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NELSON MANDELA: A LEGACY TRANSCENDING CENTURIES – THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

The attribute of great leadership is the ability at once to follow and to inspire. Its attendant punishment is the loss of the private self: becoming, often by default and sometimes by design, common property.

Some glide in comfort at this challenge of leadership. They ride the wave in perfect harmony with the tide. They indulge themselves in the glory of power and authority. Thus myths are created around them.

Others suffer the discomfort of pretence. Thus they seek artificially to create their own myths.

Individual styles of leadership over millennia have reflected the tricky balance between these extremes. Where perfect balance in the middle is attained, a good leader emerges, able to take a nation to new heights but not necessarily remarkable in the public consciousness as “a maker of history”.

The mark of greatness is imbalance, imperfection and unique remarkability.

The 20th Century has spawned many leaders, across political divides, who will remain household names deep into future millennia. Various, they straddled the extremes of comfort and discomfort in leadership, and by commission or omission, myths emerged around them. Vladimir Lenin, Sir Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, Mao Ze Dong, Mahatma Gandhi, Ho Chi Minh, Che Guevarra, Nkwame Nkurumah, JF Kennedy, Abdel Nasser and Martin Luther King stand out among them.

Where does Nelson Mandela fit among all these? As with a few of them, he was revered and yet not feared. He was loved and adored, at times and uniquely, precisely for his weaknesses.

The myth endured to the very end; and by dint of mass adulation, Nelson Mandela died a Saint in ripe old age.

With him, it was not what could have been, nor what initially was, but what endured to the very end: that imposing young man of peasant stock; that petulant and defiant activist in whom the African National Congress' (ANC) collective of young leaders of the 1940s saw qualities of leadership they honed in; that famous prisoner wallowing in the fortunate glory of a misfortune; that negotiator and reconciler; that manager of a vexed transition; and that retiree held in even greater awe...

Some of us had agonised about the implications, for a public figure, of all the terrible things that come with old age: the fluffed lines, the anecdotes repeated word for word to the same audience, the retreating short-term memory, the danger of megalomania – all legendary stuff among those who cling to public office, especially in old age.

And so we come back to the pensioner's words in June 2004 when he finally somewhat 'retired from semi-retirement': "...I had so little opportunity for reading, thinking and quiet reflection after my release". More for what was not said, that beyond a certain line, the ability to satisfy the call of public duty does wane, and Mandela himself recognised this and sought quiet solitude in the comfort, at last, of private space!

It would be a gross oversimplification to assert that glorious moments of history spawn leaders of good hue; and moments in which the masses descend into a trance of self-destruction give birth to tyrants.

Leaders who straddle both these extremes of mass consciousness and display a quality that gives meaning to the word, "humanity", are bound to stand head and shoulders above their peers.

Nelson Mandela lived through moments that lent themselves to mass glory and mass hysteria: for instance, the triumph of 1994 on the one hand; and on the other, Sharpeville, Soweto and Boipatong which lent themselves to the temptation: let mass slaughter beget mass slaughter!

At each turn, greatness shone through. It spoke as much to fastidiousness about the outcome as to the methods used to achieve it.

Mandela walked the era of greats, so created by the circumstances of history: the commanders in a World War, the guerrilla leaders in liberation struggles, the symbols of national independence, the Cold Warriors...

But if history does make leaders, how then do we explain the fact that none of these circumstances quite expressed themselves in any pronounced form in the South African struggle and in Mandela's life?

Perhaps it is from the confluence of the things humane that the South African struggle itself spawned or borrowed – such as non-racialism, non-sexism, concern for the totality of the human condition, environmental issues and so on – that Mandela derived his unassailable greatness. These are the things his people strive to represent; things his movement has championed; things that the world embraces as it struggles to discover its humanity.

He stands out as having been the last to bury the corpse of European colonial domination in Africa; the first to tower the world during geo-political re-alignments that characterised the end of the Cold War; the symbol of an emergent democratic and inclusive statehood in an era of rising social movements; a global icon in an epoch of globalisation.

Prose has been penned and dirges composed about his role in reconciling a divided nation. Dare we not pose the question, though, whether this has not been remoulded and oversimplified into the fluff of magic and miracle? For contained in the attributes he embedded in the South African psyche were the Gandhian quality for simple humaneness; the Leninist tact in managing a revolutionary moment of political authority changing hands; and a Kennedian touch in making it look so eminently reasonable. And lest we forget, to him it was solemn duty to couple 'nation-building and reconciliation' with 'reconstruction and development'.

Mandela was feted by Kings and Queens. Presidents, Prime Ministers and Executives of conglomerates valued the content of exchanges with him as much as the halo of personal association. Yet what under-girded the reverence of the powerful was the outpouring of adulation by ordinary people – young and old, men and women, black and white in all countries of the world – to whom he seemed by his mere presence to answer the question: what is life all about!

To what extent the nebulous tentativeness of the cause of social justice in the era of globalisation impacted on his portrayal and perhaps his own thinking is a matter of conjecture.

But what we can say with confidence is that Mandela was a representative of a humane order yet to be born; and he in turn grew in stature by personally embracing that cause to which the 21st Century cannot but dedicate itself, including the promotion of children's true happiness and the fight against HIV and AIDS. He is the archetypical symbol of unfinished business, a child of the 20th century and a grandfather of the 21st.

Perhaps Mandela was a born leader. Was he born to be a good leader, though?

It was both his character and the vagaries of fate that conspired to bequeath to our society and to the world the icon. In his youth, he drank more gustily than most from the tales of woe and heroism of oral history and missionary education. He escaped the drudgery of rural life in search of life's adventures in the urban metropolis.

For his leadership qualities, he could easily have landed at the head of the notorious criminal

gangs of Alexandra township or cowering pitifully as a stooge in apartheid's Bantustan toy governments. But upbringing and fate placed him in the socially-conscious and passionate group of the young Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo, Anton Lembede, Yusuf Dadoo, Lillian Ngoyi, Ashby P Mda, Bram Fischer, Helen Joseph and others.

These leaders saw in Mandela that fine blend of ambition, empathy for the underdog, pride, arrogance, magnetism and discipline. Mandela has mused about how the patience and intellectualism of the Sisulus and Tambos sometimes irritated him. From their perspective, what they saw in him was the ability to translate the fine art of theory into practical programmes for national emancipation.

In essence, he was a great leader because he was a great follower. It does not diminish his stature to reveal that the greatest of his speeches, including at the Rivonia Trial, on the day of his release in 1990, the Presidential inauguration in 1994 and subsequent opening of the first democratic parliament, the 1994 OAU Summit, the Joint Houses of Parliament of the UK in 1996, and the US Congress in 1994, were the product of collective effort.

And yet you had to listen to him speak *ex tempore* about such issues of the heart as what the struggle meant to him and his family, how he decided to initiate negotiations from his prison cell and on the meaning of personal integrity, that tears would easily roll down your cheeks.

Among the seminal spontaneous ones is his speech live on TV at the CODESA talks in 1991 when he decided to respond in very strong terms to a chiding by then President FW de Klerk, on the issue of armed struggle. Spontaneous mass celebrations erupted in Soweto and townships across the country immediately after the speech. In the order of things, many identify that moment as the tipping of psychological self-assertion in mass consciousness among Black South Africans, just as the speech on Chris Hani's assassination was the tipping of sovereign authority. And, in both instances, Mandela knew this.

If some of his peers in the leadership of the ANC were theoreticians and strategists, Mandela was a tactician *par excellence*. He knew how to gauge and respond to the mood of the people and to important turning points in history, but to do so in a responsible fashion.

If his comrades were experts in outlining broad responses to particular circumstances, he was the paragon of organisation. The ANC street-level organisational M-Plan of the 1950s, to quote one example, bore the hallmarks of Mandela the organiser.

Then there is his legendary stoicism about which reams have been written.

A minor personal experience was an instance on a trip from Durban to Pretoria sometime in 1994 when the Presidential plane suddenly lost pressure and the oxygen masks popped out. The pilots announced their assurances about everything being under control, that we had to fly low, and so on and so on.

Most of us went ashen and all kinds of images started to float in our heads about life and death. Mandela was his inscrutable self, continuing with a conversation that, gripped by terror, the few of us seating in the front seats could hear but nary a word of which we can today remember.

It is because of a combination of all these attributes that, in this era of exalted public relations and cultivation of personal image, Mandela comfortably and consistently performed with distinction, with virtually no professional help.

If there is anything that marks the measure of Mandela's genius, it was his mastery of human relations. Names of acquaintances and distant associates rolled off his lips with ease. His expression of affection and empathy were truly genuine. From him, one felt the sense of being valued and the confidence of valuing oneself.

In this regard, he was a master-politician. He knew what pleases individuals and communities and how to knead that into positive energy. He could as easily help salve a troubled conscience as he would rebuke when the need arose. And when his anger boiled over, he could inflict pain with devastating effect.

Part of the public persona, it is true, was a product of his own self-discipline. He was quick to arrest within himself the folly of destructive fury. That he hardly put a foot wrong was a product as much of his ability to take collective advice, as it was a consequence of careful self-grooming. He was conscious of the qualities that made him tower above the rest, and he systematically strove to satisfy public expectations.

Greatness in leadership contains within it the punishment of isolation. The comfort of an ear to listen and a shoulder to unload private feelings stand any individual no matter how great in good stead. Thus leaders such as these suffer personal pain more than others because the public and the private so fuse that the façade of calm has to be maintained even in absolutely stressful circumstances.

The tragedy of his personal life aside, what we can celebrate is that he found even more happiness in his last years, and he savoured it to the full. Above all, there was the community – the people of South Africa and the ANC – which nurtured him, because it knew he had become common property, the symbol of its very self.

And so the body of staid gait and mien lies motionless, still towering in the imagery but prostrate and hapless in the stillness of deathly silence. It exudes the permanent injunction for us to do good, to be honest, to be ethical... in the knowledge that, in his own words, saints are sinners who keep trying.

By dint of circumstance, Nelson Mandela fought no major wars. By design of principle, he enjoyed no exaltations of a conqueror. But there, in the humane bequest of unfinished business

for a new century resides the greatness of Madiba. His fame and power are founded on their own strength, the strength of humanity searching for a better life.

Behold, a Black Star has risen, and it continues to rise. And a continent can, at last, once more shed its own light.

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