Remembering Nelson Mandela, 1918–2013

A tribute to Nelson Mandela

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In 1971 Nelson Mandela was still in prison, not knowing his future or his fate. He wrote to his friend, Fatima Meer:

> I shall stick to our vow: never, never under any circumstances, to say anything unbecoming of the other.... The trouble, of course, is that most successful men are prone to some form of vanity.... I sometimes believe that through me Creation intended to give the world the example of a mediocre man in the proper sense of the term. Nothing could tempt me to advertise myself.[1]

Why Mandela became an icon to the world can perhaps be seen from the sentiments expressed in these words. The question we may ask, however, is: how did he manage to keep his integrity in the face of such harsh and long prison conditions and in his subsequent years where he was in the very opposite position – when he became and was celebrated as the universal symbol for reconciliation?

The answer, or one of the answers, may lie in his early experiences in rural South Africa. As one of 13 children (his father had four wives, as was, as still is, customary in many areas), he spent his childhood with the boys in his homestead and neighbourhood – it was safe in those days, and the children had the freedom to play and run around, the little boy returning at the end of the day to his mother's home for the evening meal. There he was told legends of heroic warriors, all of which contained moral lessons; he observed and internalized his people's customs and rituals, which remained deeply embedded in his psyche.

His father's death at the age of nine brought an end to this idyllic early childhood. He was abruptly, and without much preparation, taken from the place of his birth in Qunu to another village where the regent of the Thembu people was residing. He was accepted into this royal household and treated as one of the regent's sons. It is here that he witnessed the workings of a man who enjoyed the trust and respect of his people, who listened to all and who then sought consensus. 'My later notions of leadership were profoundly influenced by observing the regent and his court.'[2]

Mandela, or Madiba – the clan name by which he is fondly known – drew his inner strength from his boyhood; from freedom to play and learn through experience; from opportunities to observe wise elders and to absorb their values and ways of being. The formal education that followed taught him about open mindedness and critical thinking. He describes how, at the age of 21 years, he discovered that a friend had not observed a particular custom – he contained his revulsion, and stated that

> ....progressive ideas helped me to crawl out of the prejudice of my youth and to accept all people as equals. I came to accept that I have no right whatsoever to judge others in terms of my own customs, however much I may be proud of such customs; that to despise others because they have not observed particular customs is a dangerous form of chauvinism.[3]

This equal regard for self and other, this ability to reflect and to take responsibility, are probably the highest forms of being human. This is not about power for the sake of self aggrandisement, but it is about an inner authority that is not threatened or shaken by outer forces.

And South Africa was ready to embrace these ideals in 1994. We cannot ignore the fact that the nation – as diverse and as divided as it was, and still is – has honoured and loved this man, and has made it possible for him to become what Creation perhaps really intended him to be: to give the world an example of a true human being.

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Reference

1 Nelson Mandela, *Conversations with Myself*, London: Pan, 2011, p. 7.
2 Ibid., p. 24.
3 Ibid., p. 26.