

# Teaching Ubuntu in Percussion

By Paul Buyer

**U**buntu is a South African philosophy that teaches the values of teamwork, collaboration, cooperation, equality, helpfulness, appreciation, trust, and respect. After reading *Ubuntu!* by Stephen Lundin and Bob Nelson, I was inspired to share this philosophy with my students and discovered it relates especially well to teaching percussion.

In South Africa, Ubuntu is not only a philosophy, but a way of life. It is literally woven into the fabric of their culture. Ubuntu is about family, community, and brotherhood. It teaches unselfishness, empathy, gratitude, and caring. It is about valuing everyone's contribution and making each person feel important. It is about human relationships, connecting with others, and creating a common bond. According to Lundin and Nelson on the spirit of Ubuntu, "If you have work to do...in order for our team to be successful, then I have work to do, too." In other words, "I am, because we are."

Ubuntu puts the success of the group ahead of the individual. It is based on unconditional respect for the value of each person. In business, Lundin and Nelson emphasize, "You trust and respect every employee for who they are, not for what they have done or not done." They also insist that, "You can't just *do* Ubuntu. You have to *be* Ubuntu." Archbishop Desmond Tutu explained, "Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness... We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world." Former South African President Nelson Mandela stated, "Ubuntu [means] if we are to accomplish anything in the world, it will in equal measure be due to the work and achievements of others."

## TEACHING TODAY

As an educator, I started to wonder if this South African philosophy was something we can—and should—apply to our own situations as percussionists. Over the past few years I have noticed what seems to be a *lack* of Ubuntu in our schools and society in general. Rather than teamwork and gratitude, there is selfishness and entitlement. Rather than kindness and community, there is coldness and isolation. Rather than encouragement and trust, there is pessimism and dishonesty.

What does any of this have to do with playing "Merlin" or "Ionization"? I have always believed that my job is not just to teach percus-

sion, but to teach *people*. To do that effectively, I make a conscious effort every day to teach my students life lessons that, hopefully, they will apply to their lives as they prepare for their careers. I teach them Ubuntu.

## QUESTIONS TO ASK OURSELVES

So what does Ubuntu look like? Answer these nine questions to get an "Ubuntu snapshot" of your percussion studio.

1. Do your students treat others with respect?
2. Do they care about each other?
3. Do they put the success of the group ahead of themselves?
4. Do they reach out and help each other?
5. Are they unselfish?
6. Do they have an attitude of gratitude?
7. Do they support one another?
8. Are they humble and teachable?
9. Do they live Ubuntu?

Admittedly, saying yes consistently to these questions might sound too good to be true. Human beings are flawed, whether they are from South Africa or South Carolina. So what happens when a team member fails to live Ubuntu? "That's a huge part of the Ubuntu tradition," says Lundin and Nelson. "When someone in the village is acting in a way that threatens the harmony and unity of the community, the elders take action. Ubuntu is a compassionate philosophy, but it is not soft."

## UBUNTU IN CULTURE

Distilled to its essence, Ubuntu is about culture. Some define culture as, "The way we do business around here." Ethnomusicologist Dorothea Hast says culture is "a group's shared ways of experiencing, participating in, and making sense out of their world. Culture accounts for why these people over here think and act differently from those people over there." But a culture of Ubuntu goes much deeper.

In my book, *Marching Bands and Drumlines*, I identify culture as one of the factors influencing excellence in a marching band or drumline. For example, the degree to which a band's culture is based on Ubuntu values is one of the main reasons why, I believe, college bands and drumlines achieve excellence or fall short of it.

In the business world, Zappos.com CEO Tony Hsieh has taken culture to another level by publishing a "Culture Book." Based on Zappos' ten core values, the Culture Book is a compilation of employees' ideas and thoughts about the company culture. According to Hsieh,

"Every edition of our culture book includes both the good and the bad so that people reading the book [like prospective employees] can get a real sense of what our culture is like." Today, Zappos is ranked #15 on *Fortune's* 100 Best Companies to Work For. "We didn't know it at the time," states Hsieh, "but all the hard work and investments we made into customer service and company culture would pave the way for us to hit our goal of \$1 billion." Page after page, the Culture Book is packed with Zappos employees talking about core values that reflect the Ubuntu philosophy, such as, "Build Open and Honest Relationships with Communication," "Build a Positive Team and Family Spirit," and "Be Humble." According to Lundin and Nelson, "When we talk about making a difference with Ubuntu, we are implying a change inside the culture."

## UBUNTU IN PAS

The Percussive Arts Society is a wonderful example of the Ubuntu philosophy. PAS radiates a spirit of fraternity, commitment, and collaboration among percussionists from around the world who share a common bond. PAS members are brought together by a sense of community, connection, and passion for percussion through the PAS website, Days of Percussion, and PASIC. Listen to these quotes from well-known PAS members and notice the common Ubuntu theme:

- "Since its founding, PAS has been... a support group..." —Bob Becker
- "Whether online or in person at PASIC, you can easily connect with others who share your interests. And with PAS, you are joining a... community." —Ndugu Chanler
- "Performers, educators, students, and professionals alike have the opportunity to... share their art through the Society. When you're ready, we'll be here." —Evelyn Glennie
- "Regardless of your specialty, you can join other leaders in your field and make a contribution that will shape the future of percussion." —Mark Ford

## UBUNTU IN THE PERCUSSION STUDIO

Have you ever had a student come up to you and say, "I won't be able to make it to practice today, but don't worry—I know *my* part"? This is an example of someone who is not living Ubuntu. Having respect for your fellow ensemble members is Ubuntu. Valuing all parts as equally important is Ubuntu. Understanding how your part contributes to the music is Ubuntu. And not wanting to let each other down is Ubuntu.

Have you ever had a student come up to you and say, “I won’t be able to make it to practice today, but don’t worry—I know my part”?

What other examples of Ubuntu can we find in a healthy, high functioning percussion studio? For starters, how are your freshmen treated by upperclassmen? Are they looked down upon and ridiculed or are they mentored and developed? How about the front ensemble and cymbal line in your marching percussion ensemble? How are these students treated—with high regard as important contributors to the team or a dumping ground for weak players? Does a hierarchy exist in your drumline with snares as superstars and cymbals as bench warmers, or is there a true spirit of pride, empowerment, and togetherness? Do your students demonstrate cooperation and helpfulness in rehearsal when setting-up and tearing down? When loading and unloading the truck? Without question, one of the secrets of success to achieving excellence in any organization is the presence of Ubuntu. And it is my belief that individuals and teams that exhibit the values of Ubuntu will consistently outperform those that do not.

#### UBUNTU IN DRUM CIRCLES

Drum circles teach many values that are in alignment with the Ubuntu philosophy. According to renowned world percussionist Kalani, “Drum circles serve as a metaphor that can be used to illustrate the importance of teamwork, cooperation, and diversity in creating a healthy and productive community.” He goes on to say that, “In most cases, a drum circle is about anything *but* drumming. If you look around the circle and you see people and

expressions, you are seeing the process and the spirit that drives it.” A lack of Ubuntu can also be found in drum circles that are not well led. Says Kalani, “If the facilitator is not intentionally creating settings in which the participants feel a sense of inclusion, community, and the ability to shape their experience as a group, members can leave feeling disenfranchised and unimportant.”

Drum circles and Ubuntu share other common ground as well. According to *Percussive Notes* editor and author Rick Mattingly, “A circle can always expand and there’s room for everybody...It’s a matter of wanting to make the circle work and becoming part of a larger whole...It doesn’t matter if you have a \$1,000 conga drum or a Coke can filled with rocks. You are just as important in that circle as any master drummer there.”

#### CONCLUSION

This past June, legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden passed away at the age of 99. Despite his incredible success winning ten NCAA national championships and being voted the Greatest Coach of All Time by *Sporting News* in 2009, Wooden always considered himself a teacher rather than a coach. According to former player Bill Walton, “John Wooden was hired at UCLA to coach basketball, but what he really taught during his 27 years in Westwood was life.”

We can all learn something from Coach Wooden, as many of his values and philosophies are also found in Ubuntu: team

spirit, cooperation, respect, unselfishness, caring, and trust, to name just a few. Political activist Steve Biko said, “The special contribution to the world by Africa will be in the field of human relationship.” And as Coach Wooden reminds us, “You can’t live a perfect day without doing something for someone who will never be able to repay you.” *I am, because we are.*

#### RESOURCES

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