



**'New News' of South Africa:
Reconciliation,
Transformation,
Hope
Part of Global Journey
to Democracy**

Charlayne Hunter-Gault
Chief Africa Correspondent
National Public Radio
Johannesburg, South Africa

Editor's note: 'New News' of South Africa was presented September 28, 1998, at the University of Georgia as part of its fourth annual Walter Barnard Hill Distinguished Lecture Series. The series was established by UGA Vice President for Public Service and Outreach and JPSO Publisher S. Eugene Younts to highlight leaders in public service and outreach. Hunter-Gault is a 1963 graduate of the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia.

Living in a developing country and working around a developing continent where the needs of the people far exceed the capacity of most governments to meet those needs makes me keenly aware of the importance of the thing you celebrate here today — the idea of public service and the contributions that those of you who participate in this University of Georgia program make. So, today, I would like to challenge you even as you have challenged yourselves up to now to extend your reach in an urgent way to your neighbors to the South. In this era of globalization, as most of you know, there are no more 'foreigners' — only neighbors, and your neighbors' neighborhood is as much your business as theirs. Your neighbors in the South — not south Georgia — but in the Global South, Africa, need you, albeit in a vastly different way from the past. Despite the glass through which Africa is largely viewed darkly by the media in this country in particular and therefore by most Americans, there are more and more signs that Africa is not a hopeless basket case. Indeed, as you would know, Africa is a vast continent of some fifty countries. Some of these are indeed struggling with ongoing war and famine and disease and other forms of devastation, but all but a handful of African countries now have elected governments and many more are responding to the needs of their citizens. The words of Pliny have never been more accurate and appropriate than they are today. There is indeed something new "out of Africa."

South Africa's Deputy Executive President, Thabo Mbeki, who is slated to succeed Mandela after the elections next year, coined the phrase, "the dawning of an African renaissance," for this particular time in the history of Africa. Unfortunately, the signs of that renaissance often get lost in the simultaneous post-Cold War debates in the media over what is news and in the political arena over what is the national interest. ...[T]here has been little appetite, it seems to me, in the American news media for looking at the world and places like Africa in a different way — for opening our eyes to see the things

that we have not yet learned to see. Thus, there is the widespread failure to see what I am seeing every day that I walk outside my house in Johannesburg — what I call new news.

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It is news of struggle. It is news of hope, of amazing triumphs in the face of tremendous obstacles. It is the news of reconciliation and transformation. It is not news, if that is what you want to call it, that is designed to entertain and titillate

and pander to the basest instincts of our nature. It is news that on occasion will repel, but it also news that on occasion can elevate and can inspire. I could paraphrase the poet Robert Lowell, for example, if ever there were a "new occasion" that teaches "new duties," it is this moment in the history of Africa, if not the world — for us in the media and for those of you who add your talents and skills in the service of the public. You need that kind of news, people like you, to help guide you to new missions and to new heights of accomplishments. And, you need to know that if you follow the Afro-pessimist view of Africa, you wouldn't be inspired to contribute your talents to Africa, because it would seem as if all were for naught.

But, if you follow the new news of Africa, then you would know that whatever it is that you have to contribute would be meaningful and could make a difference. I can tell you that while I have had some amazing assignments all over the world in the past thirty-something years since I left the [Henry W. Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia in 1963] none is more compelling than the assignment I have now. Nowhere are the occasions for "new duties" more important. In fact, one of the more exciting, not to mention exhausting assignments I

have had recently was covering President [Bill] Clinton's historic but lightning-fast visit to six countries on the continent. This was in April of this past year [1998].

It seems like a century ago. But, to have the leader of the Free World acknowledge that the seeds of many of Africa's current problems and conflicts were sown by competing super powers who used Africa as the pawn in their dangerous power games was new news. Also, in village after village — in Uganda, for example — there were signs of new beginnings: Women who had started bakeries and other businesses back in the bush that were flourishing, thanks to loans of as little as \$50. Loans, incidently, that were repaid within the prescribed time limit. Schools that had reduced the illiteracy rate in the country thanks to the vision of the country's president and the work of dedicated teachers. In Botswana, President Clinton and the rest of us saw people committed to the preservation of the environment and learned about bushweeds that cure all manner of diseases including childhood leukemia. When the president left from Senegal in a very emotional moment in which he recalled the history of Goree and its relationship to African-Americans in this country, I stayed behind to see much more of the new news in Africa.

In Rwanda, where genocide claimed the lives of an estimated ten million people — a number that is almost too big to contemplate — I saw some of the thousands of children, some as young as nine years old, now heading their households. Those who had often suffered the trauma of seeing their parents hacked to death before their very eyes with machetes and now, as one told me, they are orphans, widows, and mothers and fathers all wrapped into one, at the ages of nine, ten, and eleven.

There is no program that can bring back the parents of those children or restore the extended families that used to help provide for them. I visited a small farm where some of these children are being taught how to raise kale and cabbage and sweet potatoes that will help them feed themselves and their young siblings and then maybe help them earn a little money on the side.

The next challenge is to expand such programs because these serve only a handful of the children in need of them; to expand those programs and to find ways of getting those children back in school. Even as war in neighboring Congo is threatening the recovery in Rwanda, as well as the entire region, the candlelight of hope continues to flicker and burn, especially in the minds of those children. Now, to digress for just a moment, I will tell a brief story about visiting a church one Sunday morning where some young Rwandan people were. These are mountain people and they are very closed and insular. That has been one of the psychological problems. They don't talk about the genocide and so it is still all inside of them. There is a move toward the Evangelical Church: Most of them are Catholic, but are moving toward the Evangelical Service because somehow all of that singing and music is helping to get some of that deep-seated pain and trauma out of them. They asked me — as a visitor I was coming to report what was going on — if I would stand

and say something. In this particular environment, I could no more identify with them as victims of genocide as Dr. [Michael] Adams, a white male, could identify with me as the first black student here at the University of Georgia.

So, I was petrified. I stood up and began to say that there was nothing in my experience that could prepare me to share anything with them, and then I heard myself talking about the days of segregation, the days when a whole society organized to prevent some of its citizens from achieving their full worth and value. And then I started talking about the civil rights movement.

All of these young people who had spoken earlier had talked about their own favorite songs. I have to say, I think God was moving me that day, because I had no idea what was coming out of my mouth. I started talking about this song that we used to sing in The Movement, and I starting singing "...ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round." ...There was somebody translating so I asked them to translate for me and see if everybody would sing. So they started singing. I said to them that when we use to sing it, we would clap our hands and wave our hands and move our bodies — and I am really on dangerous ground here, because this truly is a traumatized society and I am not a psychologist. But, they started swaying and they started singing and I said "...ain't gonna let no Jim Crow turn me 'round," and they sang that, not knowing who Jim Crow was. And I was trying to think of things that could relate to their experience and I said "...ain't gonna let no people put me down, and ain't gonna let that turn me 'round..." And then, something moved me to say, "...ain't gonna let no genocide turn me 'round," and I really took a deep breath behind that one. And then, I heard them suddenly singing "...ain't gonna let no genocide turn me 'round."

This is a real long story, and it is a real digression, but I've got to finish it. We get to the end of the service, and one more young person gets up to speak, and I know because somebody tells me that she has watched her mother be hacked to death, her father be hacked to death, and two of her brothers be hacked to death. She is now sixteen or seventeen, and she is the head of her household. She begins to talk about how important it was for her to come to the church that morning. She said she had been struggling because, "I would like to return to school, but I haven't been able to find the means because everything I get goes to just help feed and clothe my younger brothers and sisters." Then she stopped, and looked up, and in Kinyarwanda which was then translated, she said, "But you know, as of this moment I ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round!" That is the part of the candlelight of hope: if you look for it, you can find it, even in the darkest holes of Africa. There is also a new generation of leaders in Africa who told President Clinton of their desire to take their place not as supplicants, but as equal partners in the Family of Nations — even though their wealth is not as great as America's, and even though their needs, as I said earlier, often exceed their capacity to meet them. They told the president that they wanted to be partners in setting the terms and conditions of

aid. One of the reasons Africans like Nelson Mandela have stood by President Clinton... is that President Clinton not only listened to Africans — he heard, and he promised to begin lobbying other allies on a different way to approach Africa. South Africa's journey to the renaissance started with the process called reconciliation. The country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission has generated new news as it puts to the test Nelson Mandela's dream of a society that could put behind it its wretched apartheid past of murder, torture, and other forms of severe ill-treatment, otherwise known as gross human rights violations, against political opponents. This process in South Africa has been unique.

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For the first time, stories of gross violations of human rights have been told by those who committed them, in a public forum attended by the victims, and the families of victims and by anybody else who was interested in coming. They have been televised and broadcast on radio and television and covered extensively in the newspapers. All media once published only what was in the interest of maintaining the apartheid state, which is why there

is some measure of credibility attached to some of what the whites say they were ignorant of some of the terrible things that government was doing in the apartheid era.

While far from perfect, the South African press is more free than it ever was, and so the stories that are now being told — not only by the perpetrators but also by their victims and the families of victims — is getting out there. Many of those victims, who, up to now, have had to bear their suffering and loss alone and in secret for fear of appraisal have now been able to come out and tell their stories to the world. The Truth Commission has been a traumatic experience for the country, controversial, especially with whites, who have claimed that it has been biased against them. But, it has been an amazingly transparent process on a continent not generally known for transparency, and that alone is new news.

The next phase of South Africa's process of transformation will be in what we call the WHAM, "What After Mandela" phase. It is likely to prove more controversial and more difficult, for if the country's black majority, who were willing to sacrifice justice for truth in the reconciliation phase, but who are now far less likely to make the same tradeoff when it comes to economics. That, in their view, is the *sine qua non* of their new freedom. And Mandela's successor, Thabo Mbeki, has already made it clear in no uncertain terms that he plans to use the instruments of government as well as the market to bring that justice and freedom to the country's black and mostly poor majority. That is leading to some interesting

debates inside the country, some of which mirror the whole affirmative action debate that is still ongoing in this country — our present contribution notwithstanding.

Steering this fragile democracy through the waters to bring about economic justice will be a major challenge. Years of protest politics, in which liberation took the place of education, have left a whole generation of blacks ill-prepared to take their place in the economic mainstream. A small group of educated blacks has formed a nucleus around which black empowerment is being pursued, but critical institutions and structures in the country are still controlled by Afrikaners and other whites — thus the need for some accelerated educational plans and programs, what South African educators call (a phrase that I happen to detest) “development of human capacity.” It is just not poetic. It is a good phrase, but it is just not poetic.

The greatest threat to South Africa's fledgling democracy is not the crime that you all read about, but the teeming masses of its young, unemployed, and unemployable new citizens. The patient scene in the seemingly endless lines of black South Africans waiting from dawn to dusk to vote for the first time in 1994 is no longer assured. But, at the moment, there is still hope in the promise. In South Africa and on the continent, a new generation of African leaders is condemning military takeovers of democratically elected governments. To end corruption, there must be greater accountability and broader representation.

There is even new news and cautious new hope out of Nigeria, where its new military leader is at least promising elections next year and pledging that he will step aside for a civilian leader chosen by the people. Now the cynics will say we have heard that one before, and that will be true. But, for right now, I think the world is willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

All of these stories and potential stories are exciting in themselves, but hopefully are exciting for Americans, as well, provided they can get access to the new news. Why should Americans care? Why should they care more than journalists, or as much as journalists who simply are looking for the next adventure? It has been argued that Africa holds out the potential of providing jobs for Americans as well as markets for American partners. It has also been argued that in a globally connected world with electronic and otherwise porous borders, a continent as big as Africa must be a part of international efforts to curb drug traffic and counter terrorism. Widespread civil war in the heart of Africa, as potentially in the Congo could, and most likely would, involve neighboring states and beyond. The humanitarian crises that would flow from this surely would involve the United States and its vast resources— economic as well as human. But, more than all of that, in my view, is that the stories out of Africa that speak to the capacity of the human spirit to endure, and to survive, and occasionally to conquer are the reasons why Americans should care. Why else are we all so seized with the story of Nelson Mandela? What has his story, his example meant to freedom-loving people the world over? Well, there may not

be a Nelson Mandela who is six-feet-plus inches tall, eighty years old and a blushing new groom in the throws of new love. But, there are many Africans out there whose stories, if they are told, could equally elevate us all.

I met a nurse in southern Sudan who was taking care of mothers who were starving and who were trying to save their babies who were starving. I looked around this dirt floor where they were trying to feed these children in a clinic, and I saw so many of these mothers nursing a baby on each flattened breast. I turned to this nurse and

said, "What is this, with all of these babies?" because the mothers could hardly feed one, let alone two. She told me they were twins. They were the children of these mothers. What is it with Dinkas [the people of southern Sudan] and twins? Is there something in their genetic material that keeps producing these twins? The nurse, who was also a Dinka, said, "I think that perhaps it is God's way. You know we lose so many of our people through war and through famine. Maybe it is God's way

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of replenishing our people." Again, another flicker of hope in an otherwise very dark situation.

I know that many of you in this room have already extended your services to one or two countries in Africa. I know that Burkina Faso is one and Tanzania another. But, just as new news called me to Africa to report it, new occasions in the rest of Africa are calling for new duties for you. We speak today of globalization, but few yet understand what it means, or its implications and many, as a result, are fearful of it. Is it a force, like hurricane Georges, that is going to sweep with great power over the poor and the have nots of this world on the way to enhancing the lives of those that have? Or, can it be contained and made into a force that benefits even the least of us? If so, what is the role of institutions like this one and people like you who are committed, in Ernest Boyer's words, to the "scholarship of engagement?" Far be it from me, a mere observer of the scene, thank God, to make bold and try to provide an answer. I, after all, just live to ask questions. The forum where I sit, or stand seems to me, is the question of the day. As I think about it in this place, it reminds me of a time not too long ago when I sat in one of the halls not far from here, listening to the attorney general at the time, Robert F. Kennedy. It was 1961, and America was deeply engaged in fighting and trying to win the Cold War.

One of the battle grounds was Africa where the ideologies of democracy and communism were contesting for the hearts and minds of Africans. That day, if you will pardon the personal reference, Kennedy told a still-reluctant and mostly white southern audience that the graduation from this University of Hamilton Holmes and Charlayne Hunter would be a major defeat for communism and a triumph for democracy. Well, I know it was a triumph for me, and I hardly could believe what he was saying. But, democracy triumphed in this place but not in Africa, which may have been a failure of will and willingness to commit the resources that African countries needed to create the institutions to protect their newly won independence. So, democracy lost out to communism. But today, thirty-something years later, is a new day. America has another chance.

A few years ago, my friend and your colleague [former UGA President Charles] Knapp challenged you to think in broader terms than ever before. He said, "The challenge is to expand the University's already well-established concept of outreach beyond that of the past and to manage our resources wisely to improve the quality of life of the people we serve." Well, I submit that the challenge is to expand the boundaries of the people you serve, is to take the scholarship of engagement to engage the problems of the twenty-first century. Those problems are not local, but global. Moreover, you can help provide the models for the kind of education that Africans and others need to sustain themselves, and feel that they have in them an investment in the system that made it possible. You occupy this special place of leadership in American society, you professors and administrators and yes, even students, the lowest of the low, in your cities, towns, and neighborhoods. But, your assignment, if you choose to accept it, is to make the world your neighborhood and to make it better. With what you have to offer, despite the competition for diminishing resources, this is not a mission impossible. Whereas the College of Journalism taught me to eschew clichés, there is one that I simply cannot resist at this moment and it is this: Where there is a will, there is a way.

Editor's note: The following is an excerpt of the question-and-answer period that followed the speech delivered by Ms. Hunter-Gault in September 1998.

QUESTION: Why did you elect to leave your post in Washington to go to Africa? Was it because you predicted the bad news of the day in the United States?

ANSWER: As I tried to indicate, I can't say that I saw this bad news in the United States coming, but I am glad that I left. Timing really is everything. But, I saw a new frontier. I saw a new horizon and I had a new opportunity. One of my colleagues at NPR said, "Why would you take a step back and go into radio from television?"

I said, you know, I am a journalist and I don't consider radio a step back. I think it is one of the most powerful communication media there is and for me it has challenged my abilities, my capacities, my writing, in a way that nothing ever has — which is not to say that one medium is better than the other. Used properly, they can inspire and illuminate and educate. But, I just saw an amazing opportunity that probably won't exist [in] another time — certainly not in this century, which is almost over, but not in our lifetime — which is the transformation, the process of transformation not only of a society that is South Africa but of a continent, because I do believe that even with its setbacks, Africa is on a path. I think that the new ways of communicating are reaching Africa, which are inspiring people at the bottom to make demands in ways that they have never had in a more concerted way.

If you go to any of these international forums now, you find people who have been linked together by the Internet: People who share the same attitudes about human rights and about freedom and justice and women's rights and service. They are coming together in arenas everywhere. I could spend my lifetime, as I am sure many of you could, just going to conferences like this because people are getting hooked up. There are movements, now, there is this power that is emanating from the bottom up, and I think that is what will provide the check for rampant globalization — and, try to make this process more accountable. Now, that may be a little bit optimistic, but I am seeing these people all of the time.

There was one little period there where young people didn't seem to know what to do with themselves because they had missed the Civil Rights movement, and the anti-war movement, for many of them, was over. But now, there are other ways of expressing themselves, in getting involved — and it really is getting involved as citizens of the world. There is nothing local anymore. Even in the mayor's office in the smallest town, most of the time, they have international-trade representatives. All politics might be local, but it is also now global. Communication capability that crosses boundaries and does not stop for governments that are trying to keep citizens in check by containing their information is going to make the move toward democracy and openness — and societies responsible to their citizens is even more of a reality as we go along. So, I wanted to be a part of this because it is something real. It is not like what a lot of my colleagues who like to think of themselves as serious journalists are being forced to do today with some of the things that are happening here in America. (While what is happening in America is fueling the debate, and it is a good thing. I don't know where we are going to end up, because there are still other imperatives that move the decisions about what goes on on the air and what doesn't, and as long as it is strictly bottom line, then the chances of the kind of *new news* that I am talking about are going to be very restricted. But, thank God for National Public Radio and public television. Because they still support serious journalism all over the world.

QUESTION: What the world needs in South Africa is "good, new news." For example, we need to communicate the wonderful accomplishments of South Africa and economic development in these countries. Can NPR demand any kind of serious news?

ANSWER: We do that. Don't you listen? You have to make a serious effort to keep the news balanced, that is true. Because if you follow the pack, every story would be like the old stories. We have to report what happens. But, you have to be conscious of what you put out there — and you can't just run with the pack and report every breaking story that happens; otherwise, that is how you get these perpetually bad stories of bad things. To find the good stuff you have to work, and that is what you are supposed to be as a journalist: Out there, on the ground, looking for things. But, I think it is very easy to read the [news] wires and find out about this disaster or that disaster, or this outbreak of this or that, and go [cover] that because that is what everybody [in the media] are doing. It is a little bit harder to get the *new news*, but it is there. I am just hoping that there are serious journalists in Africa now. You have to be, because everybody in Africa now knows what the inclination of the American news media is — and it is not to cover Africa. So, those who are there are very committed people who are interested in seeing something different — who know that something different is happening and want the world to experience it. ■

About the Author

Charlayne Hunter-Gault (ABJ, University of Georgia) is chief Africa correspondent for National Public Radio. Hunter-Gault was one of the first two African-American students to enroll at and graduate from UGA. Her 1992 memoir, *In My Place*, chronicles her early life and her role in integrating the university and includes the text of the commencement address she delivered at UGA in 1988, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of her graduation.

After graduating, Hunter-Gault worked for *The New Yorker*, *Trans-Action* magazine, and WRC-TV in Washington, D.C., before joining *The New York Times*, where she specialized in coverage of the urban black community. In 1978, she joined the MacNeil/Lehrer Report as its first woman anchor.

She is the recipient of numerous awards, including a George Foster Peabody Award for the PBS Documentary "Apartheid's People" and two Emmys for her work with the MacNeil/Lehrer Report. In 1986, she was named Journalist of the Year by the National Association of Black Journalists.