

A Tribute to Nelson Mandela

By Nadine Gordimer

Let us now praise famous men...

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In the canon of human conscience Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela is surely the most famously revered in the contemporary world. In the 20th Century he was one of the few who, in contrast with those who made it infamous for fascism, racism, dictatorship and war, marked the era as one that achieved some human advancement. That is the context in which his name will live in history, beyond the new millennium.

Nelson Mandela belongs to the world.

We South Africans, who are fortunate enough to have him living with us in the present, feel he belongs to us and above all we belong to him, if on other and different levels of experience.

There are those who knew him in childhood at his home, the Transkei, and see, beneath the beautifully aged face formed by extraordinary experiences of Underground existence, long imprisonment, the soft contours of a lively youth soon to be aware of ominous demanding responsibilities calling within him beyond a personal appetite for life.

There are those – like George Bizos- who knew him as a fellow student with whom they shared food when he, as a black man, could not enter even a humble restaurant and as a young lawyer whose very presence in court was resented and challenged by white presiding magistrates. There are those who remember him practising with great Oliver Tambo as the legal firm ‘Mandela & Tambo’ in an old building of Johannesburg.

There are those of us who were present in court as he spoke from the dock when a life sentence was pronounced on him for his role in the freedom struggle, and have forever the image of his face and bearing as he declared his pronouncement: *‘I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die’.*

For twenty-seven years Nelson Mandela was imprisoned in our midst, for Robben Island is in sight of Table Mountain and Pollsmoor Prison is part of Cape Town city. Entombed. Silenced. It was forbidden to reproduce his words or photograph in the media. But in the force of his invincible dedication to the freedom of his people, at whatever the personal cost: for Mandela *‘Walls do not a prison make, Nor iron bars a cage’*. Black South Africans had a sense of his enduring **what they endured**: the brutal humiliations of prison were everyday experiences for them under pass laws and innumerable other racist restrictions which for generations had created a vast non-criminal prison population in South Africa. While he and his comrades on Robben Island were sent to break stones and pull seaweed out of the Atlantic Ocean, ordinary people among the black population were being hired out by prison authorities as slave farm labour. His people kept him among them in the words of their songs and chants, in the defiant forms of active resistance he had shared with them, and in demands for his release made by the leadership in exile along with the people themselves at home. In such news of him that came out of prison, we came to know that his sense of himself was always part of all this, of living it with his people; he received them through prison walls, as they kept him with them.

This double sense, down-to-earth as well as inspirational, was intrinsic to the very stuff of the freedom struggle. The strong possibility that he would meet his death in prison was not accepted despite the grim fact that mysterious deaths were an apartheid subterfuge in getting rid of its victims not given the mandatory death sentence. There never was the psychological defeat, for the liberation movement, of his becoming a mythical figure, a Che Guevara who might never be seen again except some day in mystical resurrection on a white horse. He remained, 27 years a leader taking on the present in vulnerable flesh and blood.

In 1998 he reflected to me *'Some die and leave behind the evil they did to others. But there are many people, unknown or little known, who leave behind the fruit of efforts they made to provide a better life for those who come after them....In respect of leadership of countries – I have never had any desire or ambition to store up wealth and be surrounded by luxury and pomp. What I want to see is an environment where the young people of our country have a real chance to develop the inherent possibilities they have to create a better life for themselves. This cannot come about in conditions of dire poverty. That is what development is about'*.

Of course it is difficult to speak of a phenomenon of world conscience like Mandela in terms other than hagiography. Jack Lang, who was one of the possible presidential candidates for the coming French elections, recently wrote a remarkable book in which Mandela appears as a modern-day Spartacus, Prometheus; but Mandela refuses Olympus, doesn't feel at home there, just as he refuses the mantle of saint. Mandela epitomises the human being of conscience, male or female, and that human being is not exalted above life, but taking action, speaking out from within human contradictions. He created his own Truth and Reconciliation Commission, inviting to lunch, granting amnesty to the prosecution lawyer in the trial that sentenced him to life imprisonment. But his loyalty to South Africa whose freedom he sacrificed so much to gain does not mean either, that he sees it obligatory to be Politically Correct, where conscience decrees otherwise. He speaks out on the present government's shortfall, failure in meeting the needs of the alarming proportion of our population infected with HIV and dying of AIDS.

There are two kinds of leaders in the species humankind. There is the man or woman of personal ambition, and there is the man or woman who creates a self out of response to people's needs, the call of conscience against oppression, injustice, and sufferings of any nature within our human condition. To the one, the drive comes narrowly from within; to the other it is a charge of energy which comes in others' needs and the demands these make on all of us who share humanity. Conscience is a form of solidarity.

Mandela has a world view in unflinching values of all humankind although his was first formulated and put into practice in South Africa. He was and is revolutionary in the positive sense of its third among many meanings in the Oxford English Dictionary; 'to change completely' – not only in overcoming a repressive regime, but by fundamental transformation of what constitutes values of human justice and dignity all the way up from the basis of food and shelter. For him, victory is not a switch of power, the takeover of seats still warm from the occupancy of the oppressors. It is the absolute necessity to change the nature, the wielding of power, the morality of power, revolutionise the eye-for-an-eye, tooth-for-a-tooth, corruption-for-corruption concept of governance in victory, by recognising that truly human survival, in the home country and the world to which the nation inexorably belongs, must be in policies, attitudes and acts which in a new and different kind of struggle, put the problems of our common humanity urgently first. We have no choice but to live together in city, nation, country and planet. We have no choice but to face, one another in this place.

It was surely in this concept of what he was – a black man denied rights of citizenship, freedom of movement, of choice in all walks of life open to a white population, as a prisoner for 27 years, as a free man, finally president of his country – that Mandela made no objection to receiving the Nobel Peace Prize jointly with the last president of racist regimes in South Africa, F.W. de Klerk. I can't resist recalling, as one present at the ceremony, that I found what I was seeing hard to conceive of, an amnesty hard to swallow- which shows how much I, who have learnt so much from Nelson Mandela, have still to learn.

Since the Award that gives us the occasion, gratefully, of paying tribute to Nelson Mandela today is that of Art for Amnesty on behalf of Amnesty International, I hope it is not irrelevant to remark that Madiba is a reader. He managed somehow to be a lover of the art of literature even in prison, where only censored works for study courses were allowed. He contrived to receive through prison walls some of our contemporary fiction – he has since written about Chinua Achebe, great Nigerian author, of reading his work in prison as *'The writer in whose company prison walls fell down'*. My banned novel *'Burger's Daughter'* was smuggled into his Robben Island cell, and the message smuggled back was that he thought well of it. That means more to me than any other opinion it could have gained.

When the World Press published lists of the great men and women of the 20th century, the names Mohandas Gandhi and Nelson Mandela rose surely above all. There is a link, perhaps not fortuitously, although the Mahatma's years in South Africa, his creation there of the political pressure of non-violence, Satyagraha, influenced the non-violent protest tactics that the African National Congress practised until the ferocity of state oppression refused any hope of reform and led to the creation of Umkhonto weSizwe. Gandhi and Mandela were totally distinct from one another in other ways, yet the voice calling upon the conscience of the 20th century to be roused against colonisation, whether manifest as the British possession of India or the whites in apartheid South Africa, came from these two men.

We, in South Africa and the world, have with us as the living touchstone against any desecration of the human spirit, Nelson Mandela. I once wrote that whatever the inhuman horrors of apartheid, we were living in a country where there were still heroes. We had the greatness of Albert Luthuli, Oliver Tambo, Walter Sisulu, Steve Biko, Bram Fischer, Dr Dadoo, Robert Sobukwe, Helen Joseph, in a life-raft roster of the undefeatable beckoning to the possibility of freedom.

We had Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela.

We have him still, carrying the conscience of freedom, now, its fearless enactment to the moral challenges of a new time in human responsibility. For others and ourselves.

And I have the extraordinary honour of placing reverently in your hands, Madiba, Nelson Mandela, the Amnesty International 'Ambassador of Conscience' Award, its tribute to, and deep gratitude of the world for, your greatness, your conscience.

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