In remarks ranging from how he integrated a former racist into a staff whose mission is to promote diversity to how getting his staff out of the office creates personal connections with the lives of students, Jonathan Jansen gave an insightful talk entitled "The Role of Higher Education in the Development of South Africa" on October 22. The talk was given as part of the Einaudi Center’s Foreign Policy Distinguished Speaker Series.

After an introduction from Vice Provost for International Affairs and Einaudi Center Director Fredrik Logevall, Jansen shared several personal anecdotes about his time at Cornell and the significance of that time to putting him on the path to his current role as Vice Chancellor and Rector of the University of the Free State in South Africa.

When Jansen arrived at his post, the University of the Free State had just gone through a significant and widely publicized race scandal in which white students had abused black
workers. The university, situated in a historically white and conservative region of South Africa, was faced with many challenges in integrating students from the region and those coming from other parts of South Africa.

"Working on a notion of 'nearness' to so called enemies is one of the fundamental challenges to education in South Africa," Jansen said. In his 2009 book, Knowledge in the Blood, Jansen set out to answer the question, "How do you get close to your historical enemies in such a way that they no longer appear as enemies, but fellow human beings?" Jansen believes that the way to bridge this divide is to foster a feeling of what he went on to describe as "nearness".

First, Jansen explained that physical proximity is not the same as nearness. "A madam and her maid are physically near, but not socially close," he explained. Compulsory core courses at the university bring students from different socioeconomic origins together. This encourages students who don't want to discuss difficult history to enter dialogue and link the past to consequences in the present.

Second, Jansen spoke of a need to promote nearness in real-time. Jansen requires his staff to get out of their offices and involved in the lives of students who feel otherwise isolated at the university. Next, Jansen discussed nearness as communion. Food is a great way to bring people together, and as a public institution the University of the Free State creates a place to eat and pray for everyone who comes there. Proximity and contact lead to activism, which Jansen describes as "...the ability to see a dilemma where everyone else looks past it."

Jansen then discussed the notion of nearness as "truth telling," stating that it takes difficult conversations to arrive at a definition of what's wrong. Jansen assigned one of the students who had been involved in the race scandal to work with his diversity staff, saying, "Here's a way to deal with a racist, put him in your marketing department." This young man has gone through a personal transition to become a relied resource who engages conservative white groups about the need for racial reconciliation.

Next, Jansen discussed nearness as resemblance. Through regular activities he encourages students to engage on terms that make it possible to make connections with others and to begin to recognize each other's common humanity rather than differences between them. Finally, Jansen discussed nearness and courage or risk taking. "The young people I want to work with are those who, against expectation, against history, embrace the other side," he said. He sees those students as the leaders who can create other such students in their mold and offer the long-term solution to building better race relations in South Africa.

To conclude his remarks, Jansen identified two basic approaches to reconciliation. The first approach, "expressing moral outrage" in hopes that it will lead to changes in policy and appropriate behavior, leads to solutions that are largely cosmetic. The second more lasting approach of "encouraging people to come together in contested spaces and create dialogue", on the other hand, creates the "nearness" that Jansen held up as the real goal of reconciliation.

The Foreign Policy Distinguished Speaker Series features prominent leaders in international affairs who can address topical issues from a variety of perspectives. The Speaker Series is
part of the Foreign Policy Initiative at Cornell University led by the Einaudi Center to maximize the intellectual impact of Cornell's outstanding resources in this area.