

**Sheena Duncan – The woman for others**  
**(abbreviated version for May 19<sup>th</sup>)**

Sheena Duncan's whole life was built on the values she espoused: justice, non-violence, generosity, courage, respect for the dignity of every human being, and love for others.

Her impact on the Black Sash is incalculable. She was its National President for a total of seven years, the chair of its board of trustees, the editor of its magazine for many years, and at the forefront of its advice office work. In recent years she has been its patron. She represented it nationally and internationally with distinction in many different fora. She influenced its vision and deepened its political understanding.

So many tributes have been paid to her. I quote only one: "The detail I found most striking was that Sheena would never leave the Johannesburg advice office before everyone in the queue that day had been attended to. What a model of "batho pele". What a patron saint for civil servants!"

It has been fascinating to seek to understand how Sheena grew into this person of such stature. She began her work in the Black Sash in the early 1960s, when the strength of the apartheid state was already evident, entrenching racially-based separation, and increasing repression of any resistance. The major liberation movements had been driven into exile or underground. Influx control was at its height – over two million people were convicted of pass law offences between 1960 and 1980. Over those two decades we saw the furtherance of job reservation, farm labour, Christian National education, censorship, security laws (90-day detention, then 180-day detention), the 'homelands' policy, and, not surprisingly, growing poverty.

The public protest work was important, however much it was curtailed by various prohibitions. The advice to individuals suffering under the laws was essential. But the larger question was **how to try to bring about change**.

One way was through the courts: how to find ways of challenging those laws through the judicial process – an invaluable lesson which still resonates with us today, now that we have constitutional rights to enhance that process.

Equally important was the further development of political understanding in the organisation. Sheena's thinking was clearly honed by the debates within the organisation, enriched by other remarkable women, and sometimes pierced by sharp differences. The objective was always to understand what was at stake and to make information available to others, to increase the political pressure on the government in order to bring about change, and to try to influence public opinion.

Her writing, particularly her annual presidential addresses, demonstrate her ability to identify the major issues facing the country, and to challenge civil society to stand up for justice. We are fortunate to have these speeches, because she was bound to write them for publication. She really preferred to speak from a few notes on cards, and she knew her facts so well that she did not need a text. She was steeped in the daily contact with those who endured the full might of unjust laws.

Those speeches are a valuable record of the organisation's work, and of her own political thinking. Just as she had the courage to face up to the government and to the electorate which returned it to power, she did not shirk from challenging the Black Sash itself. For decades the membership had sought to work only through "legal and peaceful means", but Sheena raised the issue of **civil disobedience**, and supported those who were driven by conscience to take such action. For her, it was the logical consequence of seeking peaceful and non-violent ways of bringing about change.

She said, "Civil disobedience and non co-operation with the laws of a State *is* a most serious matter. It is not to be undertaken lightly. It is the answer, as a last resort, for those who believe that violent means used to achieve change tend to create a new kind of violent society. It is certainly not to be considered in any situation where the law can be invoked to protect the rights of the people. But what is one to do when the law is no longer a protection?"

She concluded, "I personally find it difficult any longer to avoid the obligation thrust upon me to refuse to obey laws which demand that I must co-operate in the oppression of the men and women and children around me".

Sheena also spoke about **sanctions** at a time when it was illegal to advocate sanctions, and it is characteristic of her that her attitude was careful, nuanced and astute. In 1988, when the Black Sash itself had not been able to reach consensus on the matter, she wrote:

"I personally would support the call for comprehensive mandatory sanctions if I thought they were politically possible in the foreseeable future. If South Africa were to be totally isolated by every country in the world simultaneously, apartheid would probably not last a fortnight, but I do not think this is possible... I have urged people to think strategically about the sanctions they can apply".

She went on to point out that financial sanctions seemed to produce the most rapid and long term results, and that the sports boycott had been one hundred percent successful. However, she had doubts about cultural and academic boycotts, and had been opposed to the coal embargo because of its effect on the Mozambican mineworkers, who would be the first to be laid off, had no rights of residence in South Africa and not even the limited protection of Unemployment Insurance Fund benefits. Yet she recognised that coal was one of our major earners of foreign currency, and that the embargo was therefore consistent with the attempt to reduce foreign earnings.

She pointed out that this was the dilemma we faced "when we are convinced of the efficacy of sanctions as a non-violent weapon for forcing change but have to face our responsibility for those who will really suffer, immediately and personally, because of our calls".

The Black Sash also owes Sheena a debt of gratitude for her **far-reaching vision** for the organisation itself. Although she sometimes felt that the government would act against it, as it had succeeded in suppressing others, she laid the foundations for securing its future. With the advice and assistance of Raymond Tucker, the Advice Office Trust was formed in 1985, to create the legal framework for receiving funds for that part of the work. It was the forerunner of the present-day Black Sash Trust.

After 1994, the organisation set out to transform itself, responding to the opportunities and challenges of the new democracy. Through a long and sometimes heart-breaking process, which many of you here will remember, the restructured Black Sash came into being. The legacy it embraced was articulated by Sheena as based on its unchanging values: justice, dignity for all, the affirmation of women, integrity, non-violence, rigour through meticulous and accurate work, independence and courage, and the importance of volunteer contribution to civil society.

The big question is, what is the task that faces all of us today? What would Sheena be asking of us?

She certainly would not expect us to be waiting for another leader of her calibre to come sailing in to take us into the next campaign. She was a powerful force, but she was also like any one of us. She could be deeply distressed, even despairing, frustrated, angry and impatient. Her response was to listen, to learn, to pray, to engage with others, and to seek to do “the next right thing”. She grew in knowledge because she laid herself open to the pain of others and tried to do something about it. She would expect no less of any of us.

Our society is radically transformed from the racist, oppressive, violent one which preceded it. It is truly wonderful to be able to celebrate that, as we honour Sheena’s contribution to bringing it about.

However, much remains to be done:

- Poverty and inequality haunt us, as at least a quarter of our country’s workforce is unemployed.
- On going problems with the provision of education and skills training mean that the young generation will face similar barriers unless we can find ways to assist.
- Local governments and the civil service are grappling with their inability to meet the needs and demands of the public. How can we accept, for example, that thousands of people are having to wait many years for the settlement of claims by the Workmen’s Compensation Commission?

Our task as members of civil society is on the one hand to remind the government of its obligations to the whole of society, especially those whose need is greatest. On the other hand, we ourselves need to be aware and become informed about what is unjust or inhumane about current policies and practices, and to look for solutions that lie within our capacity.

Let us not stand on the sidelines, but become active and involved in meeting at least some of the needs that we see around us.

That would truly be the way to honour this special woman, this warrior for justice, who has lived and worked among us for the benefit of all South Africans.

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Mary Burton  
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