

# WILL THIS GENERATION ALSO WASTE?

BY  
BUNMI ONI  
MANAGING DIRECTOR & CHIEF EXECUTIVE  
CADBURY NIGERIA PLC

being text of paper delivered at Mr Duro Oyekanle's 50th Birthday lecture on Saturday 18th May 1996  
at KOKO DOME, Cocoa House, Ibadan

## WILL THIS GENERATION ALSO WASTE?

“.....teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom”.

These words were uttered as a prayer by one of the best known leaders in human history, probably one of the most successful too. He lived many years ago, and he received a call to leadership when the nation was going through major upheavals. They had been held in perpetual bondage and underdevelopment, and now it was time to truly liberate the country - to set the nation on the path of self-determination. It was time for them to design their own “home-grown” democratic structures, and the nation needed a leader. For several years after they got their independence, which came miraculously, this gentleman (his name was MOSES) had the onerous task to lead and guide the nation. He accepted it was up to him and his generation to accomplish this task. The words quoted earlier therefore represent an overflowing of the yearnings of a man who strongly desired to make a difference in his generation. He was to learn during the succeeding years, however, that the nation he led - just as every nation today - needed discipline more than democracy.

These same words struck me as I was pondering the subject of this discussion, which the celebrant had graciously allowed me to choose.

I would like at this point to express my sincere gratitude to my great friend, Mr Duro Oyekanle for the kind invitation for me to share these few thoughts. Incidentally the topic we have chosen is also a subject on which he and I have discussed and sometimes argued, and I'm sure is a familiar discussion topic to most people in this room and elsewhere in the country today.

The more I thought about the words at the beginning of this presentation, the more I was attracted to the second part of the prayer “:.....that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom”. Ordinarily, wisdom is the quality of being wise, having or showing experience, knowledge, good judgement, prudence etc. Perhaps one of the most important virtues associated with advancing years is wisdom. I make no suggestions that a 50-year old is an old man. Far from it, but we also know that the attainment of that age opens the door to a whole new world. As I turned these words in my mind, I was reminded of five words, representing qualities which perhaps epitomise wisdom.

Together they represent the framework that should enable us individually to design a response to the question that our subject poses.

(a) **Awareness** - is the quality of being totally conscious of self and environment. Awareness in this context has two components - hard and material knowledge and understanding, as well as perceptual (intuitive) informed awareness. Awareness builds a capability to connect with oneself and to be pro-active. It is wisdom to double-check actions against the “man in the mirror, ie that man or woman who stares back at you from the mirror. Indeed the true test against which we must measure our daily actions is this mirror test. When at the end of each day we come to be by ourselves and we can look straight into the eyes of the man in the mirror without condemnation, then we would have made a start. The person to please really is not your boss or society. It is the man or woman in the mirror. Wisdom is pleasing that man since he is incapable of masking.

b. **Imagination** is the second quality I have chosen, and it is the capability to inter-connect as well as to dream. Wisdom comes with the capacity to extend one’s mind, for only then can one come to a reasoned judgement.

- c. **Vision:** The third important word in our journey to unravel the concept of wisdom is this pervading phenomenon called vision. It is the choice of personal value systems and goals. A dedicated focus on an enhanced value-based quality of life which does not waver with the societal stream, values that give strength of character. People perish when there is a derth of vision, and there can be no development where vision is lacking. Because it is a virtue that not very many people are endowed with in abundance, most human societies cherish this quality so much that when a man has been discovered to have it, they make him leader.
- d. **Responsibility:** The acknowledgement that your experiences today are the result of the choices and judgements you made yesterday. It is wisdom to introspect, rather than seek to externalise problems and the consequences of our actions or inactions. The attribute of being responsive to and have respect for human dignity. A good sense of responsibility makes one wise in his actions. The other side of this attribute comes from the component of the word itself. It derives from two words - response ability - and it means that each

person is capable of choosing, or has the ability to choose his response in any given situation. Far too often our response does not reflect a choice, and we make a wreck of that God-given ability. Far too often we subject our response only to the general rung of the society, without allowing ourselves exercise that choice.

e. **Action:** The courage to act on the basis of integrity and one's values. A constructive day-to-day activity chart which is clearly orchestrated to the achievement of a set of goals predicated on common good.

I found a perfect fit when I compared these five words with the dictionary definition of wisdom which is summarised as "intelligent application of thought and knowledge drawing on experience and governed by prudence."

When the celebrant asked me to speak at his 50th, my thought went in various directions. What do you say to a distinguished audience - almost all in mid-life - which will not kill their appetite already sharpened by the invitation card which confirms that another event will come up after this talk, an event which is less demanding in attention.

Then I remembered that this is the generation that inwardly thinks very seriously about the future and is indeed most concerned about the years ahead. And yet, paradoxically, this is also the generation that outwardly suggests that they have had their time, and therefore tend to switch off. It is paradoxical that we tend to resign ourselves at a point in our lives when

we have the greatest concerns about the future. Those concerns obviously transcend the individual. There are concerns about how long more there is to live, what will happen thereafter, how will the children be able to stand on their feet, and above all, how can one provide now for that future. At no other time in one's life are there so many concerns simultaneously, and therefore our stake in the society to which we belong actually increases rather than diminish, on account of the emergence of a new generation coming behind for whom we must accept full responsibility (remember the word responsibility?). Suddenly there is a feeling that the clock is running, and one would have thought that is the time to run rather than resign. Certainly there is enough happening or not happening around us to precipitate a suggestion that this may well be another wasted generation. There is enough to make even the

unrepentant optimist begin to doubt his own beliefs and strengths, but it was Forbes who said ‘a golf course

-7-

without bunkers and hazards is lame and monotonous. So is life’. What Forbes did not say is that life should be all bunkers and hazards.

I spoke with a prominent member of the sixty-something generation recently, and the discussion soon gravitated to this same subject. I had observed that this gentleman had resigned, apparently leaving the younger ones to “carry on the battle”.

He shared a few experiences which led him to hang his gloves and head for home, but the part I would never forget was his account of an encounter he had with Chief Simeon Adebo about a year before the Chief’s death. The two had met at an event and this gentleman had approached Chief Adebo just as I had come to him. Chief Adebo was then seventy-something, and because he was rather pensive that day, he was asked what the matter was. The Chief remained speechless for a moment and then said .... “tell me, is this all what I invested 50 years of my life for ?” Apparently he was speaking about the near-collapse of the

Nigerian nation-state, and his real concern was that there seemed to be no glitter of hope in sight. The sage has since passed on, just like several before him

-8-

and some after him, who personified the moulding and shaping of the Nigerian society.

There are frustrations to contend with everywhere you turn to. Successive generations of contemporary leadership of the country have varied on average from zero to just a little if their visionary capability were to be placed on a scale. Some individual leaders would come in with a negative rating.

It doesn't take a genius to recognise that leadership has been perhaps the biggest single bane of our nation. Visionary leaders are not to be found commonly in the streets or in the barracks, but then we have had a few since independence, and the examples from Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe to Chief Awolowo and a smattering of others are well known. They did extremely well as regional leaders and the natural next step to upscale the glaring success at the regional level to the national scene never really happened. All of that effort got lost in the wake of our national dilemma,

but happily no one, however obstinate, contests the fact that the Western Region was a model for the rest of the country by far. Also no one disputes the centrality of leadership, education and work ethos in that development. There were

-9-

perhaps issues of succession to that group of leaders, but that is now so complicated by history that it's hardly worth talking about at this forum.

People have attempted to define where or how we started derailing as a nation, and there are as many suggestions as there are people. Each suggestion raises a new set of questions.

Was it the whole idea of the pursuit of a unitary government, or perhaps that Awo should have stayed on the path of regional governance. Was it the discovery of oil or the coming of the Military - or perhaps a bit of everything.

It appears the more the concern has grown, the more negative the trend of our national life has become. Values and virtues of yesteryears have been drained, and the restoration of sanity seems to elude us. The scourge on our people has become a national embarrassment and a reproach on our land. Shall we ever find the route out of the vicious cycle of decadence

and more decadence to a virtuous circle where we begin to live as people again?

As I think about this paradox, I often remember a truth I learnt a few years ago - that today is a consequence of the future, not of the past. I have discovered that internalising this truth leads to a fundamental paradigm shift so essential for us as a people.

-10-

The old paradigm says that today is a consequence of the past, but the new paradigm turns that axiom on its head and insists that what you do today is a consequence of what you envisage the future to be, and it doesn't matter what that past has been. This lesson was brought home to me as I read, the book "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" by Stephen Covey. He used the picture of a funeral procession to make this vivid, as he transports you for a moment to the realm of the philosophical.

Imagine, for just a few moments, that you are attending a funeral service, he says. Hundreds of dignitaries have arrived and as you arrive, the sweet soft music begins to play from the organ.

The service gets under way and from the faces in the congregation, you can tell that the departed was well-known, and probably well-connected.

The service is over and it's time for funeral speeches. Suddenly everybody becomes transparently honest and incapable of lying. As you move close to the casket you discover it has a glass top. This attracts you to get closer still and then ..... you discover that the body in the casket was yours. Speeches will be made by your associates, family, friends etc. What are you expecting to hear.

-11-

Whatever it is you hear, it is no longer possible to offer a defense, nor is it possible to offer the usual string of excuses which puts the blame on society.

Let's come away from the funeral service now and return to KOKO DOME, and ask the question: What were you expecting to hear?.

What you do today will determine what will be read, and we spend each day of our lives writing the pages and the chapters of those future funeral oratory speeches, and that's why today is a consequence of the future.

Will this generation also waste?

Sometimes I ponder on the cumulative investment in this generation. It has, collectively, more money, more education and more energy than any generation before it. It is also true that this generation is better educated

than the next two generations will ever get, thanks to the deterioration in our educational system.

Indeed this generation is epitomised by our celebrant today. I have had access to his CV and it is impressive. West African School Certificate in December 1965, B.Sc Agricultural Economics (Second Class Upper) University of Ibadan, 1970, MBA University of Lagos 1975. Several Courses and seminars in Nigeria, Europe and USA.

-12-

There is also a string of achievements both in the period he was in regular employment in Flour Mills, Phillip Morris, Nigerian Tobacco Company and National Oil and Chemical Marketing Company, as well as the businesses he has founded and run offering employment to many people - and of course, making money for himself.

He is keenly involved in philanthropic work, contributing regularly to the upkeep of the Motherless Babies Home and the famous Azikiwe Hall, University of Ibadan, Duro's Hall of residence while a student. I'm sure if we go around the room we will hear equally brilliant CVs. It is also true that this generation has demonstrated so much dynamism and

entrepreneurship, and it is in that view that I am going to close on a leadership challenge for your thoughtful consideration.

We have for too long desired to build our nation from the top. We look to people in government for leadership when such persons many times do not even understand the concept. With the bastardization of democracy many other concepts have been demolished. Not only do we have governments and officials who have not learnt to respond to anyone, we have completely lost the sense of service which makes you accountable to the customer or stakeholder.

-13-

The symptoms are many: large amounts of public funds are misappropriated and a probe is set up provided the officer concerned is not one of those above the law (and there are quite a few), and there ends the matter. So called public utilities charge rates which bear no relationship with the service provided, because they never had to meet any service requirements.

They carry a most inefficient cost profile and simply pass on the cost of such inefficiency to the consumer. Clearly the only remedy for the consumer is competition as we have seen in the Domestic Airline industry. The monopoly status enjoyed by many utilities even leads to arrogance, as

demonstrated in a recent NEPA advertisement which said: “Can you imagine life without NEPA”. The truth is that millions of Nigerians don’t have to imagine it. They live with it everyday

All this comes from the fact that we have had Military dictatorships for 75% of our post-independence national life. It is therefore not in the nature of government to feel truly accountable to the people, since individuals have not earned the position, nor has the followership learnt to demand stewardship from office holders. In my view, this resultant lack of accountability is the root of corruption, which we do not yet understand how to fight.

-14-

It is also the reason why highly placed people are not effective as leaders, because there is no driving force for self-improvement or any development of self whatsoever.

And yet we know that the cumulative talent of our people is enormous. Our country is packed with many hidden jewels which have never been allowed to blossom.

It appears therefore that by our own silent acquiescence, indecision and a resort to slandering the few who emerge as true leaders, we have allowed the factors responsible for the triumph of evil over good to thrive. Silent

acquiescence because we are mere on-lookers as we witness the destruction of our time-tested value systems. Indecision is a sin of this and previous generations because we have been very tentative or timid in challenging plunderers, probably because many of those who should have come to have a price too. It is also true that in any small group, things go well until one member of the group begins to succeed. That's when others wake up with petitions if not outright slander.

-15-

The consequence is that cemeteries today are filled with unfulfilled dreams and unrealised potentials. Serious imbalances in our social fabric result and, in many cases, the values that helped nurture our indigenous society get thrown to the winds.

Perhaps we should change our mindset now and stop looking for leadership where it does not exist. Perhaps it is time to turn the pyramid upside down, which puts the people on top. But that also means we should start building leadership from the bottom, from the lowly places.

As we build pockets of leadership in smaller groups, the pockets will soon grow into identifiable oases. Oases join together into lakes which can water their immediate banks, but the oases will need a lot of backbone to stand.

This is where I believe this generation has an unfinished task - that of building oases, because it is clearly more beneficial to build an oasis than to build a ROCK of whatever variety they come.

Leadership problem is also a problem of followership, and that is why turning the pyramid on its head is most apt for our nation.

-16-

Often we want to describe leadership and then realise that the essence of leadership cannot be reduced to a series of personal attributes, nor confined to a set of particular roles and activity. It's like the challenge of describing a bowl. We can describe a bowl in terms of the clay or other material it's made from, but a true picture must include the hollow that is made in the clay, the unseen space that defines the bowl's shape and capacity. Management science has long strived to capture the unseen

space of leadership but some of the perplexing intricacies of leadership are captured in ancient Chinese parables and folklore - the same way that modern day warfare strategies have a root in Chinese thinking.

It is often the inability to define that “unseen space” of leadership that makes us erroneously conclude that leaders are born and not made. One of such parables likens the act of leadership to the sun which gives away its energy to plants routinely, and as the plants grow, they voluntarily lean towards the sun in a process scientist have described as phototropism. Similarly, as a true leader gives of himself, the followership have little choice but to voluntarily offer their talent and energy, however recalcitrant they may be.

-17-

The one question that succeeding generations must ask themselves and answer is “what do we bequeath to the next generation.” Even if previous generations have failed somewhat in paying close attention to that question, this generation has a chance to challenge itself - and it seems to me that unless we do so, future generations may have been permanently compromised. I do not believe it is late to awaken the consciousness of

those coming after us even if we have limited time to turn things around.

There can be no real success, they say, without a successor, and it is primarily the responsibility of the successful to create a successor.

Indeed the search for leadership is a world-wide search.

In November 1987, TIME magazine asked in a cover story, "Who's In Charge?" and answered its own question, saying "The nation calls for leadership, and there's no one home."

Where have all the leaders gone? They are, like the flowers of the haunting folk song, "long time passing."

All the leaders we once respected are dead. FDR, who challenged a nation to rise above fear, is gone. Churchill, who demanded and got blood, sweat and tears, is gone. Schweitzer who inspired mankind with a reverence for life from the jungles of Lambarene, is gone.

-18-

Einstein, who gave us a sense of unity in infinity, of cosmic harmony is gone. Gandhi, the Kennedys, Martin Luther King Jr ..... where have all the leaders gone.

Leaders around the world down the ages have come to agree on two basic points. They all agree that leaders are made, not born, and they are made more by themselves than by any external means. They also agree that no

leader set out to be a leader per se, but rather to express himself freely and fully. That is, leaders have no interest in proving themselves but an abiding interest in expressing themselves. The difference is crucial for it's the difference between being driven, as too many people are today, and leading, as too few people do.

Something else that leaders have in common is that they continue to grow and develop throughout life. This is in the best tradition of leadership - people such as Martins Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, Jean Piaget, Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein and our own Obafemi Awolowo are examples that come to mind. By contrast, most people, ordinary people, are satisfied with basics. The average person feels satisfied only because he is able to feed his family, and that is pitiable.

-19-

Many times, what we identify as a problem of society has its root in the fact that there are too few people who are willing to invest heavily in their own self-development and growth. Everywhere around the world, those who emerge leaders are those who are willing to pay the price, which often includes self-denial. You don't get born with such a passion, you acquire it. I believe it is defeatist not to accept this

principle. I have also come to believe that whoever coined the word “average” has done a great dis-service to humanity. The concept of ‘average’ is an enemy to the quest for achievement which most humans are well capable of.

One of the frequently recurring issues about leadership is relevance. Leaders are tenants of time and context, and leadership into the twenty-first century must understand the context in terms of a rapidly shrinking world where great distances no longer exist, in terms of demographics which tends to produce waves (for example we have a population that has nearly 50% being 20 years old or less). We need to understand the task in terms of the need for a careful management and deployment of available resources.

-20-

This brings us full circle to those five words we discussed at the beginning which I suggested seem to capture the essence of wisdom, ie awareness, imagination, vision, responsibility and action.

I am sure you would have noticed that even though our subject poses a question, I wasn't going to answer it directly. Indeed I have not even attempted to do so. But I hope I have raised enough issues which should provide the seed for discussion in smaller groups as you settle down to the feast which the celebrant has declared.

And so,..... "teach us, Lord, to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom."

I thank you for listening to me.

BUNMI ONI

18 MAY 1996