

# PULLING OFF the plaster

So that old wounds can heal

BY WENDY KAHN



**THE YEAR 1994 WAS A EUPHORIC TIME FOR ALL** South Africans. We celebrated the values of democracy and human rights and we spoke of Madiba magic, the rainbow nation, and of course Ubuntu. Life was good. We had avoided civil war and bloodshed and, in the main, crossed the bridge unscathed into the New South Africa.

Fast forward 22 years and, as 2016 was only a few days old, our rose tinted glasses cracked and we were confronted with a very frightening reality. Although we had thought that the transformation had been a wonderful success and that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) had provided a forum for our nation to heal, this was clearly a simplistic understanding. While the TRC had allowed victims of the Apartheid atrocities to share their horror stories and afforded the custodians of Apartheid an opportunity to come clean with their role and receive some form of reprieve, it obviously had not been the healing opportunity that we had thought and hoped it would be. In the first week in January, fresh from the holiday cheer, a certain Penny Sparrow burst our transformation bubble with a series of ugly, racist Facebook posts that unleashed a tirade of

hate in the days and weeks since. She exposed a heart-breaking reality that in our country there was still a very long way to go in terms of reaching the reconciliation we all had hoped for.

This week I attended a forum hosted by the Minister of Arts and Culture, Nathi Mthethwa, to address these very serious issues around social cohesion, nation building, and anti-racism. I was very moved by an address by the representative of the South African Council of Churches who described our country as being a wounded nation. I thought that was an excellent analogy of what we are going through right now. We are a country with a festering wound. We should be under no illusions, wounds need time to heal, and it is not something that happens overnight. To put a plaster over it like we have in South Africa for the past 22 years may cover up the ugliness, but it doesn't allow the wound to heal properly. This is a long and difficult process, but something that is necessary. In order for the healing to be complete we sometimes have to clean it with antiseptic, which is painful, but it assists the process – the sting rids us of the bacteria and the obstacles to closure.

And we must remember that even after the wound has healed we are left with a scar. It is a reminder of the pain and the suffering, it will always be there as a reminder of what happened. And of course that is what we are going through in SA today. Twenty two years after the formation of our democracy, we are pulling off the plaster, cleansing out the wound, and beginning the process of healing. It is painful and hard, but it is something that we all need to be involved in.

From our own painful experienced after the Shoah, we understand that healing takes a long time.

We should be involved in the next phase of our country's transformation in the following ways:

**1** Become part of the conversation. Never should we underestimate the pain that all South Africans are going through right now. Over the past weeks I have read so many articles and blogs by fellow South Africans that have opened my eyes to a new reality in my country. For the first time, I feel like I'm starting to understand the deep hurt and damage that those around me experienced and are still experiencing. We need to understand these issues if we want to be part of the healing.

**2** Watch our words. There is no place for the vile comments that we have heard over the past weeks. There is no place for racism in our country. We need to be so sensitive in our choice of language whether it be on Facebook, Twitter, in the school corridors, or at our Shabbat tables. Once those words are out they can never be taken back.

**3** Find opportunities to dialogue with fellow South Africans so that we all understand each other better. This is the best way to support one another during the difficult times ahead.

At the anti-racism conference I attended, Constitutional Justice Yvonne Mokgoro said that it is our duty as citizens to create and strengthen our democracy. Social Cohesion cannot be formed by government alone; it requires the commitment and involvement of every community, every family, and every individual. She urged us all to begin the conversations towards nation building. **■**