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Today I had the privilege to sit in a circle with ten leaders, listening to their stories. They shared what shaped them into the people they now are. These leaders arrived this morning thinking and feeling they were ordinary people living ordinary corporate lives in an ordinary company in South Africa. They forgot about the miracle.

The stories of these leaders travelled through homelands, townships, privileged suburbs and boarding schools. They swept through Swaziland, Transkei, Lesotho, Namibia, Limpopo and Waterval Boven. They revolved around absent parents, loving grandparents, extended family, raucous siblings, line managers, benevolent professors and the security police. They spoke the language of loss and hope, of survival, hatred, ignorance, joy and forgiveness. These stories spoke about taxi wars, a passion for soccer, life, love and the whole catastrophe. In short, these ten stories mirrored, if not amplified, the miracle of South Africa.

It came as a surprise to them that they had the collective depth of “character capital” evident in their life stories. The depth of their team members’ experience, resilience and flexibility inspired higher expectations about what this team could achieve if they put their intellects and humanity behind their quest. They were moved by the stories they heard because it

reminded them of their own struggles and successes, their own unquestionable humanity.

Why was it a surprise? The question alone hurts – never mind the answer!

Are they so busy with their daily tasks and so busy reading and talking and thinking about what is not working that they forget that they are living in a miracle of transformation; that they are the miracle of transformation? Are they so self-critical that they forget what it took for each one of them to be part of this? I guess that these leaders are indeed too busy, too pessimistic, too impatient and too self-critical to own that they are not ordinary.

They do not live ordinary lives in an ordinary company. They work shoulder to shoulder: diverse people with a calabash full of wounds from a stormy past. They work together, learn to be tolerant and get frustrated with each other, without declaring war around the boardroom table. The miracle is that this is even possible, that despite the millions of reasons that exist for this team to be riddled with resentment or bitterness, they speak candidly about how to build trusting relationships.

Paul Hawken asked in his address to the Class of 2009 at the University of Portland “what would we do if the stars only came out once every thousand years. No one would sleep that night, of course. The world would become religious overnight. We would be ecstatic, delirious, made rapturous by the

“Switch off
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glory of God. Instead the stars come out every night, and we watch television.”

I think this is what we do in South Africa too. We see so many smiles from people who don't have much to smile about that we fail to appreciate it for the abundance it is. We have so much opportunity to form friendships beyond the racial lines that we forget that once upon a time we lived in a homogenous land.

We live in relative peace when, rationally speaking, it makes little sense that we can be so lucky. The stars are indeed shining every night, and we are watching television where we hear more bad news. Keeping busy is the easy way out – it keeps us in the comfort zone of going through the motions and being observers of life. The treadmill can disconnect us from personal intimacy and mindful collegiality.

In Tibet they have a word for this kind of thing: lelo, which means laziness. But it is a very specific and unique application of the concept of laziness. They call the workaholics of the world lazy, because they make sure they do not get to do the really important work of connecting with themselves, with other people, life and meaning. They keep themselves busy with things that are quite superficial, compared to the big personal challenges.

Let's not be so lazy. Let's get off the treadmill, spend less time on spreadsheets and more time appreciating the character of those around us. The least we can do for the millions of people

who sacrificed safety, education, dignity and even their lives in the struggle, is to celebrate the miracle of modern day South Africa. The least you can do for the people who work with you is to see how they too form part of this story.

Wake up! We live in an extraordinary country in extraordinary times.

Switch off the television.