

WOMEN'S DAY

I am inspired by lots of people: those who make me think, make me feel deeply, and make me change. And of course, these are both men and women. I have been asked to speak about women who inspire me, today. So, given my brief, I will not be talking about the Michaels: that is Beckhurts, Wilson-Trollip or Houlie, men inspiring to many of us, it is not their turn today.

History tells us that at times, the future for women was not theirs to decide and in many countries this still holds. Both uptown and downtown girls could easily be encouraged to strive for the elusive kind of lifestyle in the words of the song *Seventeen* by Janis Ian:

“I learned the truth at seventeen that love was meant for beauty queens, and high school girls with clear-skinned smiles, who married young and then retired.

Life isn't all it seems. At seventeen.”

And life is indeed very different to what it seems to be at seventeen. I regularly disagree with my matric class about this, when I remind them that the length of their fringes and the kinds of shoes that they wear are not in the long run what really count. It cannot.

When I think of the women who have inspired me, I do not think of what they look like. Rather, they are strong and able to be true to themselves.

They speak in such a way that their words can be received, and so that people can respond. They are thoughtful, conscious rather than self-conscious and hard working. They smile sincere smiles.

They speak truth to power. They question what is wrong. They love and stand up for all children, not only their own. They live through life changing pain and emerge with the scars of these and yet without bitterness. Somehow, they keep it all together; the needs and demands of the world and of work and family.

Looking back at the way the world evolved, we know that for a long time women were excluded from many walks of life.

I admire those who would not accept this and knocked at the doors of places to let them into what they aspired to. They pushed boundaries.

And some boundaries do not budge easily. There are many women who are still denied a good education and a choice of career. For some of them, they have had very little choice; they find themselves taking care of children without much support: getting up early to get their children to school safely and themselves to work safely and to ensure that there is enough to eat and a little bit more. They face cruel choices.

This cruelty is well described in the song *I dreamed a dream/ J'ai rêvé d'un rêve* from *Les Misérables*, sung by Fontine, as her life unravels before her....

I suggest you listen to the song, it is powerful and meant to be sung, but not by me. I shall read it.

There was a time when men were kind
When their voices were soft
And their words inviting
There was a time when love was blind
And the world was a song
And the song was exciting
There was a time

Then it all went wrong

I dreamed a dream in times gone by
When hope was high and life worth living
I dreamed, that love would never die
I dreamed that God would be forgiving
Then I was young and unafraid
And dreams were made and used and wasted
There was no ransom to be paid
No song unsung, no wine untasted

But the tigers come at night
With their voices soft as thunder
As they tear your hope apart
As they turn your dream to shame
He slept a summer by my side
He filled my days with endless wonder
He took my childhood in his stride
But he was gone when autumn came
And still I dream he'll come to me
That we will live the years together
But there are dreams that cannot be
And there are storms we cannot weather
I had a dream my life would be
So different from this hell I'm living
So different now from what it seemed
Now life has killed the dream
I dreamed

Much as I admire women who find themselves able to keep going in these cruel circumstances, I want the world to be different moving forward. Imagine if it could be, if the reality of our biological differences did not result in a glass ceiling in place for young girls, who should be free to be able to choose. Imagine if responsibilities were shared.

August 9 remembers with respect the women in South Africa who marched to Pretoria in protest against the pass laws. The march showed that the stereotype commonly held, that women had no freedom nor a place in the political arena was both outdated and immature.

We need to choose to live intentionally and differently alongside people who are the same as we are, as well as those who are different.

So how shall we then live? What can we do about all of this. We must make our own choices...

I will end with a quote in the book of Micah chapter 6 and verse 8:

“And what does God require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”