Church,²⁵ the then State President, F.W. de Klerk, in 1990 announced the unbanning of the African National Congress (ANC) and other political organisations, and the freeing of Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners. A few years later (in 1992) the new mindset had become so prevalent among whites that more than two thirds of the then predominantly white electorate voted in favour of a new, post-apartheid dispensation. The results of this referendum seem to support the hypothesis that *when influential politicians change their mindset and slogans, there may indeed be a moderate majority who follow them in the new direction.*

23 Duba et al. 1997 is a remarkable publication containing descriptions of indigenous methods of conflict resolution written by authors from eight pastoral communities in Kenya, and beautifully illustrated by two artists (Isam Aboud and Izzeldin Kojour).

24 Who in 1986 ‘changed [their] policy from separate development to power sharing’ (Johnston 1994:197).

25 Who, also in 1986, and ‘after heated debate’, ‘issued a document entitled “Church and Society” in which it submitted that apartheid could not be justified on Christian ethical grounds’ (Johnston 1994:195).

4.3 Integrating belongingness and inclusiveness

Rejecting the selfishness and superiority of one's own group does not necessarily have to mean rejecting the group itself. In South Africa, there were indeed whites who opted out of their group ashamedly and contemptuously. Others, however, retained as many links with their group as they found feasible, and tried to combine their frank criticism with tactful encouragement towards radical change.

Belonging to one's group is after all not an optional extra. In Abraham Maslow's well-known outline of our innate human needs, the need to belong somewhere figures prominently. He distinguished between groups of needs, of which four are deficiency needs (physiological needs, security needs, the need for love and the need to belong, the need for esteem and appreciation) and one is a growth need (the need for self-actualisation) (Jordaan and Jordaan 1998:651). Since we are existing as social beings, belonging is indeed one of our urgent needs, which, if not fulfilled, leaves us with a serious lack.

Except in exceptional cases, however, human beings do have opportunities to satisfy this need. As we grow up, we normally find ourselves in more than one group – for instance, a core family, an extended family, a neighbourhood and a school. It is one thing, however, to be simply part of a group and another to feel that you really belong to it. A sense of being accepted by a group and an urge to become a committed member of that group can be furthered by interpersonal affinities, reciprocal relationships and encouraging experiences. Or the desire to belong can be hampered by interpersonal tensions, cultural limitations or ideological incompatibilities.

Problems with the group that one is apparently supposed to belong to may in some cases be circumvented by striving to identify with another group. Usually there are groups that may be joined in anything from a fairly neutral to a very committed way. You can apply for a job where you feel more at home with fellow-workers; you can move to a residential area where you expect to build better relationships with neighbours; and you can voluntarily join a sports club, a hobby group, a professional association, a political party, a religious movement, or any other interest grouping. It is however so, that finding

acceptance and warmth in an alternative haven may not solve all one's problems with your 'own' group.

What should be borne in mind, therefore, is that belonging is a universal human need which we have to acknowledge in ourselves and in others, but that it would be unfair and impossible to prescribe to any group or individual in what particular way this need should be fulfilled.

It is quite possible, however, to integrate belongingness and inclusiveness. The responsibility of belonging can indeed be supplemented by the culture of befriending. This can happen when the barriers that exclude a different group, who is perhaps also regarded as difficult and unlikeable, are broken down and bridges of intergroup understanding and rapprochement are built.

Further initiatives may follow, not as superficial shows, but as spontaneous consequences of befriending attitudes: inclusive invitations, sharing of cultural traditions and shocks, honest and realistic inter-ethnic relationships, ubuntu-inspired human fellowship (Malan and Sachane 1997:18).

As indicated by the bracketed pronouns in the headings of parts 3 and 4, the fusing of belongingness and inclusiveness may be seen as the best alternative to the *we/they* polarisation. The option of coexistence can indeed be proclaimed very simply but very aptly by the emphasis on *we*, *they*, and *all of us*. It clearly communicates the message that

- *we* can be who we are and belong where we belong,
- *they* can be who they are and belong where they belong,
- *and we* and *they* can also work and live together in an inclusive *all of us* group.

4.4 Developing a more inclusive mindset with regard to identity

At the beginning of part 3, we have already noted that although 'identity' is an 'uneasy concept', we cannot ignore it or discourage the use of it. We have to remember that many people may be hoping to increase their sense of security and purpose by adhering to a favourable image of their own identity and ascribing less favourable identities to others. We therefore have to tackle the

difficulties and problems associated with the concept of ‘identity’, and address the limited understandings with which it is often casually handled.

The thoughts and insights we have discussed in the first three sections of part 3 should help us understand how and why identity-searching and identity-declaring tends to function in exclusive ways. Important points that deserve repeated or new emphasis may be listed as follows:

- The impression that the word ‘identity’ usually makes on us is that of a scientific term derived from Latin – renowned for its preciseness – and designating ‘same-ness’. With regard to the (diachronic) history of the word, this impression is valid, but according to its current (synchronic) use, the meaning predominantly conveyed by ‘identity’ is that of the ‘who-ness’ of an individual or group. This meaning is in fact the only one expanded upon in the supposedly very up-to-date thesaurus on our computers.²⁶
- The idea of who someone or some group is, is usually not based on an objective assessment – which would anyway be impractical in daily life – but on mere perceptions. The typical everyday situation is that from each of two sides a more favourable self-perception and a less favourable other-perception are formed. But each side tends to endorse and defend its own set of perceptions and to criticise and disregard the other side’s perceptions. The result is that each side gets more and more convinced of the validity and applicability of its images of ‘who we are’ and of ‘who they are’. Both of these images are slanted, however – the first towards self-superiority and the second towards other-inferiority. If ‘identity’ is used in such a context, by either of the two parties, its meaning can probably be rendered as ‘the opinion of how much better we are than they’.

26 In the thesaurus included in the MicroSoft Word software, for instance, the synonyms for ‘identity’ are given in a single list under ‘individuality’. They are: individuality, uniqueness, distinctiveness, characteristics, self, character, personality. In the sub-menus of these synonyms more possibilities are given: independence, individualism, eccentricity, exclusivity.

Being similar, different, and coexistent

- Those who try to justify such a two-faced (favouritism/criticism) disposition tend to seek arguments in the dimension of nature. In characteristics that may be regarded as pre-determined, 'arguments' for being better than others may possibly be found. Those who rather wish to propagate an approach towards mutual understanding and respect, however, may turn to the dimension of nurture, and concentrate on the modifiability of discriminatory cultural traditions. And those who are working towards an understanding that takes both constancy and change into account usually find it necessary to consider factors from nature *and* nurture.
- It is understandable that our perceptions of who we are inevitably imply perceptions of who others are. It is also understandable that such contrasting may lead to the comparing of apparent differences, and that comparisons are usually made with the purpose of evaluating. It is possible, however, to distinguish between situations where evaluation may be permissible or even necessary and those where it may be unnecessary or even unwanted. If the context is that of things, and the purpose that of choosing the most appropriate article (a piece of clothing for instance, or a tool), there can be no objection against evaluating comparisons. In the context of human groups or individuals, however, there are relatively few situations in which the purpose justifies such comparisons. Selecting the most suitable applicant for a job is a pertinent example. But striving to grab advantages for one group from another group is surely not an acceptable purpose.
- It is therefore possible to form perceptions of who we are and who others are without elevating ourselves above others. One of the best precautions against this temptation is to refrain from generalising. We have already (in section 3.3 above) touched upon the strong tendency towards generalising – with a positive partiality in the case of one's own group and a negative prejudice in the case of other groups. This narrow-minded tendency can be overcome and replaced by an

orientation which is open-minded enough to include weak points in one's own group and strong points in other groups.

When such non-generalising frankness and fairness are practised, it is not only weak and strong *points* that are included. The way is opened to include previously excluded *people* or groups. Signals of an inclusive mindset are communicated.

What we have called the alienating effects of forming concepts of identity, are accompaniments of the process, but can be avoided. They can be regarded as expectable but escapable side-effects. It is therefore *possible to explore who we are without yielding to the temptation of being **against** others – according to who we **think** they are.*

Choosing and implementing this option is nothing less than an existential change. What is needed to make it happen is not the adoption of a rule or a duty. It is *changing from a mindset of turned-againstness to a **mindtrend of turned-towardness**.* Such a transformation of thinking then leads to a transformation of behaviour. If the change of mind has been genuine and comprehensive, the change of behaviour will follow as if it happens automatically. Recommendations and reminders may fulfil a supporting and encouraging function, but are not really necessary.

Changed thinking cannot remove oppositional realities, of course. Contrasts and differences between 'us' and 'them' will still be there. Important aspects can change, however. Looking down with a frown upon differences can turn into looking at diversity with a radiant expression and receptive body language. Antipathy against cultural, political, socio-economic, or ethnic differentness can change towards sympathy. Humiliating criticising or ridiculing can be replaced by humble interest and respect.

However significant and promising such changes may be, they cannot be interpreted as irreversible and conclusive. Turned-towardness is after all not yet inclusiveness. Bridge-building over divides and journeying towards true inclusiveness are usually longer-term processes. Changing from disliking to liking may happen as a sudden switch, but can also be a gradual development.

4.5 Exploring the possibility of transforming dislike into forbearance

Dislikes may be deep-rooted, but they may also be very shallow-rooted. At any rate, however, they are not unalterable. In many cases, the fearless and persistent asking of the question ‘Why?’ may help to brush aside the alleged deep-rootedness of a dislike. In their attempts to answer the *why* question, people may for instance discover that their dislike is not really focused on the other group as such but mainly on their ways of doing certain things – as dictated by their culture. Such an insight may then lead to further breakthroughs. Instead of continuing to reify, classify and vilify the identity of the other group, they may begin to humanise, reinterpret and respect it. They may therefore approach the disliked group with sympathy and empathy, and feel the warmth of their fellow-humanness.

We should have no illusions, however, that by means of facilitating questions or suggestions dislikes can easily be turned into likes. We should anyway not think that extreme or moderate disliking needs to be turned into extreme or moderate liking. As implied by the heading of this section, even a neutral kind of tolerance can already make a significant difference. In many situations, forbearance or tolerance may be as much as can realistically be expected.

There are also the cases in which potential breakthroughs are either precluded or overruled by very typical human emotions, feelings or whims. A group can admit to themselves, ‘Yes, there is no valid reason for staying separate and aloof from them, but still, we just don’t like them’. Even a group who has had training and experience in life skills and life orientation may refuse to apply their expertise in a particular case. They may maintain: ‘What we have learnt has been very useful and can be applied in several cases, but not in this case. We won’t be able to get along with *them*’. Such feelings, firmly based on emotions and experiences, cannot be dismissed by mere reasoning.

It can happen, however, that prejudice can be removed by a deliberate effort or in a surprising way. There is the story of a teacher who gave a compliment to the wrong mother. In this teacher’s class, there was a diligent, disciplined, exemplary pupil, almost always praiseworthy, and also a lazy, undisciplined, troublesome one, almost always blameworthy. Both happened to have the same surname, however. At a parents-teachers association meeting a very friendly and well dressed Mrs Williams turned up first, and the teacher instinctively

complimented her on the good conduct and performance of her son. The next morning the unruly Williams boy came to the teacher when she was still alone in the classroom and sincerely thanked her for the good testimonial she had given his mother! And from then onwards, there was a complete change in his behaviour.²⁷

4.6 Changing an against-mindset into a toward-mindtrend

In our discussion thus far, there have been several references to ways of thinking that influence or motivate our communication or actions. When it was just the variety of ways of thinking that we referred to in an almost neutral way, we used ‘perspectives’ or ‘viewpoints’, but when it was the tenacity of a particular way of thinking that had to be emphasised, we called it a ‘mindset’.

We started off with the view of interrelated living, as captured in the saying about being a human being through other human beings. We took note of various perspectives on our human existence – with its elements determined by nature and its factors instilled by nurture. We also paid attention to our thought patterns about similarity and difference. With regard to our identity and identities, we found understandable perspectives derived from self- and other-perceptions, but also questionable mindsets based on generalising, and/or stereotyping and/or disliking.

As its name shows, a mindset is a fixed mental attitude (Fisher 1988:2) which is not meant to be changed. It has its own deeper roots, anchored in social experience, education and/or prejudice (Fisher 1988:2). It is sustained by supportive perceptions and interpretations:

We tend to perceive in a way that will disturb our established cognitive system as little as possible and to interpret what we perceive in a manner consistent with our own particular mindset’ (Fisher 1988:24).

This ‘own particular mindset’, which is in line with ‘our established cognitive system’, is usually not one of individual choice, but mainly the one adopted by

27 From a contribution in the ‘Life’s like that’ section of a *Reader’s Digest* issue of several years ago, which I read in a dentist’s waiting room. But although I have no specific reference, the story is so worthy of believing that it hardly needs a scholarly reference.

the group to which the individual belongs (Fisher 1988:25–27). The implication is, therefore, that changing one’s mindset means going against your group. And a typical result is that ‘in changing, the mind still seeks consistency. Its changes are made up of ongoing adjustments’ (Fisher 1988:24). In a context of conformity and loyalty to a group it is understandable that the first small ‘adjustment’ may require a very strong conviction that the convenient status quo can no longer be tolerated.

A mindset *can* be changed, however, and, if it is the result of an unjustifiable process, it *should* be changed. In our ‘wide and deep search towards understanding as much as possible about coexisting as the interrelated but diverse humans we happen to be’ (section 1.1 above), it is therefore crucially important also to understand as much as possible about changing an *against* mindset into a *together* mindtrend.

5. Learning from people who stopped fighting and started coexisting

In ACCORD we have had the great experience of listening to what real people shared about *how* they managed to bring their violent and protracted conflicts to an end and actually begin working and living together. The details of the background, planning and methodology²⁸ of this remarkable research project, and the report of the consultations with the communities concerned, are available in *Views and visions of coexistence in South Africa* (ACCORD 2008).²⁹ How the conflicts were transformed into coexistence at each of the three places was outlined as follows in the executive summary (ACCORD 2008:6–7):

At Muden, KwaZulu-Natal, the conflict had been between the black and the white communities – about the need for land transfer. Under the committed leadership of a well-educated young black leader and a few supporters, a self-reliance organisation was formed and the

28 Details about the criteria for planning the methodology, the methodology itself, and its implementation are given in ACCORD 2008:20–26.

29 Although my name appears as editor of this publication, the crucial content came from the members of the communities themselves. What *they* said was recorded as receptively and as accurately as possible. No prompting questions were asked, and no expectations about what they would say were harboured. They were simply invited to share their stories, and what they told was then just organised in a reader-friendly way.

association of the white commercial farmers was approached. This led to talks, a joint working committee, and eventually to the transfer of several farms. Mutual need was recognised, mutual trust was built and mutual respect was shown. Cross-cultural understanding and tolerance enabled both sides to accept all the diversity and to coexist in the best possible way.

Among the Zulu community at Mpumalanga, KwaZulu-Natal, a violent conflict had raged between the supporters of two opposing political parties. Over six years two thousand people lost their lives. Then, however, the two political warlords and many others felt that it was enough and that the risk of meeting and talking should be taken. At the second meeting a Peace Agreement was signed. Freedom of association, movement and expression returned, and the former enemies began doing things together. Mindsets and attitudes changed and a diversity-friendly orientation developed.

At Stutterheim, Eastern Cape, as in the rest of the old South Africa, the black community was grossly disadvantaged by the apartheid policy. A protracted and violent conflict was waged against the advantaged white community and culminated in a seven-month boycott of white-owned shops. Fortunately, however, leading women and men of the two sides began meeting each other, secretly or very carefully. Frank talking and active listening led to mutual understanding and to working together towards improving the situation and facilities of the black community. In the process of cooperating, attitudes changed, trust and respect developed, and friendly relationships were formed.

What follows here (in part 5), is a brief summary of the findings that emerged from the community consultations at the three places. It is more than findings, however. *Each finding can be read as a recommendation.* The participants were not asked to give recommendations, but what they told about the resolution of their conflict and their move into the mode of coexisting were things that *worked* and were therefore in fact recommendations.

It may be said, therefore, that this section (5) comes more directly out of everyday life than the others. But then it should immediately be added that the previous sections (1–4) are also based on life experience and life-related material.

5.1 Talking can change fighting into coexisting

‘In all three situations, the change began when someone or some people realised that after more than enough violence no solution was yet in sight, and that talking might be tried instead. The first time the possibility of talking dawned upon someone, the thought was probably brushed aside. But as it kept recurring, it was cautiously considered, and eventually it was courageously followed up’ (ACCORD 2008:55).

Talks have to be started and continued

The first moments of talking are obviously crucial. Usually the parties are still full of hatred and revengefulness. The warlords may just want to move from a war of weapons to a war of words. They may still be more inclined to belligerent shouting than to decent talking. Talks can indeed break down before they really get started. What had happened at our three research sites was therefore very interesting: ‘once the first step had been taken, the rest seemed to follow almost automatically’ (ACCORD 2008:56). Reasons were given for this commitment to ongoing talk.

- The aggrieved party was surprised by the dominating party’s willingness to *listen*, to *understand* and to *address the problems* that had caused the conflict.
- Parties in murderous political competition discovered that they had identical objectives – of which the most important were freedom of association and freedom of speech.

Later on, something else happened, however. As the problems received attention and were being solved, public interest in regular meetings dwindled. Although this indicated a general satisfaction with the process of dealing with the original problems, it meant that new problems that arose could not be jointly discussed by all.

Consulting from the start, and working towards consensus

It is not only talking as talking that was needed, but talking with a consultative attitude. When members of the party who was talking, noticed that the other party was really listening, they were encouraged to carry on talking *and also* to listen from their side. Monologue then became dialogue, and the atmosphere changed from opposition and competition to consultation and cooperation.

When the talking took place in such a spirit, it is understandable that the approach towards decision making could change from each party pushing its own position to the parties jointly working in the direction of consensus. When such an orientation was adopted, the parties found themselves encouraged by bits of agreement that emerged out of their negotiating, and attracted by the possibility of an overall agreement about a satisfactory solution.

Providing strong leadership, with creative flexibility

‘In all the consultations the value of leadership was acknowledged and praised’ (ACCORD 2008:57). The leaders were commended for the strong, but not headstrong, way in which they took the lead. They were not deterred by immediate fears, risks or obstacles. They took firm directions, but on their way to their goals and visions, they did not hesitate to adapt to circumstances and utilise opportunities.

Interrelating the contributions of leaders and communities

The leaders reciprocated the praise they received, and appreciated the wide-spreading and deep-reaching influence of their followers. It was after all not only a peace agreement as an event that was needed, but an ongoing process of implementing the agreement and experiencing a climate of peaceful coexistence. So, both in making peace and maintaining peace the responsibilities of the leaders and the followers had to be interrelated.

This correlates with one of the important findings of a Reflecting on Peace Practice (RPP) Project that involved more than 200 international, national and local peace agencies around the world (Anderson and Olson 2003):

As RPP looked at the many peace programs in operation, it became clear that in spite of the great variety of activities, ... peace practice takes essentially two approaches to engaging people for peace:

More People

Believing that peace can only be achieved when many people are involved, this approach sets out to engage more people in peace activism, in talking to the other side, in protesting violence, in gaining new understanding, etc. The theory behind this approach is that the achievement of peace depends on involvement of 'the people.' ...

Key People

Believing that peace cannot be achieved without the direct involvement of certain people deemed important to the peace process, this approach sets out to engage these 'key' individuals in dialogue, in programs designed to increase understanding, in changing laws, in negotiating a cease-fire, etc. (Anderson and Olson 2003:54–55).

In this remarkable publication, significant examples³⁰ are given of how key people and more people indeed interrelated and cooperated, not only at the individual/personal level but also at the social/political level (Anderson and Olson 2003:65–69).

5.2 Breakthrough experiences can be of pivotal and continual importance

'Near the beginning of all the consultations, after brief overviews of the conflicts and their eventual resolution, participants tended to mention some of the most crucial things that happened and facilitated the change from conflict to coexistence' (ACCORD 2008:54).

Accepting, trusting and respecting each other

Where the conflict had been between groups of different skin colours and cultures, the initial breakthrough was simply a changed way of thinking about

30 From southern Sudan, the Balkans and Fiji.

the other group. One group, or both, discovered that instead of continuing to distrust and reject the other group as a dehumanised enemy, they can be accepted, trusted and respected as fellow-humans.

This kind of breakthrough led to surprising actions, such as the calling off of a seven-month consumer boycott, and to changed attitudes. ‘It was as if the most vivid memories were those about the change from non-acceptance (or even rejection) to acceptance, from distrust to trust, and from disrespect to respect’ (ACCORD 2008:55).

Granting each other freedom of association and expression

Where the conflict had been between groups of the same skin colour and culture, but different political parties, the breakthrough was from unfreedom to freedom. The discovery was made that the adherents of the two political parties actually had the same goals – or, in struggle idiom, the same demands. This startling insight enabled the two parties to begin negotiating about restoring the freedoms they had lost when they were fighting each other. And so they regained their freedom of movement and association, freedom of expression and choice, and freedom from prejudice (ACCORD 2008:39).

Doing things together with one another

There was also a breakthrough to working together on projects that were urgently necessary in the old South Africa. ‘This togetherness was of course totally different from the mere adjacency in which an authoritarian supervisor and a subservient worker would perform a job. It was the togetherness of a joint commitment to a worthwhile task, and of a joint satisfaction when tangible results were achieved and enjoyed’ (ACCORD 2008:55).

5.3 Understanding can bring about a major breakthrough

At all three places, the groups really became serious about talking. The talks obviously started with demands, but did not get trapped in the mere reiteration of demands or slogans. What happened in all three cases was the almost extraordinary thing that the demands were not countered by defences or excuses. When the afflicted parties tabled their demands, the inflicting parties acknowledged and accepted the demands! And in the case where the

two parties were socio-economically similar but political rivals, the discovery was made that the demands of the two sides were identical! All the talks could therefore immediately move into the mode of addressing the problems behind the demands, which were in fact the problems that had caused the hostilities.

*When demands are frankly accepted or open-mindedly approached, it may indicate that the relatively rare phenomenon of a breakthrough to **understanding** has taken place.* When this turning point is not reached, the talks can continue, and they may even end in an ‘agreement’. Such an ‘agreement’, however, usually proves to be unsatisfactory to one or more of the parties, and may therefore be short-lived. But when it dawns upon one party how the position of the other party may be understood, a surprising result usually follows immediately: the way is opened to mutual understanding and to voluntary cooperation towards resolving the conflict.

There is a striking example of how this was discovered decades ago by practitioners who were helping to resolve community conflicts. They recruited volunteer research assistants to help them explore the difference between hearings in which there were ‘dramatic changes’ and those in which the disputants ‘seemed “stuck” in their positions’. The finding was:

It became apparent ... that in the hearings that showed dramatic change – when disputants arrived hostile and left cooperative – the transition was seldom observable as a progression. Rather, they observed a single moment – the ‘turning point’ or ‘breakthrough’ – in which the tone of the discussion changed, the atmosphere suddenly lightened, and hostility was supplanted by curiosity about the other disputant (The Community Board Program 1986:8–9).

And the typical ‘single statement’ that marked this ‘critical turning point’ was: ‘So that’s what happened! Now I understand’. ‘At this point the disputants unite against the conflict’ (The Community Board Program 1986:21).

One of the very meaningful findings of our own research project was that *understanding definitely played a crucial role* in the conflict-resolving and coexistence-building processes of the communities concerned.

Promoting cross-linguistic communication

At two places, the mother tongues of the groups differed, but both groups had some working knowledge of the other group's mother tongue, and also of English. During the conflict, however, people from both sides tended to stick to their own language, either due to hesitancy to use the other's language (or the common language), or due to obstinacy to keep using their own.

When the talks and the general rapprochement began taking place, however, a cooperative willingness apparently developed to put one's working knowledge of English and of the others' language into use. During the consultations – which took place in rural settings, included older people, and covered topics and terms not in everyday use – translation was occasionally necessary. It was amazing to see, however, how such translation could be done in an *ex tempore* way by people who had no special linguistic training.

What this willingness clearly showed, was that everyone regarded *understanding* as very important. In cross-linguistic situations, understanding was rated higher than insisting on talking one's own language. And the attempts to learn and use another language were heartily welcomed – while smiles and jokes were enjoyed about accents or errors.

The implied recommendation was that in any bi-, tri- or multilingual setting, as much proficiency in the other language(s) and/or a common language as possible should be encouraged and promoted. In such a way understanding can be improved and benevolence can be shown.

Developing cross-cultural understanding

Equally important as or even more important than understanding languages is understanding cultures.³¹ At the two research sites where the languages differed, the cultures also differed. What became clear from the narratives and the current situations was that the cultural differences were acknowledged and partially understood, but that in this regard also, there

31 By transferring 'fluency' from language to *culture*, Pillay and LeBaron (2006:187) emphasise that effortless communication can take place between fellow-humans brought up in different cultural contexts, and that 'the same delightful surprises' may be experienced as when a new language learner understands and is understood for the first time.

were differences between the attitudes revealed in the conflict and the post-conflict situations.

During the conflicts between the black and the white communities, there was some knowledge of each others' customs and beliefs. This elementary knowledge could have contained prejudiced perceptions or wrong interpretations, but it was enough to facilitate the coming together and working together of the groups.

In spite of shortcomings ... both groups had the significant advantage of having talked about their cultural customs. They understood something of the preferences for either a more vibrant, social atmosphere or a more quiet, individual one. This background has enabled the groups to affirm and practise their own ways of doing things and to allow the others to do the same. The pronounced differences they managed to accommodate where possible and to tolerate where necessary (ACCORD 2008:58).

In the time of the conflict, the attitude – in both directions – was apparently one of stereotyping and aversion. But after the conflict, the attitude became one of understanding and coexisting.

Experiencing mutual understanding

Without specifically stating it, the research finding mentioned above clearly implies that in such breakthrough moments the understanding became two-directional. When one party exclaimed 'Now I understand', the other party reciprocated with something similar, either in words or in body language. That the understanding was indeed mutual was shown by the immediate willingness of both parties to move into problem solving (The Community Board Program 1986:22). In this regard, another observation was also made:

The curious thing about these moments was that the content of the discussion at the time was not particularly momentous and sometimes was almost trivial. But from that point on, disputants shifted their focus, so that instead of fighting one another, they united to battle the problem (The Community Board Program 1986:9).

Three inferences may be drawn from this finding. First, it may be a very ordinary, everyday thing that causes someone to look through the eyes of another. Second, when this has happened from one side, the chances are very good that it will also happen from the other side. And third, the breakthrough is not just a short-lived event, but can be the beginning of an ongoing mode of coexisting.

In our own research project, the resolved conflicts were much more violent than disputes between neighbours or groups in a multicultural city, and the talks were obviously focused on the momentousness of the situation. But in these cases too, it could have been a trivial thought, as one about an opponent's partner or child, that led to the opening up of understanding. Still, although our information did not lead to the first inference above, it clearly pointed to the second and the third. What we heard at each place showed that the turning point was almost simultaneously reached by both parties, and that it was indeed the beginning of a new way of working and living together.

Arriving at more manifestations of mutuality

Mutual understanding is not only crucial; it is also creative. It tends to start a chain reaction of wider spreading mutuality. This is what we have indeed found.

At all three sites more than one aspect of mutuality was emphasised. Mutual understanding led to mutual trust. In some cases, mutual trust led to mutual relationship building. More generally, it led to mutual recognition and respect. From both sides, individuals and/or groups realised that the others also exist and also have their needs, their rights and their cultural contexts. They experienced the dynamic results that can follow and multiply once the isolation of prejudiced perceptions has been overcome (ACCORD 2008:59).

5.4 Mindshifts and attitudinal changes can be the beginning of new ways of life

Such a growing disposition of mutuality does not only reveal a new way of thinking, but *is* a new way of thinking. It can also be called a new orientation

or a new attitude, and the fact that we can use different terms for the same phenomenon shows what a comprehensive phenomenon it indeed is. Anyone or any group that has experienced this transformation has turned away from a preoccupied concern with own interests, away from an apathetic unconcern about the interests of others, and has thereby turned towards others. For this process of turning about, we have already used the conveniently condensed term ‘turned-towardness’.

If this term is somewhat extraordinary, it may be ascribed to the out-of-the-ordinariness of the phenomenon itself. In fact, the relative rarity of this turning towards others prompts us to modify or create terms. For instance, the outcome of changing one’s mindset should preferably not be a new *mindset*, but rather a *mindtrend*. What should take place in most cases is a *mindshift* from an *established pattern* of thinking to an *accommodating way* of thinking. At the same time there may be an attitudinal change from conformist postures to relational orientations.

If the change is not a self-initiated effort, but an overwhelming experience, it brings about an internal awareness and external manifestations. Both the inner happenings and the outward expressions may be almost impossible to capture in words or in analyses, however. The best approach may perhaps be to use *mindtrend*, *attitude* and *orientation* phrasing interchangeably, without trying to identify which could have been first or most important. After all, the ‘manifestations’ are usually no more than signs from which we may draw inferences. Our deductions may appear to be convincing, but they cannot provide demonstrable certainty. Nevertheless, when two parties, after all their fierce fighting, jointly begin to resolve their conflict, one can believe that they have indeed experienced changes of *mindset* and/or *attitude* and/or *orientation*.

Beginning to like each other

When thinking about a happening that seems to be a chain reaction of changes, one’s thoughts tend to turn to the saying and the song ‘Love changes everything!’ In the context of coexistence, however, we may and should be wary of making too much of love in what normally is taken to be the full sense

of the word. The kind of coexistence that can be an amicable, or at least a non-antagonistic, way of interrelating with fellow human beings in everyday life, should rather be thought of as an option in the middle of a continuum ranging from love to hate.

Our research findings showed, however, that when two groups put an end to their hostilities and begin getting along together, their relationship can move from the enmity side of the continuum not only to the neutral middle but further into the amity side.

Different thinking liberated people from the 'enemy' perceptions they harboured and enabled them to develop an inclusive attitude. They began accepting others as neighbours and as friends (ACCORD 2008:60).

Such changed perceptions and attitudes may in most cases be due to the breakthrough to understanding. Mutual understanding of motives, interests and needs may brush aside stereotypes, judgments and labels, and open the way towards diversity-friendliness and rapprochement.

Accepting and appreciating diversity

An important part of such a comprehensive change may be the surprising insight that irritating differences can be seen as interesting examples of diversity. The differences do not disappear, and their differentness does not diminish, but a different attitude towards them is displayed. Instead of regarding them as downright rejectable, they are considered as at least understandable and possibly even acceptable. Instead of summarily judging the difference, its natural or nurtural or contextual explanation is taken into account. And instead of thinking in terms of 'difference', with its concept of oppositeness, the idea of 'diversity', with its notion of compatibility, is entertained.

The new attitude is no monolithic one, however. A continuum-like range of options is available, as clearly shown by the verbs commonly used with 'diversity'. It can be wished away but nevertheless tolerated. In a matter-of-fact way its existence can be merely acknowledged. In an emotionally neutral way it can be respected. Its potentially useful presence can be accepted. Its interesting

variety can be appreciated and welcomed. And its fascinating enrichment of life can be warmly embraced.

At all our research sites, it was clear that in resolving the conflict and turning to coexistence, the cultural and/or the political diversity was not only accepted but also respected and sometimes even appreciated. During the talking, listening and problem solving at each of the places, the atmosphere apparently changed from hostility against difference to affinity for diversity.

Becoming ready to forgive and be reconciled

Such a change in atmosphere usually leads to changes in attitude and behaviour. In our research project we found that established practices of ‘blaming, accusing, slandering and hating’ (ACCORD 2008:61) were left behind, and a willingness to forgive developed. And just as the hostility had been mutual, the forgiveness was mutual too.

When the offering of forgiveness is not a mere show prompted by a sense of obligation, but a genuine expression of an inner urge to reconcile, it is usually reciprocated. If the forgiving words are endorsed by body language, the other party may accept that they have been pardoned and that the way to reconciliation has been opened. They may therefore feel inclined to follow the example of genuinely forgiving and becoming ready to reconcile.

Becoming committed to working and living together

As we discern and discuss components of the inner change, such as new orientations to affinity, diversity and reconciliation, we become aware of commonalities. The changes in thought patterns and attitudes usually have their inner beginnings before they become observable realities. They include aspects of dealing with wrongs of the past, sorting out grievances of the present and turning to better relations in the future. In an interrelated way they contribute to a comprehensive inward transformation.

While it can be very useful to focus on the various factors and facets separately, it is often important to think and talk inclusively about the entire change and what it can bring about. A very appropriate and outcome-oriented perspective that emerged from our community consultations was

the emphasis all the groups placed on their actual *working together and living together*. At the same time, however, the prerequisite of *willingness* for such cooperation and coexistence was explicitly stated or clearly implied. In all the cases it seemed as if it was *not a duty that was internalised*. It was *an inner commitment that was 'externalised'*.

A convenient and concise way of referring to this change may therefore be to call it '**becoming committed to working and living together**'. 'Becoming committed', which obviously implies 'and thus being committed', highlights both the process of transformation and the resulting mode of sustained transformation. 'Together' signifies turning towards and acting jointly. And the present participles 'working and living' emphasise two core areas of human activity: productivity and sociability.

Between these two areas there is an important difference. In the old South Africa, there have been striking examples of culturally and residentially separated people working together quite well. Some of those stories became known through the public media or through works of literature, but many more could have been noticed only by a small circle of observers. It did happen that people of various ethnic, cultural and/or socio-economic groups who found themselves at the same workplace, either through a definite calling or by mere coincidence, worked together in a very cooperative and amicable way. But the system of apartheid kept them apart socially. At the end of each workday they had to go home in different directions to two different worlds. There were some law-defying friendships and marriages, but they were the exceptions.

In our research consultations, we could therefore notice the distinctions between just working together in a good spirit and really beginning to live together as neighbours and friends. Obviously, then, the actual liking and befriending of each other in everyday life are of much greater significance than pleasant cooperation at work.

5.5 Transformed ways of thinking, feeling and interacting

The basic lessons we can learn from these groups of people are stunningly simple and commonsensical:

1. Hostile contraexistence can become changed to *easy-going coexistence*.
2. The obviously needed starting point is to switch from intra-group monologue to *inter-group dialogue*.
3. Such talking and listening can change prejudiced thinking about 'them' into *impartial thinking about 'all of us'*.
4. Such a mindshift usually brings about a feelingshift from hating or disliking the others concerned to *respecting or befriending them*.
5. An inner transformation of this kind spontaneously leads to radically changed behaviour. Conflict-causing interaction can become *problem-solving cooperation*.
6. The whole atmosphere can change from one of othering to one of *togethering*.
7. Working and living together do not rule out any group's justified claim to *assertiveness and belongingness*. Each group may and should retain its being there and being so.

Such lessons are not at all difficult to understand or remember. One can easily memorise them and produce an excellent answer to an examination question in this regard. But to internalise and apply them means nothing less than abdicating the throne of self-supremacy and/or own-group-supremacy. Domineering and greediness are left behind. Rapprochement and sharing are taken on.

In this section (5), we have focused on one project of ACCORD – one that was specifically focused on apparently successful post-conflict coexistence – but from ACCORD's work more can be said about successes and failures. There are of course also the cases where a party, or more than one party, did not become willing to talk, listen, understand and resolve the conflict. Most probably every organisation working in the field of dealing with conflict can share its experiences of working with parties who did attain coexistence and those who maintained, or reverted to, contraexistence.

It is important to remember, however, that at all three of ACCORD's research sites the conflicts had been so violent that several or many people were killed. This project showed, therefore, that *it is not only mildly quarrelling couples and neighbours who can become coexistent, but also recklessly fighting warlords and their followers.*

Coexistence should therefore not be seen as a little luxury that can be added on where groups of human beings are just proceeding on their own without caring about each other. Coexistence should rather be seen as an essential necessity in the relations between natural groups and nurtural groupings of humans on this planet. Where and when coexistential relations have not yet been established, or have been disturbed or disrupted, they can and should be put into place or restored. As human beings we should not allow our differences to prevail over our similarities. *What can and should indeed triumph over all kinds of instituted dividedness is our inherent interrelatedness.*

6. Learning from people who continue coexisting while coping with new problems

The publishing of the report of the above-mentioned research project and its findings was due to take place in the following year (2004), but had to be postponed when the partner from abroad, who was mainly responsible for the budget of the project, had serious funding problems and had to close down. ACCORD remained committed to complete the project and began looking for alternative funding, but had to give priority to other projects already underway at that stage. This unfortunate delay eventually led to an important advantage, however. Follow-up visits were made and what the people at the three research sites shared with us then was included in the publication (ACCORD 2008:72–82).

At all three places there were bad news and good news. The bad news was that political and economic powers had caused new problems about which little or nothing could be done. The good news was, however, that in spite of these external problems the community groups were still maintaining the level of coexistence they had reached after resolving their conflicts.

6.1 Honestly acknowledging the existence of new problems

We appreciated the frankness of the people, who did not tell us what they might have thought we would like to hear, but rather shared the truth about their experiences and frustrations.

Democratic but disappointing governance

At all three places, the various groups had welcomed South Africa's new democratic dispensation, but their original euphoria was gradually displaced by disillusionment.

At Stutterheim it was emphasised that councillors of ward committees were democratically elected, and that the municipality was functioning according to the *Batho pele* ('People first') policy, but also that there were 'councillors and officials with "own position first" or "own political party first" agendas' (ACCORD 2008:79). Before the elections, they had promised unrealisable things to voters and jobs to their favourites. After the elections, there were disappointing cases of meetings 'managed by people knowing nothing' (ACCORD 2008:73), and of poor service delivery and abandoned development projects as a result of incompetent or self-seeking officials.

At Muden, the lack of knowledge, insight and competence of the Department of Land Affairs officialdom was deplored. The good advice of the Zibambeleni community organisation was ignored, and on each of the available farms many families were simply settled – as equals, and without training, equipment or start-up capital. Both at Stutterheim and at Muden, where the conflict had been between blacks and whites, the whites were understandably reluctant to focus on shortcomings in the new dispensation under a predominantly black ruling party, but the blacks did not hesitate to voice their outspoken criticism.

At Mpumalanga there was one complaint about cases of apparent discrimination by the ruling party against members of another party. The matter was calmly listened to and tolerantly discussed, however, and 'aggrieved people were invited to bring details so that possible problems could be investigated and addressed' (ACCORD 2008:80).

At all three places a clear message was therefore conveyed that a mere veneer of democracy is unacceptable. Any warning signal of exclusivism, partisanship, nepotism and over-assertiveness, or any omen of neo-apartheid, calls upon courageous people to become whistle blowers (ACCORD 2008:80).

Usurped and inadequate development

In spite of the resolved conflicts, poverty and unemployment remained urgent problems at the three sites. When the Stutterheim conflict was resolved, the old South Africa was still in place. One country town could not change the apartheid politics of the country, but the black and white Stutterheimers began working together to improve the local situation. The Stutterheim Development Foundation secured funding, and in a few years many local jobs were created and development work of more than R30 million was done. When the new, democratic municipality started functioning, however, they chose to appropriate and get the credit for developing the town and its surroundings. Subsequent development was therefore downgraded to what the new structures could manage to produce.

The transfer of land at Muden was indeed a commendable development of that time. Here too, however, the new democratic structures came with a different approach. They seemed to be bent on chasing impressive statistics of the amount of land transferred and the number of families settled. 'They [did] not seem to care much about an improved quality of life for emerging farmers and their families, or about increased amounts of food produced for a growing population' (ACCORD 2008:81).

The people of Mpumalanga 'justifiably expected that the outside world who praised them for making peace would endorse their applause by means of substantial investments' (ACCORD 2008:81). At the follow-up visit, they reported that the situation of poverty and joblessness had deteriorated further, but also that they had established a 'Mpumalanga Peace and Development Foundation'.

6.2 Remaining unwaveringly committed to coexistence

The most encouraging finding of the follow-up visits was that in spite of the frustrations and disappointments they had to cope with, all the groups were unanimous about their sustained peace and coexistence. This message was clearly communicated through their words and confirmed by their body language.

At Mpumalanga it was stated that the peace between the two political groups was still in place in spite of the bad economy. This statement conveyed two important facts. 'Firstly, coexistence can survive without good economic circumstances. But, secondly, bad economic conditions can be a serious threat to coexistence' (ACCORD 2008:81).

At Stutterheim, two things were frankly acknowledged: the setbacks of poor governance and slow development, and the sustained coexistence of the black and the white communities. In spite of a few broken relationships, the general atmosphere of friendly relations was still intact. 'Friendliness seems to be innate in, or internalised by, many people of the Eastern Cape. Friendships have been made, and maintained through the ups and downs of almost two decades' (ACCORD 2008:81).

At Muden, the black and the white farming communities shared very similar experiences. They had to cope with new problems of policies and procedures, 'but with their own interracial relationships they had no more problems. The working committee became redundant when the land transfer process had been concluded, but for subsequent farming issues the same method of consultation undisturbed by race issues has been used and will be used' (ACCORD 2008:81).

7. Concluding thoughts on experiencing the thrill of coexisting with fellow-humans

At the end of our theoretico-practical discussion, we can summarise a few lines of thinking about being there for the duration of one's life and being interrelated with fellow-human beings in one's own group and in other groups.

7.1 Living with a mindtrend of focusing on the enriching value of diversity and the uniting value of alikeness

We have briefly looked at the innumerable differences between thousands of human groups and billions of human individuals. We have realised that many of these differences are of no relational importance whatsoever, but that some kinds of differences – mainly those of culture and personality – can be regarded as irritating by others. We have taken note of the way in which uneasiness, tensions, dislikes and disputes can develop between groups or individuals living in fairly close contact with one another.

We have focused on the possibility that the way of thinking which exaggerates cultural differentness can be changed to become less prejudiced and more relaxed. Then, diversity can be appreciated in cultures and personalities. The attention can be focused on similarities and the basic alikeness of all of us as fellow-humans can be taken seriously.

When such a mindshift has been made, the way is opened to the warmly human experiencing of being interrelated with others, including those of so-called different ‘identities’.

7.2 Living with an attitude of acknowledging, tolerating, respecting or even embracing diversity and differences

We have taken note of the fact that changed thinking about differences cannot remove the differences themselves. From the new perspective, some differences may become relationally irrelevant, but others may for various reasons remain in place as apparent incompatibilities.

Fortunately, however, such incompatibilities are not incompatible with coexisting. Coexistence is not a monosemantic term for a monolithic thing, but a collective name for a range of options. A coexistential way of thinking should therefore be realistic enough to find an appropriate attitude and approach for each unique situation.

Sensing the presence of coexistence is not reserved for the extreme option of *embracing* diversity. It can also be felt in situations where merely *acknowledging* differences is enough, where *tolerating* differences is needed, or where a general *respecting* of difference and diversity can indeed be shown.

7.3 Living with a 'natural' coexistence – which is not an effort or a show, but an inner commitment

But the most thrilling excitement comes when the inner way of thinking and feeling coexistentially is externalised into words and actions radiating genuine coexistence. What was shared by real people who experienced real coexisting after brutal conflict deserves to be taken as seriously as possible:

...the naturalness of coexistence was strongly emphasised. The 'naturalness' was taken in two very and equally important senses.

The one was the sense of happening as it should in the usual course of things ... It was said that we should not expect an idealised level of coexistence between two groups, since that is anyway unnatural in any single group of people. Within their own group people normally coexist at different levels, ranging from the more indifferent to the more intimate.

The other was the sense of happening spontaneously. It was said that coexistence should be a natural thing and not an effort. This means that pressurising people towards coexistence may only produce outward shows of coexistence and not real coexistential relationships (ACCORD 2008:68).

Particularly encouraging and inspiring was what these people shared five years later – after they had to deal with own-interest-based problems in actual daily life. They frankly said that, in spite of serious and difficult problems, they were still enjoying a good level of coexistence. A few paragraphs on the last page of *Views and visions of coexistence in South Africa* may therefore serve as a fitting conclusion to this discussion of 'being similar, different, and coexistent':

With regard to dealing with problems and challenges, the obvious conclusion was that *liberation from own-groupishness can become an enduring reality* in the relations between groups and individuals. A clear sign of this open-mindedness was the frank way in which the various situations were discussed. There was no taking of sides

and no defending of own camps. Where the people were struggling with ineffective planning, short-sighted policies, poor service delivery, self-interested politicians or incompetent officials, the criticism came from both sides. Blacks were outspoken about the shortcomings of some fellow-blacks and the defects in the black majority governance of the new South Africa. Both the blacks and the whites discussed the problems without any racial stereotyping or prejudice. Both groups regarded the challenging issues as political party problems and/or personality problems, which they had to address jointly.

With regard to coexistence, the conclusion, directly interrelated with the one just mentioned, was that *the mindset and behaviour of working and living together can become everyday realities in spite of trying circumstances*. What all the groups at the three places communicated verbally and non-verbally, was that escaping from exclusivism and arriving at inclusivism was not just a short-term emergency measure. It was a lasting change. In-bred and/or inculcated aversion was left behind and a fair degree of affinity was internalised and nurtured. Their coexistence was not a show or a duty that was kept up by effort. It has indeed become a natural experience of their daily life with all its ups and downs (ACCORD 2008:82).

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