

Willing & Abel podcast: Dreaming and Doing with Songezo Zibi

Season 1 of Willing & Abel is brought to you by <M&C Saatchi Abel>, a proudly South African award-winning creative company founded on the principle of Brutal Simplicity of Thought.

[00:00:00] **Songezo Zibi:** But, Mike, you also find that we become afraid that the more candles there are, they will illuminate things we ourselves don't want to look. We should, if we want to be better, right? I think we hold ourselves back in so many ways. We want to, to only talk to people who are going to compliment us. I only want to talk to people who agree with us or going to validate us. What happens as a result of that is people are right in front of you and you don't see them.

[00:00:38] **Mike Abel:** Hi, I'm Mike Abel. I'm a business, marketing and communications specialist and the founder of MNC Saatchi Abel. I'm a family man, a problem solver, a futurist, and an optimist at heart. Welcome to my podcast, Willing and Able, the home of hopeful conversations that challenge perspectives. It's a continuation of the ideas and conversations I began in my book, Willing and Able, Lessons from a Decade in Crisis. My guest today is Songezo Zibi, the national leader of of RISE Mzansi, a modern political organization of patriotic South Africans. With over two decades experience, a modern political organization of patriotic South Africans. With over two decades experience in roles spanning the automotive, mining, media, banking, and financial services industries, he's also an author, speaker, strategist, and mentor, and a good friend. Welcome Songezo. So great to have you here today.

[00:01:35] **Songezo Zibi:** Mike, always good to see you and to speak to you.

[00:01:39] **Mike Abel:** So you were born in Mkanduli, in the former Transka. Tell us a little bit about your upbringing and how that has shaped you into the man that you are today.

[00:01:49] **Songezo Zibi:** Mike, Mkanduli is where my heart is. It's where my soul is in so many ways. So I was born to a single mother. My mom had me when she was 19. My date of birth is disputed. She says it was the 28th. And on my certificate of baptism, which was done at the church, says I was born on the 27th. Of which month? December. December. Yes. Not the 25th of December. No. But you know, Mike, then the downside of being born on the 28th is that you don't get any presents because it's after Christmas, nobody's around or has any money left. So, but I was born to a, you know, to a single mother, but I was fortunate, blessed really to have two wonderful grandparents. And I'm particularly grateful that I'm told I was the first child that my grandfather got to raise after he stopped drinking heavily. And so this person that they describe who used to like be drunk every day and be abusive, it's like, I've never seen that guy because he was always gentle, always understanding, always helpful. He was a man of service in many ways. And, and part of that upbringing, you know, by my grandparents, uh, my mother's great, but the first 14 years of my life was with my grandmother, but I also grew up in a village where

everybody who was older than me was my either my big brother, big sister or a parent in one way or another. And so people ask me, you know, how did it feel to grow up without a dad? I honestly, Mike, I I don't know what that's like, because there was always a father figure, it taught me lots of things, the responsibility, community, shared experiences, and it informs what I'm doing now in politics, because sometimes I wish South Africa could be like the village I grew up in, where everybody cared for one another, and everybody's kid was everybody's kid. Every kid was everybody's kid, you know? And you were other people's big brother, even if they were not your blood relatives. So that's how my village and my upbringing might have shaped me.

[00:04:10] **Mike Abel:** Beautiful. Well, I think we have to change the saying now to say Um, it takes a village to raise a country. I like that model very much. So you have a wealth of experience as a communications specialist and a journalist. So let's go a little bit back to your time as editor of the Business Day because I think people will be very interested in that. What was the most important lesson you learned?

[00:04:38] **Songezo Zibi:** To know what I didn't know was the most important lesson. And it, it needs humility. Because, you know, when you have the power to publish, ah, things that could either help people or be incredibly damaging, I found that it's really helpful to understand what you don't know, because in your journalistic inquiry, you want to find out what do I not know? And once you know what you don't know, you then try and understand it. And if you do that, your writing and your production and your editing become better. And that was my approach to the job.

[00:05:23] **Mike Abel:** That's so interesting in terms of focusing on what you don't know. Because when I watch so much mainstream media today, I see so much, um, behaviour that presupposes, you know, everything already and the line of questioning based on an agenda, you know, so you don't actually get the fresh and unexpected responses, uh, you know. I see journalists today leading a witness and that plays out so much on social media as well. So what is your advice then to younger people, uh, in terms of having inquiring minds in terms of looking for that, for what they don't know, because obviously as a leader of a new political party, if everybody votes for what they do know, you know, you can't transform or change a country. So what are your thoughts around getting people, I think, to question what they don't know? What is your approach of discovery of what you don't know? How did you realize what you didn't know?

[00:06:23] **Songezo Zibi:** So Mike, interestingly, and that may be since we're talking to young people, I'll speak particularly about the experience of writing an opinion piece. So I think that the best opinion pieces that I produce followed a heated argument with somebody. And what I end up writing in the opinion piece is not what I'd initially intended to write. Because I realized when I read it that, you know, what I was arguing about with Mike, what he was saying to me is now in the piece. Or the way I am now expressing this view is better because of what you were arguing with me about. And so, what I would say is always look for somebody who disagrees with you, they will make you better. They'll make you better at writing, they'll make you

better at shaping your own worldview and so on. Look for somebody who disagrees with you and have a good natured disagreement and see.

[00:07:34] **Mike Abel:** I think that's so useful because, again, you know, the way of today and much of social media is around cancel culture. And so you disapprove of people who have a different view as opposed to appreciating people. You know, because as they say, if two people in the room agree on everything, you only need one of them. Yes, that's true. So I absolutely love that. So if you look at the media industry today, Um, do you think things have changed in a positive way over the last five years? Would you say that media is headed in not such a positive direction? What is your perspective on the, on the media industry?

[00:08:16] **Songezo Zibi:** There's a good and the bad, Mike. You know, uh, ten years ago, uh, a conversation such as this that can be distributed. What's not going to happen, right? Generally, very few people could, could pull it off, but you and I can sit here, have this conversation and, and this podcast can be distributed to thousands of people, millions of people. I think that's fundamentally a good thing. It's fundamentally a good thing, but here's the negative. People who seek to divide and harm society have access to the same. And so the role of journalism for me, I feel it is to accept the responsibility of applying the new ones. To this really divided terrain and echo chambers and mutual counselling of people's views and so on. And when I was at business day, people would write to and say, Why did you publish that guy? He's a, he's a neoliberal. Why do you publish that guy? And I would say, my job is not to protect you from views you don't like. My job is to make sure that piece is well written, doesn't abuse anybody's rights, doesn't put anybody in danger. And there is no disinformation. Otherwise, the piece is good to go. Yes. Right. And then it is up to you to decide whether you agree with it or not. It's not my job to filter what is in the paper. And we had a very diverse, uh, core of columnists at Business Day, from the Free Market Foundation, uh, on the one hand, all the way to leftists that used to write for Business Day. I mean, Nomalanga Mkize. We used to write on education mostly for us as a leftist, but she existed on the same pages as somebody from the free market foundation, and that's a good thing.

[00:10:10] **Mike Abel:** Absolutely. That's very interesting because when you say that I'm reminded of, uh, of a saying, which is, uh, a candle loses nothing by lighting another candle. And I think that that's what you want to do today, is inspire, ignite thought, as opposed to people that see their role in life as blowing out candles. Yeah. Yeah. Because, you know, that's a very easy thing to do.

[00:10:33] **Songezo Zibi:** And there's too much of it, Mike.

[00:10:35] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. And the more candles, the more illumination.

[00:10:38] **Songezo Zibi:** But Mike, you also find that we become afraid that the more candles there are, they will illuminate things. We ourselves don't want to look into, but we should if we want to be better, right? I think we hold ourselves back, back in so many ways We want to to only talk to people are going to compliment us We only

want to talk to people who agree with us are going to validate us what happens as a result of that is People are right in front of you and you don't see them. You don't understand their life experience, not because they're not telling you, because you refuse to allow the candle to go into that part of their lives, right? And I think it's a constant struggle these days, you know, with social media and so on.

[00:11:33] **Mike Abel:** It's true. I mean, there's a, there's a wonderful saying you'll, I mean, as you really know, uh, have a saying for every occasion. Unfortunately, I drive myself crazy with my sayings, but these are saying that sometimes in your darkest place lies your greatest reward. That's true. The places that you don't ordinarily go to in your own mind and your own heart. Uh, that there's a, that there's rich reward. And, uh, you know, I left Twitter recently for a month. I'm yet to decide whether I'm going to go on or not, because for me, Twitter was like going into a dark cave and I'd shine my light there for illumination. But more often than shrieking vampire bats from the ceiling. You know, and as opposed to lighting a path for others. So I think you've articulated that challenge beautifully. Your LinkedIn profile calls you an entrepreneur, a dreamer, a doer, and a visionary. I think you all have those. It's refreshing to say that, you know, you're a dream and a doer in the same breath. What do you think the most valuable things are that you are doing? In life right now, to bring those two things together.

[00:12:42] **Songezo Zibi:** Believe it or not, the first one is being a parent. I am finding that I don't only have my own dreams, but the dreams of our three children. Uh, it's a, it's just been a sort of a, a weird experience because before I became a parent, I just, it was all me. I didn't quite, quite understand. And, and the thing about having kids is that you've got your own dreams. They become your dream, their dreams become yours, and you got to try and help them make those dreams come through every day. And that's the doing part of it. So, so that's, that's one. The second is being part of RISE Mzansi and having the responsibility of being a national leader. Sometimes I'm in the shower and I'm thinking, Oh my God, am I crazy or what? And I look at my colleagues, Vuiswa, Debukho, Esther and I see how hard they work. They're not in the shower with you. They're not in the shower with me. Thankfully, they're not in the shower with me. I don't think I have lots of time to think.

[00:13:59] **Mike Abel:** Because people always shower. Sorry, I had to do that to you.

[00:14:02] **Songezo Zibi:** So, but I look at them. And how committed they are. And I think. You know, in society, sometimes we tend to talk about dreamers as people who do nothing and I look at these guys and I think these are dreamers who do, these are dreamers who do every day and there is reward in the doing. People ask me what does success look like. Success. Being able to do what we're doing every day, I wake up and we go for it. We think big, we dream big, we go for it in small steps every day, but we're going for it. It's so rewarding. I love it.

[00:14:43] **Mike Abel:** You know, when you talk about your children's dreams and what they want, I haven't actually thought about it until now, about part of the role of parenting is to be A conduit to your children's dreams. Yeah, you know, um, I'm a very involved dad That's the thing that I love doing most I guess in addition to you know

being a husband to Sara for many years, but I've always thought that my role is to make them feel like they can achieve anything they dream of doing. But I've never thought of myself as being a conduit to their dreams. And I like that very much because it also is a lot about what can I learn from them in my own journey, which I'm aware of. But I think in terms of being, you know, you spoke earlier about seeing people and being in the moment and actually to, to think about those things actively as a parent, not just assuming the role of raising children, if you like.

[00:15:44] **Mike Abel:** Okay, so something very, very close to our hearts at the moment. Winner Springboks won the Rugby World Cup in October 2023. You wrote a piece about the team's leadership, saying nothing rivals the deep satisfaction and pride that comes from getting something you deserve. What in your life has given you this feeling?

[00:16:10] **Songezo Zibi:** Phew! You ask me a tough question now. Uh, sure. I would say that it has been the recognition that, that was informal at business day or as a result of the work that we did at business day, when I was editor. I didn't understand how much we changed people's lives in so many ways, you know, some, uh, People are famous these days as a result of writing for business day, or they did their most important work when they were at business day, people used to read business day for, you know, it touched them in different ways. And here's the part about, about being proud and deserving. So I think a lot of people listening to this podcast know Wanda Lacy Chlobo. Wanda Lacy Chlobo started out. He started writing publicly in the business day. I didn't know that. He started in the business day, um, and I, I thought he was a brilliant young man. You know, yeah. One day he's 32, 33. He's a kid. That's very brilliant. He's a brilliant kid. And nearly a decade ago, he was, I mean, seven years ago, he was writing for business day. He was writing for the business day, right? And being read by ministers and governors of the reserve bank and so on. And he plays a really important role in the country, and I feel proud that we were able to elevate his brilliance and give it a platform. And as a result, he's doing really important work for the country. He gives his knowledge of his knowledge freely, Mike, whether it is the government, it is companies, it is communal farmers. In the Eastern Cape or KZN and so on. He's such a gift and I'm really proud. So when people say that, uh, you did a wonderful job at business, actually, let me have a much better appreciation of it now, because they say, why they say you introduced us to one dealer. You introduced us to Nomalanga Mkize, to Zama Ndlovu and, and, and so on. And so that's the one thing, quite a few...

[00:18:28] **Mike Abel:** You know, there's a bit of a theme happening here, you know, we spoke just now you spoke about being a parent and what I took out of it was a conduit to ensuring your children's dreams happened. We've now spoken about talent there and a conduit and I'm thinking of your latest journey in the political arena and I can only then imagine that your dream is to be a conduit for people in this country. Yeah. To have. More successful, happier lives, because it seems like that's your wiring. Would you agree with that?

[00:19:03] **Songezo Zibi:** No, I would. And Mike, I'll go back to the first question that you asked me about my upbringing and my grandfather. I tell people all the time that

I, I realize now that in so many ways, I am my grandfather, my, my grandmother, because my grandfather was so kind and understanding, so we, we had two mielie fields, um, maize, maize fields. Uh, one for yellow maize, the other one for white maize. And people's goats sometimes used to go and, you know, like chow the crops and so on and, you know, he would get upset, would impound them. So my grandfather always forgave the people, you know, he wouldn't make them pay damages, which used to irritate my grandmother. And one day she said, you know, I am sure one day you will sit alone bored in heaven while the rest of us are having fun in hell. But he was a generous. Yeah. There were kids that he, whose moms, when they went into labor, he took to hospital in the night. And, and so on. I love doing that, Mike. For me, that's just what being a grown up is. It's not even a political thing, it's like, when you're a grown up, you make things possible for kids, for other people, and they do it back for you without you asking.

[00:20:27] **Mike Abel:** For kids of all ages

[00:20:29] **Songezo Zibi:** , Yeah, for kids of all ages, even grown-up kids. Yeah, yeah.

[00:20:34] **Book Ad:** Mike Abel's book, Willing and Able, Lessons from a Decade in Crisis, captures the stories of clients and partners and the wins, losses and learnings through his eyes in a career spanning three decades. Whether you're looking for courage or inspiration to learn what it takes to disrupt industries or discover how to transform your company meaningfully and truly empower your people. You'll find it between these pages. You can listen to the audiobook on Audible, download it on your Kindle, order it online, or find it at your favourite bookstore.

[00:21:09] **Mike Abel:** So speaking about childhood, you know, one of the things we do as kids, not so much as adults, is crying. Yes. Uh, but when I read your article, you said you admitted crying numerous times after our win. What else really pulls at your heartstrings and how do you think vulnerability makes you better as a leader?

[00:21:30] **Songezo Zibi:** You know, Mike, I cry a lot, by the way. Oh, do you? I cry quite often. Okay. I cry quite often.

[00:21:35] **Mike Abel:** I think that's very healthy. I wish I did.

[00:21:37] **Songezo Zibi:** Because, Mike, I do. I do. I cry when I see people succeed just for themselves. Seeing how happy they are. And getting to hear the story of how they got there. You think, my God, what a journey it has been. So I cry when that happens. I cry when people suffer. A cry when people are sad. You know, you can take me to a funeral of somebody I've never met. And I will look at the family and how sad they are. And tears will just my cheeks. My wife is used to it. And, uh, and my kids are, but some people get freaked out by it. But I think it's important. I mean, I, I cry I don't know how to say easily, but without fear of judgment.

[00:22:33] **Mike Abel:** Well, you're giving people out there that are listening today a huge gift because I've always believed that vulnerability is strength, not weakness.

You know, when you are vulnerable and when you are empathetic, that makes you a very powerful leader. It's the people who are unable to cry at all, that are unable to feel, who are actually weak. Because not only don't they understand other people, , but they don't understand themselves. Because if they did understand themselves, they'd feel emotion. So I, I think that that is, uh, as I said, it's a, it's a great gift you're giving to people in that. And so cry people,

[00:23:14] **Songezo Zibi:** I, I, you know, Mike, eh, I wrote that piece in one sitting. I went through all the emotions of that spring wind. I. I was initially delirious, obviously. Very, very, very happy. So, you know, and, uh, and then I just took it in over the next couple of days. And there were a couple of moments, but there was that moment when Siya ran across to Cheslin Kolbe.

[00:23:46] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. Who was distraught. Who was distraught. I mean, face hidden in his jersey.

[00:23:51] **Songezo Zibi:** That part, that finished me. Because, that's love. That's seeing someone. That said to me, Siya was on the field thinking about his teammate and his friend and fighting for him too. Because he understood what would happen to him emotionally if the Springboks lost. I got a sense that Siya was so much happier for Cheslin than he was for himself. And that's beautiful, man. It made me cry.

[00:24:27] **Mike Abel:** It is. You know, the superpower of Siya is often ascribed to being a leader with love, a leader who loves his people. And you know, again, the strength that comes from that vulnerability in opening yourself up as a leader. Yeah. I must actually get Sia on the show as well. Please do. I think he would be amazing. If I can get him to South Africa. So you've used the term listening politics to describe your party's approach. A lot of people don't know a lot about your party and you'll tell them, yeah. But where do you think you discovered or when do you think you discovered the value of what I would call in your case, deep listening?

[00:25:13] **Songezo Zibi:** So Mike, I discovered it when I was at Rivonia Circle and we're doing something called Democracy Builder, um, which still continues. So, you know, I worked for companies. I've got my own life experiences, just growing up in a village and so on. And, you know, going to boarding school. And, and, and, and so you think, you know, a lot, and then you work for large companies, you travel the world, you think, you know, a lot, you become a journalist and you're dealing in information, enormous information. I think I know a lot. And then we started going out with Democracy Builder and I thought, I have not been listening or seeing because even the things I already knew the way people expressed themselves around those issues was just so much clearer and better than anything I could have come up with. And that's when I realized if we want the language that will resonate with people, we've got to listen first and listen intently. So practically Mike, in short, it means now when people say we want jobs, we ask, why do you want a job? And they say, not because we want to buy food and so on. Is food a problem? Yes. How often do you eat? Maybe once a day. You see, it opens a window. But if people say, no, we want a job, say, okay, great, you know, know better than you did before they told you.

But when you ask so that you can listen some more, I realized this is the way we should do politics. And it's working. It's working. RISM's answer is growing at a rate that surprises me, to be honest.

[00:27:03] **Mike Abel:** Well, I think people value being heard enormously, you know, because I think people, as you've said, touched on a couple of times in this conversation is there's a difference between being seen and being heard or being there and being seen even. So I've heard you say that, uh, when you meet people at campaigning events, you ask if you could change five things, what would they be? Yeah. I'm about to turn that same question on you.

[00:27:37] **Songezo Zibi:** Those five things, Mike, and I'll just list them. The first would be if every family were to have three healthy meals a day, that, that really before anything, just three healthy meals a day. So that would be the first thing. The second thing would be for everyone to feel safe in South Africa. You know, Mike, it's one thing to be safe. It's quite another to also feel safe. And I think sometimes we are safe, but we still don't feel safe because the danger is lurking outside, the, even within the safe space, it's lurking. So it is, that's the second thing. This feeling of national safety, I think would be just less angry, less adversarial, more willing to listen. So that's the second thing. The third thing that I think, Mike, if we can do is to just change the way we think about common public problems. I'll make an example with drug addiction. You know, you talk about drugs, people want to throw everyone in prison, like, okay, they are the guys who sell drugs, they are the guys who need to go to rehab, because it's a public health issue. Can we not only think about how we condemn people, but then what after, right? So, so we're going to make an intervention to send them to prison. And then what for consuming, I don't know how many milligrams of drugs. So that's a third thing, changing mindsets. The fourth, Mike, is if every community were to have sporting and arts facilities.

Mike, we underestimate the importance of joy. in people's lives, or even moments of joy. And there are people whose lives, even when they want to be joyful, the tools for being joyful are not there. So that would be the fourth thing. And the last one is, Mike, is where South Africans would have a decent opportunity, to not just survive, but to build wealth. We don't even, you know, we talk about poverty alleviation and I always think let's be bold, man, let's talk about eliminating poverty and building wealth, you know, for, for people where people can do that themselves. They can dream and be like, I can do it. And I think you've got a much better chance of doing that when you are safe and you've got the opportunity to be joyful, Mike, I think.

[00:30:20] **Mike Abel:** You know, I think that people need to succumb to joy, to let go, to let joy in. Yeah. And I think that we all hold so much often in this country that the ability to allow joy to penetrate is a difficult thing.

[00:30:40] **Songezo Zibi:** We feel ashamed of being joyful sometimes. Yes. And even when. The opportunity is here. We don't see it because we think we shouldn't be joyful. And one of the things we've learned from our friends, from the African American community, from an organizing point of view, they say, guys, try and organize around joy RISE Mzansi has soccer tournaments for gogos. Are they any

good? Mike, doesn't matter. They are wild. The people there, the laughter, the involvement, and so on. And you think This is beautiful. Right. And I think we should do more of that.

[00:31:20] **Mike Abel:** I love that because that, what that would do obviously is to ignite the inner child in them.

[00:31:25] **Songezo Zibi:** Yeah. And they argue. You know, they argue. A goal or a referee's call and then they're confused. They don't know their rules. It's, it's lovely.

[00:31:37] **Mike Abel:** I love that. So, Songezo the author, your first book. Yeah. Yeah. Raising the Bar, Hope and Renewal in South Africa was published in 2014. If you had to write that book again right now, what would be different?

[00:31:53] **Songezo Zibi:** Nothing.

[00:31:54] **Mike Abel:** Really?

[00:31:55] **Songezo Zibi:** Nothing.

[00:31:56] **Mike Abel:** So if you had to say, what is the key premise and belief from your book that thought that you think is constant that would apply right now? What is that enduring truth? It's that we have the power to change our circumstances. That's. It's always been clear to me, okay, not always, since I've realized that we, we have the power. Uh, I've believed that consistently and that's, and, and you know, Barack Obama, uh, of all people in none of his famous speeches, um, I think he was doing an interview and he said, democracy is an experiment in self-government. You, you always experimenting. And you're always trying to make it better. No, in fact, it was a speech, a more perfect union. I think you must look at it, Mike, a more perfect, you know, it was beautiful because he was saying we must always strive for perfection of this democracy and it will never be, but in the work that we do, we change a lot of lives, we make the country better, we make society better. And since I've believed that, I just thought we've got to learn to do it in small incremental quantities, but we've got to do it and we can change the world. The concept of, uh, failing forwards, I guess, but knowing it won't be perfect and perfection isn't the aim, but you know. Two steps forward, not one step back. Yeah. Yeah. I like that very much. Um, so you are a very hopeful man. How do you find the balance though, between hope and realism

[00:33:51] **Songezo Zibi:** Through Jonathan Mox, our campaign manager. But I think generally in, in, in life, Mike, I mean, sometimes I hope can really run away. I mean, some, I have these swings, Mike, where. I am super hopeful. And then sometimes I like swing the other way. I'm like, ah, maybe we were just too hopeful and so on. But I would put down the ability to, to continue moving forward, hopefully. In having a moral idea as a driver of what you do, I find it difficult to connect with endeavours that don't have a sort of a moral idea that you're trying to, to, to achieve. And I find that even when I'm really dejected, when I wake up the next day, I think of the moral

imperative and then I just get up and I, and I do it. And I think for me, that has been the key to remaining hopeful that a better tomorrow is, is possible. I don't have to know how today when I'm still in the pits, but I know that tomorrow morning I will know what to do. Sometimes people ask me, so like, what's your plan for tomorrow? I say, I don't know. So I said, I have no idea, but trust me, tomorrow we're moving. And you know, you wake up tomorrow, could be in the shower, you could be running, you could be walking. I'm sure it happens to you, Mike. You're like bingo. Yeah. And you get going.

[00:35:20] **Mike Abel:** Yeah, well I know what the answer is to that, uh, and that is that your subconscious is far more powerful than your conscious mind in problem-solving. Yeah. So, I actively apply that. I take a problem and I don't think about how I'm going to solve the problem at all. I identify the problem. And then I leave it and then exactly what you say, often in the shower, often on a hike on the mountain, suddenly it comes to me that aha moment that if I had to sit down at my desk and think about and think about it, I don't think I'd get to, to the answer.

[00:35:53] **Songezo Zibi:** Yeah, no, no, absolutely. And that's, I mean, there's a verse in the Bible. I, I'm not one of these people who can recite the Bible, but there is a verse in the Bible that talks about a bird that only worries about what is going to eat in the immediate. It doesn't worry so much about tomorrow, but it in a way it doesn't mean I'm interpreting this verse. It doesn't mean that tomorrow takes care of itself. It just means that, uh, the universe, if you trust in the universe, and you do what you're supposed to do and you, you, you apply yourself and you, and you work hard with the right people and so on. Tomorrow, things will line up. If it's not tomorrow, it's the next day. Just don't give up. Right? And, and eventually come across the right people. You're a successful businessman. I'm sure that's happened a few times in your life. Where you're like, how did I meet so and so again? You're like, you know, I didn't want to go there that day. Yeah. And I met so and so there.

[00:36:59] **Mike Abel:** Yes, yes. Well, I think that, uh, you know, if you put positive energy into the universe, and I'm a very big believer in it, Then you've got to go with the universe, you know, you've got to allow it to take you where it's going to take you. And, you know, sometimes things don't, you know, when you and I first met one another 20 something years ago, when you were, you know, starting out at Volkswagen South Africa.

[00:37:21] **Songezo Zibi:** And you guys were actually in this neighbourhood. Yeah. Weren't you guys around Gardens?

[00:37:25] **Mike Abel:** We were in like Roland Street.

[00:37:27] **Songezo Zibi:** Roland Street. Yes was near Parliament and then ETV came into the same vicinity.

[00:37:33] **Mike Abel:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. Who would have imagined, you know, and here we are, you know, in different incantations and iterations and, uh, and, uh, you

know, just the stream of life, I guess. But I think that when you are burdened with a lot of responsibility like you are and, uh, and like I am in many ways, and you sometimes battle, you know, to see how it's going to end positively, where it's going to get to when you, um, I guess, confront, uh, many challenges at any point in time. What is it in you that you think prevents you from giving up? That at the moment you think, actually, I can't do this anymore. I'm wasting my time here. It's too hard. What is that thing that gets you going? Is that your grandpa? What is it that you, that you kind of draw on that says, come on, push on?

[00:38:26] **Songezo Zibi:** So look, I mean, it's a, it's like I said, I channel my grandparents a lot, my, my, my grandfather. But by the way, if I do name a specific hero, it's my grandmother rather than my grandfather. In many ways, I think if she had lived in a different time, she would have been a very successful chief executive of a company or even a president. But there are two, when I'm doing something alone, alone, Mike, I have thoughts of giving up a lot more often. And what keeps me going is seeing the other people. It drives me in a way, Mike, that I cannot, I cannot describe. And then we find out later that all of us were thinking of giving up.

[00:39:18] **Mike Abel:** Yeah, absolutely.

[00:39:19] **Songezo Zibi:** But we thought none of us were giving up. I love that. When I'm by myself, I always find inspiration in the most vulnerable person who needs me to succeed as a parent is my daughter, you know, she's turning seven in December and my daughter needs my wife and I to succeed and needs the country to change. And that drives me, right. But in any situation, even now in the work of Rise Mzansi, where we were, you know, I take a particular interest in the kids, you know, like. But I mean like toddlers, because sometimes people bring toddlers there. And I look at these guys, they are insulated from deeply understanding what's going on around them by their age and being naive. And my hope is by the time these guys develop the ability of in search and understanding their environment, I really hope things are better. And that's enough to keep me going. Because then they don't get into the trauma, Mike. Yeah. They don't have to deal with the trauma, Mike. It puts a time, a time limit on what we, an incentive to, to do things quickly. Yes. And urgently. Yes. It infuses urgency, that's the right word.

[00:40:55] **Mike Abel:** You've given me a lot to think about.

[00:40:58] **Streetstore Ad::** The street store turns 10 this year. The world's first rent free, premises free, free pop up store provides a dignified shopping experience to those in need, allowing them to choose from a selection of pre loved clothing and shoes. Over a thousand stores have been hosted around the world in the past decade and now we're calling on you to host your own. Visit thestreetstore.org to sign up and find out how.

[00:41:26] **Mike Abel:** When you talk to people. And you tell them something about yourself. What is it that you don't tell them? What would people be most surprised to hear about you as we sit here right now?

[00:41:39] **Songezo Zibi:** Uh, Mike, I mean, it is that I used to sing in a choir. I did. I could read music. Okay. I could read music. Uh, wow. And,

[00:41:53] **Mike Abel:** uh, what type of music? When you say like a gospel choir?

[00:41:56] **Songezo Zibi:** No, no, no. You know, like those music signs. I could do that. I could do that. Right? And so if I saw, like, I needed to understand how the tune of the song Okay. Is I could read it. And then sing it and practice it and sing it because I was, I was, I was in a choir. The reason I don't tell people. The reason I don't tell the mic is I'm so bad at singing now.

[00:42:27] **Mike Abel:** That sounded pretty good to me.

[00:42:29] **Songezo Zibi:** Yeah, I know, but you know, like when you don't sing actively, I mean, anyway, I don't tell people that I used to be in a choir actually, and I could read music and so on. But because they asked me to sing and then they believe me less.

[00:42:44] **Mike Abel:** Well, it's funny cause I've never sung in a choir. Um, I've sung in the shower and my wife tells me not to sing, but...

[00:42:54] **Songezo Zibi:** Can I tell you something like an interesting story about the singing? So I used to sing. So I was in standard seven. It's grade nine these days. And I go to boarding school and then I would sing in a choral voice coming from the shower right to the dormitory and then One of the older boys at dorm 37 looked out and he said, Hey, come here. So I came, he says, you are going to join the school choir. I was like, no, no, no, no, no. So our choirmaster was my aunt and she drove us hard. And I hated the fact that she wanted, wanted us to practice for hours. I mean, we used to win awards and so on, but I didn't like it. So I go to boarding school and I don't want to do it. That guy, Mike, that guy, that guy who said, come over here, he is a very successful, uh, on Broadway and West End London. He was on Umoja, he's on international productions. He literally lives between Sydney, London, and, and New York.

[00:44:01] **Mike Abel:** Oh, wow. Maybe you can help get him on the show.

[00:44:04] **Songezo Zibi:** That guy. I'd love to talk to him. So I'm going to, I'm going to look for him. It's an amazing story. That guy, he went that far.

[00:44:13] **Mike Abel:** Well, there's so many amazing stories. You know, the other day I was talking about, uh, Pretty Yende and, uh, people said, who? And I said, the South African opera singer that sang at King Charles's coronation. And our country doesn't know about her, and our country doesn't know about your friend.

[00:44:31] **Songezo Zibi:** No, no, no. People don't. He's, I mean, I bumped into him at Frankfurt airport some years ago. And I could see, you know, the South African flight

leaves late. Yeah, and I thought, guy's looking at me. He keeps looks. So I went over and it was him. So I ask him, so where do you come from? He says, I'm going home, but, but he tells me what he does and I Googled him and I'm like, Hey, there are all of these pictures of him on stage in London and all of these Hamilton places.

[00:45:00] **Songezo Zibi:** Yeah, you could find.

[00:45:01] **Mike Abel:** So in your latest book manifesto, a new vision for South Africa, you challenge South Africans to take on. A new generational mission to accept the responsibility of leadership. What is the smallest but most impactful way in your mind that the average South African can do to drive this forward in society?

[00:45:27] **Songezo Zibi:** You know, Mike, I would say it is to think of the most of the nearest democratic structure. in your life and get involved with it. There are many. So I live in Hauteng and there are estates. So you get body corporates and so on. People don't get involved with the body corporate. But they should. I run away from them. People don't come to the AGM, the school governing body and, and, and, and I think we don't realize how important this work is. And then sometimes I'll sit. I mean, I'm not in the body corporate myself in my estate. There we go. I'm in a bigger body corporate, it's called Rise Mzansi. But sometimes I listen to the residents. The way they speak to the guys on the board of corporate, who don't get paid, who are also residents, and I'm thinking, but guys, come on, these guys also have jobs. They've got kids that they got to take to school and look like they don't work for us in the way that you're speaking to them. This whole thing belongs to all of us. It's a residence association. It's ours. Why are you talking like this? And now we must nominate people for the, for the, for the following years. But oh no, the same people that were allowed. So if we can just change that, Mike, there will be so much that we can accomplish as a country.

[00:46:59] **Mike Abel:** Accountability.

[00:47:00] **Songezo Zibi:** Accountability. It's responsibility, Mike. It's accountability. Holding ourselves accountable. So I participate more now in the affairs of my kids school than I did a few years ago. I make sure I know what's going on.

[00:47:16] **Mike Abel:** What do you think it is about South Africans and South African politics where There is such a low level of accountability, certainly if I look at the country since, I guess, uh, 2008, the end of the Mbeki presidency, why do you think people have stopped holding our politicians accountable in South Africa?

[00:47:41] **Songezo Zibi:** Mike, uh, you know, I'm going to say something surprising here, and I would say it's Eurocentrism of our politics. This is what I mean. You know, I spoke earlier about how being a grown up, for me, in my community, is about being responsible. Right? If there's one thing that changed after '94, at least in black communities, it is that sense of responsibility. Now, if you withdraw from being responsible yourself, what are the chances that you're going to hold someone else accountable? My school was built by the community. You know, there would be a

meeting at the headman's place. They would say, the fence at the school needs to be redone and refreshed in two Saturdays time, all the men are going there to do it.

That's a decision of the whole village. And you know what? In two weeks time, that place is teeming with people putting up the fence. Mike, that's a really powerful thing, right? Now the ANC comes and, and they say, and sort of say West ministers type. Politics says the political party is the agent. You are the customer. They go and they do it. Of course it doesn't happen. Because even holding them accountable is. taking accountability yourself, right? But now we don't want to do anything. And I feel that if we can restore some of the things that help democracy, but aren't necessarily based on democracy in and of themselves, the democracy would get better because you decide I'm not a child. I'm a grown up. I'm not going to let Panyaza Lesufi do this, which I can't explain to my own kids. I'm going to challenge him because I want to be able to explain it to my kids. It's a simple thing that people in the village could do. On the bigger stage. A journalist must go and ask.

[00:49:53] **Mike Abel:** Well, I do think that, uh, you know, they say that charity starts at home. Uh, accountability starts at home. Accountability starts within yourself. And I think that for those listening today, I think that's a very powerful message. You know, people are great today at holding other people accountable, but you can't hold other people accountable until you hold yourself accountable. You don't have the right to hold other people accountable until you hold yourself accountable, uh, for your own behaviour. I know you're a curious man, and you said earlier that, uh, I guess what was the benchmark of your journalism was finding out or knowing what you didn't know. Yeah. So if I had to ask you what you are curious about right now, what would it be? What are you wanting to know more about?

[00:50:45] **Songezo Zibi:** Mike, you know, I'm actually wanting to know more about AI. Yeah. I'm wanting to know more about AI, uh, because I mean, it, it's fantastic. Right. It's like, it blows my mind. Every time I like see things that come out of machine learning and so on, but I don't understand it enough to act. I don't understand it enough to know how to make use of it effectively and what I should be careful of, right. By way of whatever is adverse, you know, from it, but I also, it is not properly integrated into how I develop ideas in my head, to be honest, it's, it's a thing on the side. That I'm like, okay, there's AI, but I feel like just the strength of my own ideas, if it was as integrated as economics is, in my head, I would be a much better thinker and a much better person. I don't know enough about AI.

[00:51:51] **Mike Abel:** So I can, I can help you with that a little bit. You know, I think it was Prometheus who was thrown out of heaven by the gods for giving, Man fire. And as you know, fire can be used to give light, to give warmth, to cook, or it can burn everything down. And that's what we have with AI today. I think we have this opportunity to harness this thing in a very positive way. If that's how we choose to harness it, or it can be utterly destructive. And, uh, I don't think now that the genie is out the bottle, um, We are ever going to be able to harness it one way versus the other The same way with the invention of a car, you know It can get you safely from a to b or it can kill you on the way if you drive like a lunatic And I think the responsibility that you talk about the personal responsibility the personal

accountability is to harness the power in a positive way and I think there are many many, many positive ways around that. Because you are such an empathetic man I'm going to ask you quite a hard question. What are some of the challenges that we are facing at the moment in connecting with each other as a country, as a people?

[00:53:13] **Songezo Zibi:** It's, I think the biggest challenge is seeing each other fundamentally as human beings. Before any label, before any label, seeing each other as human beings. You know, Mike, there's an article I read, almost every quarter, and I've done so for years. It was written by Thabo Mbeki. Uh, can't remember, I think it was 2005 or 2006, in one of his Friday letters, we used to deal with whoever he didn't like sometimes, or who had pissed him off, but he wrote this really seminal article, learning to listen to and hear one another. Short version is, a former police minister, Adrian Flock, had washed Reverend Frank Chigane's feet. Okay. I remember that. As an act of contrition. Mm. And there were people that made fun of it. Oh, really? There was a lot of derision. and so on. And Thabo Mbeki writes this beautiful piece that basically says, this is the arc of Adrian Flock's life. Mm. For a man of his upbringing and political and other beliefs to end up here, washing Reverend Frank Chigane's feet. Is a, is an incredible lesson in personal transformation and being able to deal with your. Demons and confronting things that you've done in your life. And I mean, it didn't say it in these words. And he said, if we understood that we would understand how powerful that act was. Now you would think Thabo Mbeki got and bet for Atrean flock, like in which universe.

And I learned something and you know, Mike, with things happening in the world, so much conflict and so on, I went back to that article. And I read it again and I was like, you know, that's not what we are doing. We, we always look for people we, we like and we agree with, and the people we disagree with. We don't want to listen deeply and, and understand. And myself. I need to reconnect with that and understand that you can love deeply people who disagree with you profoundly. And it wouldn't be strange because you, I understand where you're coming from and you understand where I'm coming from. One day we will meet in the middle. But you know what? Because I understand you, I'm not able to lose my love for you. That's what that told me. And if we could have that today, if we could have today, Mike, be better people, all of us, I think.

[00:56:17] **Mike Abel:** Amen. I agree. I agree. And I think that it's, as you say, it's understanding, opening yourself up to understanding as opposed to judgment.

[00:56:29] **Songezo Zibi:** Yeah. We want to be right. We want to win. We want to win the argument. And, and in fact, Michaela Rong, British journalist, once said to me, you don't have to have an answer to everything. The search for answers itself is worth it.

[00:56:53] **Mike Abel:** I agree with you, a hundred percent.

[00:56:55] **Songezo Zibi:** And it takes you to people and places that you never thought you would go, but the search for answers.

[00:57:02] **Mike Abel:** So you may have answered this already, I'm not sure, in what you've just said, but, you know, as we hit the homestretch of each episode of Willing and Able, I asked my guest a cornerstone question.

[00:57:15] **Mike Abel:** Uh, Songezo, my question to you is What are we not seeing in South Africa at the moment?

[00:57:23] **Songezo Zibi:** What we don't see enough is, I don't understand. Yes, I don't understand. Uh, I love the movies. And you may remember the movie Philadelphia. I do. With Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington. Brilliant, yeah. Amazing movie. And what did Denzel Washington, like, Denzel Washington's character, like say, explain this to me as if I'm a five-year-old. Hmm. I don't, I won't get offended. We don't say that. We don't ever say that. We already know. Yes. There is so much pain and conflict and missed opportunity in saying, I don't know. I don't understand. In not saying, I don't know. I don't understand. Tell me. Mike, if we did that, I mean, yeah. And it's seen as weakness. You know, even in the context of the politics that we, that we're doing, people say, yeah, you can't be successful as a politician because of that. And I always think, why not? What was the whole thing about Madiba? That's what it was. Yeah. Right. That, that's what it was. And I feel we don't say that enough. Yeah.

[00:58:49] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. People feel vulnerable. They feel scared. They, they don't like to feel, um, not in control, you know, I sometimes sit in a meeting and I'll hear the CEO of a company talk about, you know, the BNZ of the APU. And I've got no idea what that acronym means. And I'll say to him, sorry, but. I don't use Denzel's love, but I'll say, I don't know what you just said. Can you unpack it for me? But I noticed the other people in the meeting sit there nodding their heads sagely and they've got no idea. So I think it's about vulnerability. Strength, as you say, comes through vulnerability. Strength comes through emotion. Strengths comes through opening up and, you know, being real. Um, so talking about that, is there something that is important that you've changed your mind about? If I had to say, you held a strong position on something, and then through the journey of your life, you've changed your opinion on that. Is there such an example you could give me?

[00:59:50] **Songezo Zibi:** There is, Mike. You know, it's an interesting thing. It's, it's my evolving understanding of the Afrikaner community. You know, I grew up understanding Afrikaners as the oppressors. Yes. And in a context, it was true, right? But I had a realization at some point that they also stuck here with us. They stuck here with us. They can't even go back to Holland. They won't know them there. Yeah. They are a tribe now. They are a tribe now. And if anyone, it must be part of solving our country's problems. We've got to all change our mindset. They've got to change theirs, we've got to change ours. And see one another as African tribes that love Africa that want to share it in prosperity. So it's, it's a particular thing. I mean, you grow up singing songs about Amabunu and so on. That's, that's changed, Mike.

[01:01:05] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. Well, I think that, uh, you touched on it earlier is to be able to see people as people, you know, as having good in them. Finding one another much more challenging, much harder. It's easy to hate. Yeah, yeah. You know, it's easy to shut down. It's not easy to be vulnerable and to open up and to say, I'm a dad,

you're a dad, let's find each other there. Or I'm a businessman, you're a businessman. Or I'm a politician, you're a politician. There's got to be You know, commonality, points of entry, and I think that if you do put, which you've touched on a number of times beautifully in this conversation, is seeking understanding. Yeah. And if you do, you'll find each other.

[01:01:55] **Mike Abel:** Songezo my friend, I want to thank you for sharing your insights with me today and with our listeners.

[01:02:01] **Songezo Zibi:** Mike, thank you. Thank you so much

[01:02:04] **Mike Abel:** I'm personally so reinvigorated after this discussion. And I'll be fascinated to see how the future South Africa unfolds in 2024 and beyond. Really, may us all continue to keep dreaming about what you talk about and doing amazing things, personal things, big things, small things in this beloved country of ours.

[01:02:25] **Songezo Zibi:** Thank you very much for having me.

[01:02:38] **Mike Abel:** Thanks so much for listening today. If you enjoyed this podcast, why not leave us a five-star review? Tune into Willing and Abel next time for more conversations that challenge perspectives.

[01:02:51] **Credits:** This podcast is produced by 2Stories. Written by Linda Scarborough, produced by Carol Williams, with audio editing, engineering and sound design by Kozi Mzimela, with production assistance from M&C Saatchi Group South Africa's team, Maciek Dubla and Nadia Siegel. Special thanks to Sonic Nursery and Edible Audio for the recording of these episodes.