

Violence as a form of communication: Making sense of violence in South Africa

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Abstract

This article explores the meaning of violence in South African society against the backdrop of its violent past. Using a perspective suggested by H.W. van der Merwe** and Sue Williams in an article in 1987 – understanding violence as a form of communication – the article seeks to analyse how the persistence and scale of violence can be understood as a legacy of our past. This approach can also help foster spaces for more constructive engagement with those who resort to violence in the face of the society’s failure to provide effective channels for more constructive communication.

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** In the 1987 article by Van der Merwe and Williams, the first author’s last name was incorrectly spelled as ‘Van de Merwe’. In the article below, however, all references to this 1987 article will contain the correct spelling ‘Van der Merwe’.

Introduction

The persistence of violence has been a very distressing aspect of the transition to democracy in South Africa. While the system of apartheid constituted systemic violence and relied on physical violence to survive, political analysts expected post-apartheid society to be much more peaceful. Instead, the continued high levels of both political and criminal violence, while different in many respects from past violence, keep confounding theorists and practitioners. While high levels of crime in response to poverty and political frustration at the slow pace of delivery of basic services are to be expected, the level of violence present in both these spheres is more difficult to explain. A useful perspective that manages to cut through the deeply emotional and moralistic nature of the public debate on these matters can be found in an article published over 25 years ago.

Hendrik (better known as H.W.) van der Merwe and Sue Williams wrote an article entitled 'Pressure and cooperation: Complementary aspects of the process of communication between conflicting parties in South Africa' in 1987. This article had a significant impact on my thinking at the time and has stayed with me over the years. It has resonated with much of my own work and with current debates about why South Africa appears to be such a violent society.

Their article essentially argued that violence and negotiations are two ends of a continuum of communication. They are both intended to convey a message. People resort to physical violence especially when they feel that other avenues for communicating their message have been blocked. In order to de-escalate or resolve a conflict it is necessary to help the different sides to look more sympathetically at the opponents' actions, to understand the meaning of violent acts, and to put them in perspective.

The article was published in the late 1980s, a time when the conflict between the apartheid government and the liberation movements appeared particularly intractable. Violence on both sides of the conflict appeared to be escalating, and the parties were viewed as entrenching their positions and heightening mutual mistrust. The 'excessively' violent nature of their actions was interpreted as an indication of the lack of commitment to negotiations, and even as an expression of hatred or a disregard of the other's humanity. Rather than simply being

regarded as 'normal' acts of war, these actions were seen as particularly brutal and aimed at inducing terror.

The State had launched attacks against African National Congress (ANC) bases in neighbouring countries, apparently targeting and killing civilians indiscriminately. This was seen as a blatant provocation, particularly given that an international mediation team, the Eminent Persons' Group,¹ was present in South Africa at the time. At the same time, ANC supporters were utilising 'necklacing' against enemies and collaborators, a strategy openly supported by some ANC leaders. The cruel nature of these actions was seen by both sides as over-kill, a rejection of their opponent's humanity and an attempt to escalate the conflict.

In a context where polarisation had led to a breakdown of communication, Van der Merwe and Williams sought to introduce a silver lining on the dark cloud of violence. They argued that both sides were attempting to communicate through their actions (both their violent and nonviolent actions), and that there was a desire for this message to be understood by the other side. They further expanded on the issue of violence and communication:

Even apparently senseless or counterproductive tactics may be selected in order to convey a message. Thus violence, even extreme forms of violence, may be part of a political strategy that has a specific end in view.

Such acts ... can be seen in a more acceptable light in order to understand and eventually resolve a conflict that is harmful to all concerned.

It would be helpful if all sides come to see each other's actions as communication, thereby perceiving the actions and the opponents as being part of the process of dealing with the conflict (Van der Merwe and Williams 1987:9, 11).

To simply provide a moral condemnation of the actions of the other side was in fact obstructing each party's ability to make sense of this form of communication. By helping each side understand the message and the motives

1 A group of high profile individuals visited South Africa and met with a range of different political leaders to explore opportunities for negotiations.

of the other, a mediator could help them move towards more constructive forms of communication.

The problem of violence clearly still plagues South African society, as does the tendency to resort to moral condemnation of such 'senseless' acts. Scholars, politicians and activists are still trying to make sense of the persistence of violence in its various forms in South Africa – to interpret it in a way that can be responded to in a constructive manner. Assailed by these images of horrific violence in South Africa, their perspective of looking at violence as a form of communication still holds important value in making sense of the senseless. Understanding violence as a form of communication also, however, raises serious questions about what communication skills and techniques a democratic South Africa has inherited and how to make sense of this culture of dealing with conflict.

By first outlining some of the most overt aspects of the present violence faced by South African society, then reviewing different approaches to understanding violence from a communications perspective, this article seeks to present some ideas about what these phenomena mean for potential violence prevention strategies.

The continuities of violence

While the direct political violence between opposing political parties at a national level has largely disappeared, violence has persisted and has, it would seem, become worse in numerous other spheres of the South African society. Physical violence (both at interpersonal and collective levels) seems to have become the norm in many social contexts, and these seem to mirror the underlying structural violence that has only marginally been ameliorated since the transition to democracy. Structural violence (examined in more detail below) refers to the social structures which harm people by systematically limiting their access to basic needs (Galtung 1969).

Interpersonal criminal violence is the most immediate and worrying manifestation of violence for most South Africans. It is not only the high crime rate that raises concerns among the public and the government, but also the

violent nature of these crimes. Public and political outrage are often expressed at the apparent excessive nature of the violence used by criminals – seemingly in excess of what was required to achieve the immediate criminal goals.²

The number of murders in South Africa has dropped significantly since 1995.³ It does, however, remain very high compared with other countries,⁴ and the rates of other violent crimes have not shown a similar decrease in recent times.

Gender violence, particularly rape, remains at a horrific level. More than 25 percent of South African men questioned in a 2009 survey admitted to raping someone, and nearly half of those men said they had raped more than one person (Jewkes et al. 2009). The rate of homicide of women by intimate partners is six times the global average (Seedat et al. 2009).

Police violence has also remained a serious concern despite the various efforts to introduce democratic policing and human rights principles into the training and management of police since the transition to democracy. While various measures have been introduced to regulate and provide oversight of police use of force, incidents of police excesses appear to be multiplying, both in relation to their handling of public protests and their dealings with individual suspects.

The most shocking of these events was the killing of 34 and injuring of 78 striking miners on 16 August 2012 at the Lonmin Platinum Mine in Marikana. This was the most serious incident of police violence, not just since the democratic transition, but since the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 that marked the beginning of the armed struggle in South Africa. Police use of force against public demonstrators has however become increasingly common over the last decade. Rather than simply a tragedy of miscalculation and failure of police

2 This concern prompted the Department of Safety and Security to commission the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation to conduct a study on why crime was so violent. See Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation 2010.

3 See Mail and Guardian 2011: SA murder rate drops by 6.5%.

4 Violence and injuries are the second leading cause of death and lost disability-adjusted life years in South Africa. The overall injury death rate of 157.8 per 100 000 people is nearly twice the global average (Seedat et al. 2009:1011).

management, this massacre is the outcome of a more violent orientation of policing that had been observed in various other public confrontations.

Just a week before the massacre the Minister of Police, Nathi Mthethwa, spoke vehemently about the need for police to use maximum force:

Police must return fire with fire. We will use maximum force based on the law itself. Those who want to break the law, such as cash-in-transit heists and bank robberies, must think again. They should know that we will not waiver in continuing to let them feel the heat and that we squeeze them with maximum force (Neethling, 2012).

It was exactly those units who were trained and experienced in the use of maximum force against armed criminals who were deployed in Marikana. Statements that were symptomatic of a growing militarism in the police and stressed their capacity and willingness to use violence had been made before. Susan Shabangu, the Deputy Minister, framed this quite explicitly at a public rally in 2008:

You must kill the bastards [criminals] if they threaten you or the community. You must not worry about regulations. I want no warning shots. You have one shot and it must be a kill shot (Mkhwanazi 2008).

When challenged about this statement two days later, ANC president Jacob Zuma supported her: 'If you have a deputy minister saying the kinds of things that the deputy minister is saying, this is what we need to happen' (SAPA 2008).

Another aspect of police use of force that remains problematic is the torture of crime suspects. While the number of people dying in police custody is higher today than it was during apartheid, it is difficult to allocate responsibility, as many of these deaths are a result of illness or injuries received prior to detention. The high number of deaths (720 in 2011–2012), and the regular allegations of torture are however concerning signs, particularly in the broader context of the police being encouraged to use violence.⁵

5 Also of great concern is the fact that the Independent Complaints Directorate (now called the Independent Police Investigative Directorate) does not keep statistics on torture due to the fact that torture had not been defined as a crime till 2013 (See Independent Complaints Directorate 2012).

As mentioned above, the increasingly violent approach to policing is in part a reaction to the perception of escalating violence of criminals and protestors. The violent nature of public protest is indeed a growing concern. Both the number of protests and the violence associated with these protests appear to be rising. One estimate puts the number of major service delivery protests in 2012 at 173 (up from a previous high of 111 in 2010) and found that over three quarters of these were violent (Municipal IQ 2013). Much of the blame for this, however, rests with the police because of their confrontational strategies in engaging public protests, with peaceful demonstrations spiralling out of control once police engage protesters (CSVR and SWOP 2011).

Xenophobic attacks have also unfortunately become common in South Africa. Beside the more orchestrated and mass scale assault on non-citizens in 2008 when 62 people were killed (some of whom were burnt alive), attacks continue on a regular basis on a smaller scale, and are generally dismissed by State officials as being criminally motivated.

Violence has also remained a central feature of many of the large strike actions by workers. In the lead up to the Marikana massacre, 10 people were killed, including two policemen and two mine security guards. The most violent of these large actions was the national strike by security guards during which 50 people were killed over a three-month period. The main umbrella union in South Africa, COSATU,⁶ admits that half of its members believe that violence during strike action is necessary in order to achieve results (Orderson 2012).

Other spheres of South African life where violence has been noted as alarmingly regular or disturbing are vigilante violence,⁷ schools,⁸ prisons⁹ and families.¹⁰

Alongside the overt physical violence is the disturbing continuity of structural violence. Inequality in South Africa remains appalling, both in terms of the country having one of the highest levels of income inequality in the world (which has in fact increased since 1994),¹¹ as well as the distribution of this disparity along racial lines despite State efforts to promote equality.¹² The delivery of basic services and adequate housing, while significantly improved since apartheid, is still a distant dream for many citizens, and unemployment remains at a staggering 36.5 percent.¹³

Does all this violence that appears endemic to South African society say something about its inhabitants being a violent people? Do we resort to violence too easily? Have we become so hardened as to accept violence as a normal part of everyday interaction and of political and social discourse? Have we become so hardened to the supposed inevitability of poverty and inequality that we accept these as the norm and view their eradication as a distant goal?

7 Police statistics claim that 5% of SA's approximately 15 000 murders per year are vigilante killings.

8 Burton and Leoschut (2012) found that 22.2% of high school learners were found to have been threatened with violence or had been the victim of an assault, robbery and/or sexual assault at school in the past year. A study by Mncube and Harber (2012) found that about 55% of pupils who were surveyed report that they have experienced violence in one or more of these forms.

9 The Judicial Inspectorate for Correctional Services (2012) found that there were 852 deaths in South African prisons in 2011–12, of which 48 were classified as unnatural deaths.

10 Jewkes et al. (2009) found that more than 40% of South African men said they had been violent with an intimate partner.

11 South Africa's Gini coefficient increased from 0.66 to 0.70 between 1993 and 2008 (Leibbrandt et al. 2010). These figures are however vigorously disputed, the disputes being based on questions of whether the income figures include various state assistance programmes.

12 The average white household income is still six times that of black households, down only slightly from the ten to one ratio at the time of transition (De Wet 2012).

13 The official figure of 25.5% unemployed includes only those actively looking for work.

Can the perspective of ‘violence as communication’ perhaps help us think through some of these challenges, and clarify what we are seeing and what solutions might be feasible?¹⁴

Making sense of violence in SA

Firstly we need to confront some critical questions: Has violence become a normal form of communication in South Africa? Has it become a normal form of interaction that is almost taken for granted? Have we in fact adopted a culture of violence? Some commentators have remarked that South Africa has adopted violence as our 12th official language (Molopyane 2013).¹⁵ Moreover, violence has been ‘valorised’ in our patriarchal culture to the point that it is being taken for granted, or as a social fact, and not as something that is in itself problematic. South Africa is not unique in terms of the commonality of violence. Some analysts have pointed out the commonalities between South Africa’s ongoing post-transition violence and other countries that have also experienced decades of conflict (Steenkamp 2005; Steenkamp 2011).

In addition to analyses that explore the structural causes of conflict, some analysts have suggested that violence has become so normalised because South Africa has in effect developed a ‘culture of violence’:

[It has become] a society which endorses and accepts violence as an acceptable and legitimate means to resolve problems and achieve goals (Vogelman and Simpson 1990).

[E]ndorsement and acceptability of violence to which this label [culture of violence] refers is crucial to an understanding of any violent incident in South Africa. Resolving conflict and problems through violence has long been a major part of South African culture (Vogelman and Lewis 1993:5).

14 The concept of ‘violence as communication’ has been used to help explain terrorism (Schmid and De Graaf 1982) and the psychological motivation of criminals (e.g. De Haan 2011; Blumenthal 2006), but has not been commonly used in conflict analysis literature.

15 South Africa recognises 11 languages as official languages in its constitution.

Both the extent of violence and the moral response of society (or lack thereof) may be seen as indicating that South Africa has developed a culture of violence. The term 'culture of violence' implies two things about how society views violence: Firstly, violence is seen as normative rather than exceptional. Violence is seen as a normal response to addressing a problem, and therefore attracts little condemnation. Decisions to use violence are thus based on whether it works or not, rather than on whether it is justifiable or not. Secondly, violence is valued in certain situations. Violence is seen as serving a positive social function (in addition to its instrumental value). In this formulation, violence thus becomes an effective and commonly used form of communication, and those who are good at this form of communication are valued members of society.

In some ways, however, all societies may be characterised by such a 'culture of violence'. They may be located at different points on a spectrum ranging from the condemning to the valuing of violence. Making such broad judgements about a whole society is deeply problematic, however, particularly in a society like South Africa's which is composed of a range of cultures and social networks with their respective attitudes to violence that are contextually specific. With very few exceptions, cultures around the world allow and even celebrate violence in certain situations, particularly those of inter-state conflict.

Johan Galtung (1990:291) provides a different formulation of this idea. He preferred the term 'cultural violence' to refer to 'those aspects of culture ... that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence'. This framing allows us to deconstruct which aspects of culture shape how violence is sanctioned and celebrated. Rather than berating or lamenting a culture as a whole, the focus becomes a more nuanced engagement with particular aspects that can be seen to either improve or worsen over time. The normative nature of violence (as well as the invisible nature of structural violence) then becomes subject of an analysis. As Galtung (1990:291) notes: 'Cultural violence makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right – or at least not wrong'.

A critical question when confronted with the full range of violence in our society is whether these forms of violence are all interconnected by a shared

cultural paradigm or whether they represent numerous violent subcultures. This question leads to more questions. Are these subcultures autonomous or does change in one affect the others? Does exposure and normalisation of violence in one sphere 'bleed' into other spheres? For instance, does exposure to wartime violence lead to the acceptance of violence in dealing with conflict within the family? Does acceptance of violent sports make a society more susceptible to violence in other social relations? Or more specifically, does viewing the torture of political opponents as acceptable make us more morally flexible when torture is then used against regular criminals? And when violence is celebrated for achieving political liberation, can we then condemn those who seek economic liberation through violence?

The key concern here is whether normalising violence in one sphere presents a slippery slope that undermines our ability to reduce it in others. In stable and homogeneous societies, this may not be a problem. Clear values and norms about violence that are commonly shared can contain nuanced internal contradictions that do not seem to bother the average citizen. However, in the context of huge political and social flux and transformation (where these shared values are absent or not so explicit), the concern about a slippery slope may be more serious.

Van der Merwe and Williams argued strongly that peace and justice are complementary, and that society's acceptance of violence presents serious ethical dilemmas that undermine justice. While not overtly condemning violence, they drew on Adam Curle to point out that condoning violence presents a philosophical position that does put society on a dangerous course. Curle (1981:17–18) argued that by accepting violence as legitimate, the implication is that:

the ends are more important than those who may stand in the way of achieving them. ... A particularly dangerous and unsavoury aspect of this philosophy is its sanctification of 'interests,' personal or national, in defence of which any enormity, including nuclear war, is acceptable.

Another element that helps explain violence's persistence is the trauma it induces. While both the perpetrators and the victims of violence learn what

works (and what perpetrators can get away with), the victims experience both individual and collective trauma, which presents fertile ground to see violence as a necessary form of self-defence in the face of officially sanctioned abuses. The history of violence is thus a legacy that marries behavioural patterns to a psychological condition of vulnerability, oppression and marginalisation. Kynoch (2006:32) argues that violence is a form of humiliation that undermines human dignity and which can have a long lasting impact on social norms when it becomes part of systemic abuses:

We have to take account of state policies that exposed millions of boys and men to humiliating police harassment and a violent prison system. Finally, state sponsorship of township violence further undermined the rule of law. These conditions, unique to South Africa, nurtured a culture of violence that has reproduced itself ever since.

Bar-Tal (2003) also points out that the violent nature of a conflict is a key factor in explaining its intractability. He argues that, once a conflict becomes violent, certain factors emerge that make it more difficult to resolve. Violence shifts the stakes in terms of emotional involvement, irreversibility of the situation (particularly with loss of life), it fuels the desire for revenge, and it leads to a cultural preservation of this memory of victimisation.

Yet another element of cultural violence that needs clarification is the valorisation of violence. Not only is violence tolerated, but under certain conditions, society rewards individuals or groups for being violent. In such cases individuals do not only gain the spoils of violence; they also build their status among their peers. The most obvious example of this is gang violence where violence is used as a way of gaining rank in the gang. But the same can be said for a head of state who acts aggressively towards another country as a way to bolster support among his or her electorate, or a political leader who seeks public support through appeals to police to 'kill the bastards'.

In a society that celebrates the violence of its liberation and the courage of its warriors and soldiers (while paradoxically also commemorating a peaceful transition), the ideas of masculinity are clearly linked to power and physical

strength. Our society still says: to be a real man is to be willing to use violence to defend yourself or your woman.

Transition to cultural non-violence

What does this mean for the challenge of dealing with violence and building peace? The range of challenges outlined above is somewhat overwhelming. Cultural violence is pervasive and deep rooted. Our values and norms which justify and celebrate violence are rooted in our various institutions ranging from the police, to the schools, to the family. These values are however in constant competition with values that celebrate non-violent solutions. In South African history, as well as in the constitution and in the country's political culture, there are factors that value negotiation, peaceful protest and human rights. The normative battle between appropriate responses to conflict is ongoing within all our institutions.

There are perhaps three key lessons to take from viewing violence as communication. Firstly, we need to understand why violence is chosen as a form of communication in a particular situation. Secondly, we need to understand the language of violence. And thirdly, we need to understand the repercussions of the State 'adopting' violence as a non-official 12th language.

To understand its use in particular situations, we need to read violence in context. Martin Luther King (1967) said 'violent revolts grow out of revolting living conditions,' and 'violence is the language of the unheard' (cf Smith 2002). Van der Merwe and Williams (1987:11) also emphasise this context of oppression and marginalisation which explains resorting to less constructive communication: 'the more (the) usual channels of communication are closed, the more violence is the alternative seen, as with groups repressed and silenced by governments'.

At a very practical level, we need to try to come to grips with what people who use violence are communicating through their actions. As Orford (2013) argues, we need to learn to understand this language, to deconstruct its grammar and to look for its syntax and meaning.

Violence at an interpersonal and public level consists of regular repertoires and observable patterns of symbols. Gang violence, for example, takes on ritualistic forms, a language that its members have to learn and emulate. Public violence in South Africa, such as burning tyres and libraries, or necklacing informers, foreigners and criminals, took on a ritualistic character that has survived into the democratic society (Timse 2011).

The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) published a report on collective violence (service delivery protests and xenophobic attacks) in 2011 entitled 'The smoke that calls'. This title was an overt reference to the way that protesters explained the nature of their violent actions to the researchers:

The premier undermines us. He'll see by the smoke we're calling him (CSVR 2011:27).

In the context of unremitting poverty and lack of basic services, violence is seen as a language that speaks more loudly. In the face of repeated efforts to pursue more peaceful strategies, violence appeared as a last resort, and was then legitimised:

Violence is the only language that our government understands. Look we have been submitting memos, but nothing was done. We became violent and our problems were immediately resolved. It is clear that violence is a solution to all problems (CSVR 2011:28).

The authors argue that the form that these acts of violence take is borrowed from the script that had been developed during the struggle against apartheid. Burning a local clinic or a library which represents state authority is a symbolic disruption of that authority. But the language of violence is not just one that is spoken by the protesters; it is also heard and spoken by the State, which brings us to the third point, the un-official adoption of violence as a 12th language by the State.

Violence is a shared language where the State also interprets this communication through the same logical framework. Violent protests are taken more seriously than non-violent protests. The State has thus bought into the logic that violent

people are serious and non-violent people are not sufficiently upset and can be ignored.

Just as protestors use violence to get the State to take them seriously, the State does the same thing when it comes to communicating with the public about crime. Using this same language of violence, the State seeks to communicate its seriousness about crime by proclaiming how violent it will be against criminals. State and society engage in a conversation about problems through a mutually shared set of symbols associated with acts of violence. It would thus appear that as a society we have failed to generate effective, shared, non-violent forms of communicating deep concern, commitment, or desperation. Those who do not use violence are rendered mute and invisible.

The challenge is for society to strengthen and reinvent symbols and strategies of communication to convey the urgent and critical messages of desperation that should drive our social policies. The State also needs to learn to read, hear and see peaceful protests for what they are (not simply as messages of low intensity). Learning to see desperation in protests that are not violent is thus a priority in these contexts. Protests in Cape Town against the failure of the local government to provide adequate sanitation (such as the dumping of faeces in government offices and the international airport) provide an interesting (but not very promising) example of such a search for symbols (South African Press Association 2013). Rather than react emotionally or dismissively through labelling protests as destructive or misplaced, the State needs to learn to take all forms of protest seriously and to examine what they are communicating.

While South Africa has developed a complex set of symbols for violent communication, a key challenge is to develop a shared and valued set of non-violent forms of communication. As Orford (2013) suggests, 'We must learn it fast if we want to hold open that reciprocal space of conversation where languages other than violence can be spoken.'

Conclusion

South Africa's ability to communicate effectively is an essential prerequisite for its ability to address its legacy of inequality and poverty. For communities and the

State to engage each other in negotiation and confrontation regarding life and death issues such as service delivery, jobs and crime, they need to have a shared language or set of symbols to communicate their desperation or commitment to a cause. The language of violence is a convenient common reference point for protestors and state authority which draws on only certain elements of South Africa's tradition of liberation struggle. The rich tradition of non-violent struggle with its symbols and values has not been lost, but battles for recognition alongside the visceral front page coverage given to violence.

South Africa's history of violence has developed a repertoire of communication that threatens to trump other forms of non-violent communication when it comes to addressing serious problems of crime and revolting living conditions. Excessive reliance on these old repertoires of violent communication has created a form of cultural violence that legitimates and celebrates violent communication and violent identities at the expense of exploring new forms of communication.

The picture is, however, not totally bleak. Alongside the language of violence, numerous State-established forums generate new forms of communication and engagement between State and community. Civil society and community-based structures who bump their heads against an apparently unresponsive state continue to seek new avenues to express their needs and demands. The language of protest is thus one that keeps evolving and seeking new forums and forms for being heard. This is a co-evolutionary process where both the state and society need to ascribe value to responses or initiatives that do not simply rely on violence as an indicator of seriousness, commitment, or desperation.

Van der Merwe and Williams would probably have seen many silver linings in the present context – both in terms of the continued commitment of the poor to have their voices heard (even if violently), and in the commitment of many to continue experimenting with non-violent communication. Their emphatic call to those who tried to counter violence with violence was for an approach that would recognise the desperation that the violence sought to communicate, and would build communication strategies that could provide more effective redress and thus negate the need for violence. Rather than condemn violence, their call was for us to rely on (and in some respects learn to talk) a different

language. While warning against the consequences of violence as our default communication setting, they sought to explore the positive avenues that are present in South African society, but which are not sufficiently acknowledged as a part of our tradition and as having been critical in many of our successes.

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