

Acceptance Speech by Lincoln Mali on receiving the Distinguished Old Rhodian Award at Rhodes University, Grahamstown

Members of the Old Rhodian Award Committee, members of the Rhodes university community, fellow award recipients, ladies and gentlemen, I stand before you feeling less worthy of the honor bestowed on me. I have asked myself many times, how this great institution would celebrate one so undeserving. In order to gain strength, to stand more upright and to answer these questions, I drew inspiration from the immortal words of Nelson Mandela;

" In real life we deal, not with gods, but with ordinary humans like ourselves: men and women who are full of contradictions, who are stable and fickle, strong and weak, famous and infamous, people in whose bloodstream the muckworm battles daily with potent pesticides. On which aspect one concentrates in judging others will depend on the character of the particular judge. As we judge others so we are judged by others. The suspicious will always be tormented by suspicion; the credulous will ever be ready to lap up everything from oo thobela sikutyele, while the vindictive will use the sharp axe instead of the soft feather duster. But the realist, however shocked and disappointed by the frailties of those he adores, will look at human behavior from all sides and objectively and will concentrate on those qualities in a person which are edifying, which lift your spirit (and) kindle one's enthusiasm to live".

I assume that Linda Booji, who nominated me, and my colleagues from all over the continent, who supported my nomination, are true realists. Words cannot do justice to my gratitude and appreciation to Rhodes University for recognition of this magnitude with an amazing company of fellow award recipients. I dedicate this award to the thousands of colleagues whom I have had the privilege and honor to lead. It is their guidance, constructive feedback, and inspiration that have given me the courage to grow both as a person and as a leader. My nomination for this award was made possible by how high they lifted me on their broad shoulders - **they** are the true heroes in my life story. I have a lot of people to thank in a limited amount of time. I would like to thank my lovely wife, Sva Mali, my mum, my family, comrades, friends and all those members of the village that raised me.

Ladies and gentlemen, for me to repay the trust given me today, to be deserving of this honor, I pledge to strive to meet the two key challenges associated with this award, namely, meeting the challenge of leadership and meeting the challenge of being a role model.

1. Meeting the challenge of leadership

Mr. Chairman, the nomination for this award has made me to reflect on the huge honor, tremendous privilege and high calling of leading people towards a noble goal. Our continent is yearning for men and women of the highest integrity to lead it towards the promise of a new Dawn.

We have been all been exposed to various theories, standards and definitions of leadership. The one that resonates with me more, the one that daily inspires me and the one I ultimately hope to achieve and sustain is aptly captured by Kouzes&Posner. It is very simple in its definition, yet deeply profound in its implications:

“Each leader or potential leader has to place the people at the centre, be responsive to their needs, respectful of their wishes and accountable to them. This requires us as leaders to be selfless in our contribution, inclusive in our decisions, humble in our behavior and inspiring in our actions. If we do this, our joy will not be in how exalted we may be; how elevated our positions are, how much wealth we can amass, and how much power we can have.... it must come from a deeper and special place, where others benefit, grow, or prosper because of our actions...that’s true leadership.”

This definition not only captures the exemplary behaviors expected of us as leaders but also the pure motives we have to have. It sets a standard by which we can benchmark ourselves, but most importantly, by which our followers can judge us as leaders. This dynamic standard can objectively be used on a daily basis to evaluate our suitability to lead –every speech, gesture, comment, visit, and interaction with our constituency is a test of our suitability to lead.

My colleagues in Angola, DRC, Ghana, Namibia and Nigeria will be my conscience, critics and counselors to ensure that, “through my individual actions and achievements I enhance the reputation of the university.” The leadership challenge requires that I and all other leaders accept, with all humility, that leadership goes beyond our fancy titles - that trust must be earned, respect must be earned and loyalty must be earned over time. May we never forget or take for granted the incredible privilege and blessing we have to lead.

I hope over time, God willing, I will be up to the leadership challenge.

2. Meeting the Role Model Challenge

Members of the Rhodes University community, the current societal climate lends itself to an environment of hubris, greed, corruption, fraud, and conspicuous consumption among leaders. There is a dire shortage of genuine role models that our young leaders can look up to. **Jonathan Sacks sums it so well, “ when everything that matters can be bought and sold, when commitments can be broken because they are no longer to your advantage, when shopping becomes salvation and advertising slogans become our litany; when our worth is measured by how much we earn and spend, then the market is destroying the very virtue on which in the long run it depends”**

Our potential and aspirant leaders have to navigate through a moral, ethical and legal minefield about their behaviors and decisions as they assume leadership roles. They need guidance, advice, and pointers towards a righteous path –but more importantly, they need role modelling. I have always shied away from assuming a role modelling role because I firmly believed that my own journey of learning is yet to be complete.

In accepting this award, **which “is specifically intended to acknowledge Old Rhodians as role models”**, I pledge to continue my work of grooming and developing young leaders throughout our beloved continent. To give true meaning to this award, to be deserving of being counted among its recipients, and to continue this important work, I need to assume the difficult task of role modeling. In accepting this difficult task, I have to embraced the harsh reality that leadership is not only what I do, but also fundamentally who I am as a person. To be an effective and influential role model, I have to always ensure that there is alignment between who I am and what I do as a leader.

I hope and pray that I may be to be up to the demands of role modeling.

It will not be easy, as I'm not a god or saint, but a mere mortal with flaws and contradictions. Sometimes I will fail, disappoint, and not be up to the required standard, but I will not give up, I will strive to always be, "***The Man in the Arena***" identified by Theodore Roosevelt in his seminal speech in Sorbonne in 1910.

Maybe that one day, in my old age, bruised by life's journey, I would be sitting on my stoep on a farm, watching my grandchildren play, reflect on this momentous day at Rhodes University. Maybe only then, would I be comfortable to be called, a worthy "Distinguished Old Rhodian". Until then, I owe this University a huge debt, a debt that cannot only be repaid through living up to the honor, prestige and tradition of this wonderful award. My leadership journey continues...

I thank you