

Anthony Comegna ([00:19](#)):

Here we are folks back to one of my absolute favorite books for many years now, *Everyday Ubuntu* by one of my favorite guests so far on our show, Mungi Ngomane. It really cannot be said enough how uplifting this book is, how beautiful it's production values, and how absolutely inspiring its message. But, hey, I gushed enough in this interview as is, so let's go straight for it. It's Mungi Ngomane on another week of *Ideas in Progress*.

Anthony Comegna ([00:54](#)):

Right now, I'd like to start out this week with sort of a ... I don't know if this is necessarily a challenge or not, but I guess you can tell me what you think about this, because for many groups around the world, cultural appropriation is a fairly serious problem nowadays, especially when we do have a globalized world that people share culture across constantly, and it's hard to separate cultural groups anymore even if people want to. It's hard for a culture to keep a hold of it's heritage and identity as such, when Westerners around the world are all doing yoga or something and have absolutely no spiritual moorings attached to it.

Anthony Comegna ([01:42](#)):

Westerners have spent centuries denigrating people who are not in the West. Our governments, our corporations, missionaries, and all sorts of other groups have prosecuted purposeful campaigns to squash and stamp out other cultures, but now that we are so integrated and globalized, Westerners also now like to pick and choose. Sometimes unthinkingly and very uncaringly grasp at bits of culture that they like in practice, but not really recognize the importance or seriousness that might be attached to it in its original context.

Anthony Comegna ([02:24](#)):

Like I said, say white Californian soccer moms doing yoga in their off time or something and totally divorced from spirituality and sense of authenticity, white Americans who love black music for example and totally look the other way about police violence run rampant. So, I'm wondering, again, your grandfather Archbishop Tutu calls this Africa's gift to the world. I'm wondering how do you personally and other people who do try to practice ubuntu, how do you deal the potential problem of simple cultural appropriation?

Mungi Ngomane ([03:04](#)):

So, this is obviously a very valid concern. People will simply jump on ideas as, "Oh, it's another cute, exotic thing." without really taking on the full challenge of what the idea is. Because ubuntu is about our humanity and how we're connected, but also the inherent worth of each individual, I think it is problematic when someone tries to say they're practicing ubuntu, but they have not accepted the full humanity of all members in the society that they're in, and yet with that, as someone who really likes to be in control, I've also learned that I'm truly in control of nothing and no one except myself. So, I think this goes to lesson six, which is believe in the good of everyone.

Mungi Ngomane ([04:01](#)):

I'm not Pollyanna enough to think that there are no people who always approach things as a zero sum game, but I don't think I can let them be determinant of how I live in the world and I don't want to use too much of my energy worrying about this because they just ... What do they say? Worrying is hoping for something that is not, whereas I could use my energy as I am now trying to educate and going out

there and explaining ubuntu and showing it to the best of my ability and then hoping that the people that are attempting to integrate it into their lives are doing it with the best intentions, which I think is what I've seen so far.

Mungi Ngomane ([04:47](#)):

Again, I don't consider myself an expert on this. So, when I'm teaching, I'm also just sort of learning and there will always be people who take advantage of any topic. I think it's probably human nature, but I don't know if other practitioners or myself feel that we should spend the energy on that necessarily and the concern with those people, because then I have less energy to spend on the people who are really earnest and then also the people in my life who make me better. So, I think it's something that is in the back of my mind, but I'm doing what I can do and then not trying to control others.

Anthony Comegna ([05:42](#)):

Yeah. It seems to me this is a possible example of almost like a reverse colonization, where non Western cultures can really make their stamp on the rest of the world in a serious and change promoting way that that could possibly transform a lot of the parts of Western history and culture that were colonizing themselves. So, it could be a pretty serious way to not only reverse the trend, but stamp out the colonizers in a sense without any kind of violence, without any shots fired, just with say 14 lessons.

Mungi Ngomane ([06:28](#)):

I've never thought about that, but that is an interesting thought and something that I want to spend time considering is that one way to sort of not market it, but share it, and does it help people in the West who are interested about learning more about ubuntu and it could be. That's an interesting thought.

Anthony Comegna ([06:56](#)):

Have you encountered anybody who has tried to sort of argue with you about the [inaudible 00:07:03] or maybe your grandfather about the value of treating this as Africa's gift to the world that maybe the more it spreads around, the more likely people are to misuse it, misapply it, not really understand it, sort of watering it down and therefore destroying part of that gift?

Mungi Ngomane ([07:23](#)):

So, I haven't come up with that yet or come to that yet, arguing with anyone about it, but when I was writing it, my biggest concern besides people thinking that I wasn't thinking about the complexities of their life was that, yes, someone would misuse it or misapply it in a way that was harmful to others. And to explain that, one of the lessons is about listening. So, ubuntu is clearly about listening even to those that you don't agree with and that is clearly something that my grandfather and Nelson Mandela were able to do, but I don't want it to be something where a group of white supremacists took it to say, "Well, this is what ubuntu says, so you need to listen to me." Like I said, less than five, having dignity and respect for yourself and others. From that lesson, the biggest thing I've taken away is the need for boundaries and I think that boundaries are healthy and allow us to be our most authentic selves. So, I want people to be able to use boundaries.

Mungi Ngomane ([08:39](#)):

So, one thing I thought of when I was writing it was "All right, well, I have no control over white supremacists or racists and what they're going to do with ubuntu, but I hope that if there is a group or a

person that feels that they are the person receiving this ire, that they could, at least from lesson five, see that boundaries are allowed and that it's not just you need to listen to whatever someone says." If someone is harmful to you and doesn't acknowledge your humanity, I think you can completely remove yourself from that situation. That's what I would do. I wouldn't say, "Oh, well, I have to sit here and listen to you while you're trying to harm me or not acknowledging me as a human being."

Mungi Ngomane ([09:28](#)):

So, I think, again, it goes back to the, I am focused on sharing it earnestly and sharing with people who come to it sincerely, but then also making sure that in that they understand that you don't need to be a doormat to engage with an opposing side. I don't think anyone has the patience that my grandfather Nelson Mandela has. I definitely don't. So, I'm still trying to get to that stage where I could hear the horrible things that were said to them and not react in total anger and try and put myself in their shoes to find a way forward. I'm not there yet. I'll be very honest about that. But, yes, that was a big concern is people taking it and using it horribly wrong and harming people in their use of it. That's definitely something that I don't want to happen.

Anthony Comegna ([10:32](#)):

No, I sort of take the core of the historical examples in the book to be the South Africa's truth and reconciliation hearings. I think these are such wonderful examples, not because of all the grizzly and horrifying murders and other crimes that you discussed throughout, but because it's really ... it's such a fascinating and powerful example of reconciliation, of putting these lessons into just the most difficult practice I think imaginable. I could not imagine being your grandfather on that committee listening to story after story, after story or tuning in on TV to hear all the horrible stories from the apartheid regime and having the whole purpose behind it being to reconcile with each other. That must be so difficult. It's just beyond my imagination.

Anthony Comegna ([11:37](#)):

Part of that probably has to do with the fact that me and I think many people of my generation ... I was just growing up in the 1990s. We never learned about South African history in school. We never heard anything. I never watched any of this on TV. I never ... It just totally escaped my knowledge into the sort of black hole of recent history. We have a lot of undergraduates and grad students in the audience who probably also did not learn much of anything, if anything at all about what South African history was and what happened in the early 1990s there. Could you give us a bit of background to the TRC and how people possibly could find it within themselves to practice ubuntu under those conditions?

Mungi Ngomane ([12:29](#)):

Yeah. So, the TRC, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was sort of the body that was created by the South African government under Nelson Mandela to find a way for South Africa to move forward. My grandfather had actually just retired and then came back out of retirement to chair the commission. The idea behind it was that South Africa didn't want a repeat of the Nuremberg trials, where there was just another cycle of blame and things weren't actually getting better. Just we blame new victims and the cycle of violence continues. So, they decided to have the TRC where perpetrators of harm could come forward and could get amnesty if they told the full truth of the acts they had committed and then if also the TRC committee decided that these acts were done under political means. So, if it was done politically, not personally, then these people could receive amnesty and it's because they wanted the full truth out.

Mungi Ngomane ([13:53](#)):

These hearings were all over TV and the radio. They wanted the whole country to know what had happened so that they could move forward as one and become the rainbow nation. To this day, it's still mind boggling to me. Again, forgiveness is something that I think requires strength. I don't think it's an easy thing to do and for an entire country to move forward in forgiveness of horrible atrocities where mother's children were kidnapped and killed and they were learning about it on TV and men were imprisoned and children threatened, it's horrifying to think that you could just speak of it all in public and then move forward and forgive. That doesn't mean forget, but forgive.

Mungi Ngomane ([14:52](#)):

I think that it is a lesson to us around the world about the power of forgiveness, but also within that, I think in the book I spoke about how there always going to be individuals who cannot forgive. There was a woman who said it is not for her to forgive the man who killed her husband, the TRC can forgive, but she is not going to bestow that upon him. I think that's understandable. I think there's situations where you can't force someone to work on your timeline of forgiveness, but for South Africa to avoid the bloodshed that the rest of the world thought was going to happen once the apartheid government was removed, this was the way for them to do it. It wasn't perfect, but it worked for them and it was the first attempt at this.

Mungi Ngomane ([15:54](#)):

I think it's a lasting example, because South Africa just celebrated 26 years of freedom. They're a young country. They're still learning as they go. Think of a 26 year old. I'm just a few years older than that and I'm still learning. But, I think it's a very potent example of what's possible if you have leadership who are willing to embody what the country needs. So, it's not like they had a leader who had been enjoying life out on the streets. This was someone who was also imprisoned for most of his life who came out and did the act of forgiving that he was asking his country to also do.

Anthony Comegna ([16:47](#)):

I've thought for a while, I'm a historian by training and I do a 19th century US history, and reconstruction after the civil war in this country was just a disaster all the way around. The only good thing probably to come out of the civil war was some half-hearted frankly half assed abolition where only private slave holding was abolished and the government can still own slaves or let's call them involuntary servants, right? They work in prisons today by the millions producing all sorts of household products that we have all around us every day, and that's still allowed. Meanwhile, most of the planters were just fine. They didn't have to face either truth or reconciliation, and you get a resurgence of groups like the Klan and all sorts of racial violence and Jim Crow. It's made me think, "My God, I wish we had had something on our minds like the South African model 120 years later." The rest of the world could have used ... they could have listened to Africa's gift quite a bit earlier.

Mungi Ngomane ([18:02](#)):

Uh-hmm (affirmative). I mean, the only thing for me with reconstruction and after the civil war is in the US I feel like we have this problem with education and erasure. So, if we take it to today, we can't have a conversation acknowledging slavery without someone saying, but, if it's ... well, yes, my great, great ancestors were involved in slavery, but the sections in schools, I think when I was learning about slavery in the US probably lasted a week and then maybe another week for the civil war. I mean, how do we

take hundreds of years of something and then distill it down to maybe two weeks in total? What are we teaching children in our quest to overcome racism?

Mungi Ngomane ([18:57](#)):

Then again, with racism, there's a noticeable amount of people that won't even acknowledge it today, let alone slavery. So, I don't even know if the US back then would have been prepared or able to do something of this sort, because I don't even think we are now, which is a bit disheartening. But, I think that there are tough conversations to be had here that maybe the South Africans were definitely not perfect, but it seems like they were more willing to have these tough conversations that we are not and have not been able to so far.

Anthony Comegna ([19:40](#)):

Another set of anecdotes from the book that I really enjoyed where your story is about the Tutu foundation in the UK and the kind of work that they do, especially the stories that really grabbed me were about the interactions between young people and the police and how the Tutu Foundation strives to bring them together and put these principles of ubuntu into practice and help people change their perspectives on each other. Maybe we could close out by you telling us a bit about the Tutu Foundation and the kind of work that they do.

Mungi Ngomane ([20:13](#)):

Yeah. So, the Tutu Foundation in the UK is funny enough, the chair is my father-in-law and they are focused on the youth because clearly the youth is a group that my grandfather absolutely adores and thinks is our future. So, it was set up in the UK to focus on the youth and bring about change in communities where people are not necessarily listened to. This sort of ubuntu round tables that they started doing that were meant to be conversations change and I think have definitely been conversations for change was actually thought out by a few young men who either had maybe been in a gang or had gotten in trouble for knife crime, not knife crime necessarily, but like carrying a knife as protection.

Mungi Ngomane ([21:04](#)):

I mean, it's amazing to, A, see what young people can do, but also see how these round tables are growing. Now, they're in ... they're supposed to be expanding to 10 boroughs in the UK. The last time we got together and spoke to the young men who started the program, they went back to the beginning. One of the first ones they did where the police came in to talk to them and they asked them not to wear their uniform so that everyone is sort of coming to the table as a human, not as whatever their job is. They said from those conversations that actually before this, they had never thought of the police as people, until one policeman told a story about how he had been called to a home where there was a gruesome murder.

Mungi Ngomane ([22:01](#)):

Then right after that, he had to go do a sort of stop and frisk. So, he may have been more agitated and forceful in his stop and frisk, because he was actually very afraid from the murder he had just seen. Just hearing stories like that does not absolve them of their fault, but it made them think, "Wow, like these policemen are actually humans too." In the same light, the policemen, some were shocked to know that these kids thought, "Oh, we're just coming into your neighborhood to harm you, when actually we thought we were coming in to keep you safe." That's interesting to know. Maybe if we knew some of

you more, then you wouldn't feel that way. Again, if we bring it back to the US example, when I sit and listen to these stories, I'm like, "I don't know, could we do this here?"

Mungi Ngomane ([22:58](#)):

But, it's just amazing to see what young people can do and the growth that the foundation is having with this program. Obviously, right now, they're not bringing people together in rooms, but the focus on getting people who are usually ignored, talking to the groups that they sometimes feel ignored from I think is very powerful. I think it'll make a difference when they can return to normal or figure out how they proceed in expanding it to different boroughs, where you know, all over the UK, these are problems that are happening.

Anthony Comegna ([23:44](#)):

All right, everyone. Instead of me waxing on even more than I already have about how much I just absolutely love this book and how integral it can be to all of our lives right now. Let's just once again thank the essential people in making this interview happen. First and foremost, I want to thank our show's producer Sean Parker for the idea and all the work of making it happen, and Mungi Ngomane for writing such a tremendous and really challenging book. I sincerely implore you all to shell out your so-called stimulus money to buy a copy, enjoy Africa's gift to the world and integrated into your lives as much as possible. I don't mind telling you all that I've tried my best. It is a constant struggle and as well it should be. Let's go for it. People let's really live out our principles that we say we believe in and let's practice ubuntu every day.