Remembering Nelson Mandela

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When asked to write something about Nelson Mandela, I thought, 'What more can be said?' How could I offer anything of worth or interest to all that has been written already? And yet his life is such an outstanding expression of personal self-development, a deepening of consciousness and subsequent expansion of vision, that perhaps some words about him do belong in a journal of Humanistic Psychology.

I grew up in Capetown, which I later learned had the reputation of being the most 'liberal' of cities in South Africa. I experienced my childhood as one of extreme isolation and loneliness and it was an enormous relief to grow up. It wasn't just that neither of my parents had much idea of how to relate. I simply accepted this reality as how life was, as I guess many children do. But what shocked me to the core was that we shared our house with dark-skinned people, were in fact looked after and cared for by them, and yet it was assumed that they didn't really matter. The implication was: 'You needn't bother yourself about them'. I retreated yet further into my own world so as to hold on to my own thoughts, and was left in a state of absolute puzzlement about the human race.

The person who related most to me and my sister and brothers was regarded, along with others of similar colour, as a kind of sub-species. It was the same in other people's homes. The subject was never even referred to unless I fell out of line and asked an awkward question: such as 'Why isn't Lizzie looking after her own children instead of us?'. No one in our large family ever took note, or now remembers, that she had two sons, let alone that they died in the township of tuberculosis (TB), aged three, and one and a half, because of the appalling conditions: leaky shacks in the wet Cape winters. She wasn't even given a day off for their funerals. And when I displayed my anguish about this my mother said, in a pleasant and unconcerned voice, 'Oh, they're not like us. They don't feel as we do.' And yet she was strangely content to leave us in her care. And my mother was not a nasty woman. Not a single person in my world questioned this mindset of an intrinsic superiority or inborn inferiority – neither the whites nor the blacks. No complaint to us from Lizzie. Not a hint of it. No discussion around it. Nil awareness. That was my experience. My elder brother would snigger if we passed by half-naked children, and my father drove past a man lying by the side of the road on the way to our holiday cottage. When I called out from the back of the car, 'We must stop and see what's happened to him', the reply was, 'It's alright. He's black.' And it was the same when I went to school. Perfectly affable people would come out with similar comments. It was unremarkable. The implication was, 'You needn't bother about them'. Everyone seemed to accept this as normal. I decided that grown-ups didn't know anything.

I'm sharing this personal material to give you a flavour of what Nelson Mandela, and all people of colour in South Africa, were up against, and how *phenomenal* was the achievement of the constitution which now stands. The task of waking up both white and black in South Africa was beyond most people's conception. Certainly, our servants found me not only odd, but troublesome at times, and didn't want to know. It was too disturbing, no doubt. It was natural for them to have a separate outside toilet and no shower or bath – and yet bath and wash us in our bathroom; and what was strange about calling my father 'Master'?

It was almost more sane-making when some years later, President Verwoerd came to power and put a name to this situation – Apartheid – and the everyday reality that no-one in my world ever seemed to notice as strange was incrementally spelled out in harsher and harsher discriminatory laws that ended up surpassing even those of Nazi Germany. The majority of the population was left with not a single human right. Verwoerd explained to us all that it was for everyone's good, and Apartheid or 'Separate Development' (i.e. non-development of the blacks) could even be called 'Good Neighbourliness'. At least the situation now had a label. Something to refer to. And people began talking 'politics' at last.

So this was the situation that had to be transformed. This was the task for which Mandela was prepared to die, but for which he hoped to live. Fortunately he possessed

enormous life energy, not always used for the benefit of his families, but focused on liberating his people. And with his inborn political astuteness there came a time when he realised that freedom could never be achieved by purely peaceful means. The mindset of the oppressor had to be pierced by a 'Spear'. Nothing less would infiltrate the privilege-fuelled complacency of the vast majority of Whites. Stability equalled continued oppression of an extreme nature. However, what is often not understood by what was called the 'outside world' is that the blacks also had to be stirred awake from their years of a compliant acceptance of inferiority – from believing that they were 'less than' their oppressors in some fundamental way.

When Mandela came to the conclusion that freedom was not possible without some use of violence, I agreed with him. And I was, and still am, a pacifist by temperament and belief and have participated in anti-war marches. But we can't give ourselves the psychological luxury of *any* absolutist position if we are to be in touch with reality, certainly at this stage of our evolutionary development as a species. The Absolute indicates a domain from which all that was and is and can be may be seen to emerge, but if we lay claim to it in our relative, and as yet radically uneven and erratic state of awareness, then we have indulged in a compelling engagement with hubris. We forego wisdom. And Mandela had a practical astuteness that was the breeding ground for the more mature wisdom to come.

Without some carefully chosen act of violence (blowing up pylons to start with, and only progressing if no heed was taken), the sleeping consciousness of the vast majority of white South Africans would have slumbered on in collusive, even if uneasy, acceptance. No one is that willing to give up privilege unless their safety or security is threatened. The violations that underpinned the status quo would have continued to be declared normal, regrettably necessary, or even right. Peaceful demonstrations by the oppressed, even when escalating in daring or number, were met with instant and intimidating violence by the state, and an inborn sense of inferiority is not easily dissolved. Western leaders, including the militant Margaret Thatcher, had no conception of what Mandela and his African National Congress (ANC) comrades were up against, and so they quibbled about his 'terrorist' or 'freedom fighter' days as if they had never had anything to do with the use of force when their interests were threatened. It was only the Mandela who appeared from prison who was welcomed and so enthusiastically and effusively lauded, although not one of them would be likely to follow his example.

And then of course Mandela was also accused of being a communist. The ANC stood alongside communists because communists stood alongside them. Many were hugely principled, courageous and committed to the struggle. Communism was a better bet than Fascism. Churchill was certainly grateful to have Stalin as an ally. In later years, even after becoming President, Mandela denied his communist leanings of earlier times because the very word 'communist' can still set off a knee-jerk reaction of righteous horror and justification for the oppression of the past. When some criticize even the icon Mandela for not really being a good 'politician', I disagree. He was an inspired realist. He knew his erstwhile enemy. It was prison, and the assumed length of his imprisonment, that offered him the opportunity of radical inner transformation so as to find it in himself to love his enemy too.

Fortunately, more liberal views increasingly prevailed overseas as the Anti-Apartheid Movement grew in strength, led, along with others, by the committed and tireless ex-terrorist/freedom fighter ANC members in exile. It was they who educated the outside world into the necessity of active boycott, knowing that the threat of economic collapse, the loss of the white's privileged standard of living, could then no longer be seen as something from which an oppressive police state could save them. Educating the consciousness of the West took enormous energy, organization and astute handling. Over time the Anti-Apartheid Movement abroad was an essential component in isolating the rulers of South Africa, as well as shaming various external beneficiaries and investors in the country (and thus the system) into withdrawing their trade and assets. It was necessary that the white population become economically threatened as well as fearful of what had now come to be considered 'The Black Menace' – 'these terrible violent blacks that didn't know how to behave'. It is a sentiment many whites are now reverting to as they retain their wealth behind their gated properties and wonder why burglaries are so rife.

That entrenched attachment to economic privilege and job opportunities was the insight shared by both Mandela and President de Klerk, whose wise pragmatism prevailed over attitudes born of long years of dogma and racist fundamentalism. The post-prison Mandela likewise knew that only if their economic status wasn't threatened could the white population bear to co-operate with those they considered to be intrinsically inferior (Mandela himself having attained the status of a singular phenomenon by then). It was not only his inborn leadership qualities, but his deep inner transformation, that placed him in a class all of his own. In psycho-spiritual terms, he had attained the grace of becoming a fully individuated human being. Without this

long and taxing inner journey of personal self-development, the history of South Africa could have been very different. Because things were on a knife-edge, a tipping-point, nothing was assured and *dis*integration into violence and chaos only narrowly averted. Look what happens when a new president is 'religious' rather than psychologically and spiritually integrated, as in the case of Egypt's disrupted Arab Spring. Democracy, in itself, does not deliver peace – nor wise, mature and integrated leaders.

It was the 'Stories' smuggled out of that prison on Robben Island – stories of increasingly inspired modes of handling captivity, deprivation, boredom and humiliation while gaining in dignity and retaining a sense of his destiny as a leader of his country against all odds – that ensured an aura of such unique excellence that it morphed into 'Universal Man'. Only thus could all races come to accept him as their president. For once the near mythical status was at least supported by an utterly authentic and costly inner journey, plus the tireless courage, commitment and determination of his wife, Winnie, to affirm, proselytize and broadcast this myth to her people and the world. Tragically this inspired and necessary outer role was not matched by an inner journey towards deeper integration and illumination. Tragically, but not surprisingly, hers was a journey of disintegration into violence of a purely cruel and unnecessary nature; not surprising, when brought up within a climate of such violence, distortion and humiliation. Very natural, in fact. Given that she now had the status of a 'Mandela' – without the inner journey – she was left at the mercy of an empowered and overloaded ego, common to many leaders who flounder. Their joint but divergent journeying highlights how essential is a commitment to, and opportunities for, personal self-development. It affirms all that Humanistic Psychology stands for.

Thus, Mandela's words rang true when he spoke of the necessity to construct a 'people-centred society' in his State of the Nation address to parliament on the 24 May 1994. Towards the end of the same address he made a further groundbreaking announcement:

> It is vitally important that all structures of Government, including the President himself, should understand this fully, that freedom cannot be achieved unless the women of our country have been emancipated from all forms of oppression and empowered to intervene in all aspects of life as equals with any other member of society.

What enabled Mandela to achieve the establishment of the new constitution was his opening to new possibilities in his personal exchanges with individuals – not only de Klerk, but in the myriad of his face-to-face encounters both in his own country and later as he travelled around the world. In such lies our true human power. In these the transformative potential of human beings shines forth – is displayed – and in such can we put our trust.

Mandela left prison shaking the hand of his gaoler, looking into his eyes, and saying he would miss him. And the gaoler knew he meant what he said and felt privileged to shake the hand of a black man. Mandela learnt to connect with his oppressor as a fellow human being, and as one who could have been an oppressor himself if he had held on to his righteous anger and outrage, and let it run him. Anger can be a fire, a motivating force, but it needs to move through us and leave space for the movements of a subtler and more empowering energy which allows the heart to open so as to see ourselves in the other – with our mutual woundings, fears, loves, hopes and griefs, as well as all else that makes us, each and every one of us, unique.

And so Mandela was clear of hate when he used his political acumen to negotiate with de Klerk, and de Klerk could experience this and so trust him. Relieved of hate and at one with himself, Mandela was free to see beyond what would have been just, and to then work towards actualizing a constitution which could enshrine the principle of justice for all inhabitants of a long divided nation. Having come into his wholeness as a person, he could open his consciousness and understanding to the dilemmas, fears and anxieties of his now fellow leader, and honour his otherness. He could recognize the burden de Klerk carried of the leadership of a people fearful of losing all they had known, all the benefits they had come to depend on. Two wise politicians and hard-headed realists who had shed fanaticism had come to respect the man in front of him, even as each fought for the best possible outcome for those they represented – the difference being that Mandela, having undergone a long and arduous deepening of his being, could now genuinely endeavour to represent *all* who lived in that country whose rulers had so narrowly avoided assigning him to his death but had also, unwittingly, played a part in his opportunity of inner, and thus outer, transformation.

Just because equal rights for all citizens had not only been totally absent in practice but positively forbidden in principle, Mandela brooked no compromise on this. It was the bedrock from which he would not budge. However suddenly and dramatically freedom came to South Africa, he knew the road towards equality of opportunity would be long and rough and arduous, but at least it should have constitutional underpinning. (Abraham Lincoln would have applauded him, no doubt.) At least no interim steps towards the principle of equal rights – especially in a country in which

equality of opportunity had been so scandalously lacking. Decades of scant or no access to education, and laws such as 'Job Reservation' limiting the opportunity of blacks to attain even modest skills, meant a long walk ahead – longer, even, than Mandela's Long Walk to Freedom.

So Mandela was looking to the future by putting the constitution above all else. In exchange, he had to let go of his socialist leanings, which he is seen by many of his people to have betrayed. He knew the West well enough to know that investment in South Africa would flee, and also that de Klerk had to carry his privilege-addicted supporters with him. And indeed, the South African economy has grown these last years, to the envy of many other nations, even though, alas, the distribution of income and wealth remains a disgrace. It is tragic that poverty and extreme inequality of access to resources is so rife, and of course a new, self-interested black elite was bound to evolve. The majority of those in power have always abused power in their own interest throughout history. Let us look to our own past – and present. What on earth do we expect? Mandela was a richly developed human being, not a magician or instant transformer of human nature. There is no short cut to transformation, as his own life revealed. He may well inspire others in that direction, inspire others to engage in their own very different journey of personal development and transformation. There is no other way for more humane societies to evolve. But it makes an enormous difference if certain values, which will always be held in tension with other values and rights of equal importance, are nevertheless given form/formulation enshrined in a constitution; a necessity for a culture that eschewed such values, and assumed that human beings were born unequal and should remain that way.

If improving the morality within banking is considered elusive when based on only having to undo 30 years of the corrupt culture that evolved within it, what do critics of Mandela's legacy expect? Because just as some will make him a hero or 'saint' of legendary fame, others will need to complain that he failed to transform the mindset of his fellow compatriots as thoroughly as he appeared to transform his own. They will shy away from the disturbing challenge that transformation is personal work at the level of soul.

How wise that this man stated that his body be returned to the rural scene of his birth – the village where he grew up, grew up with the naïve and immediate responsiveness of a child knowing nothing of what it would mean to have to *attain* freedom of a far more complex nature. Back to the earth, which sustains and ultimately receives us all. And no Religion can now claim him for their own. A truly free spirit at last.

Further Anecdotes

Paradoxically it was liberation from the corrosive and collusive belief in the intrinsic superiority of those who held power, as well as their inborn resilience to cope with the outcome of this false belief, that early activists were up against.

It was only much later, as an adult, when actually visiting some of the townships, that I personally experienced this incredible resilience, and the resourcefulness and spirit of the people who made a life for themselves in such appalling circumstances. As the world witnessed, Africans sing and dance at funerals – and they do so through all their tragedies, trials and tribulations. And the extended family also serves this resilience. I visited our 'nanny' there before she died. She had adopted two disabled children although dying herself of neglected breast cancer. She was cheerful. Her daughter was part of the household and there was no question but that she would take them on along with her own children.

On a much later visit, when Aids was rife, I was invited into a shack which housed about 14 orphans from various families, all cared for by the eldest youth of 19 – and they were cared for. Another time when my brother and I took some clothes and supplies down to the township, children appeared from everywhere. I gave one of them two bags of lentils and he immediately turned around and gave one to another child.

A friend of mine – during a period of brutal police raids – took three women into her home for protection. After a month they wished to return, even though conditions had not improved. They said 'thank you', but it felt too 'dead' in a white home. 'You people don't know how to live', they explained.

Jill Hall was born in South Africa into an environment of extreme inequality and oppression, and cannot remember a time when she was not disturbed, puzzled and fascinated about what it means to be a human being. She moved to London in her late teens, working as an actress until becoming a mother and philosophy student. Attracted to the arena of self-development in the early days of Humanistic Psychology, she later became a tutor at the Institute of Biodynamic Psychology. She now runs weekend residential groups and has been a guest lecturer for various professional bodies and universities. She is the author of *The Reluctant Adult*.