The Nelson Mandela I knew and loved

by Peter Storey
December 12, 2013

Mandela in 2008. Some rights reserved by South Africa The Good News.

I met Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela 50 years ago this year in his jail cell on Robben Island. I was a newly ordained part-time chaplain to the prison there. He was with other Rivonia Trialists, who were named for the farm in Rivonia, outside Johannesburg, where they had been arrested on July 11, 1963. Mandela was not with them in Rivonia; he was already serving a five-year sentence for leaving the country illegally, and was tried with the Rivonia Trialists because documents incriminating him were found at the farm.

The Trialists had been flown secretly to Robben Island after being sentenced to imprisonment for the rest of their natural lives for the crime of “sabotage.” The guards were very edgy about their new prisoners, and determined to show these “terrorists” how tough they were. Sunday, when I visited, was their one day off, but it was spent in total lockdown. I was not allowed to gather them for a normal service of worship, but had to walk up and down the hallway between their cells, trying to

make eye contact with each occupant as I passed. All but one member of the small group had experienced mission-school education, and they were at home with Christian worship. Preaching under these circumstances was tough, but I tried to leave each one with a word of encouragement.

Their singing, however, couldn't be bound by iron bars—and the great hymns of the church, well-known to them, echoed powerfully through the hallways, their melodies often taken up by prisoners in other cell blocks. My memories of Nelson Mandela were of a strong, vital person in the prime of his manhood, all strength and contained energy. He had a ready smile and clearly appreciated the dilemma of a young minister trying, under the cold eyes of the guards, to bring a moment of humanity into this desolate place. Only once, on a very cold day, was I able to persuade a guard to let the group out into the prison yard, where we gathered in a sunny spot. That day I changed my text to, "If the Son sets you free, you are free indeed," letting them choose how to spell Son/sun. They enjoyed the joke. The guards did not.

Given these limitations, I have often felt embarrassed being introduced as "'Mandela's prison chaplain." Yet being confined to proclaiming nothing other than the healing, strengthening words of scripture, the prayers of the church and the songs of the faith, required putting one's trust entirely in the power of the gospel—nothing else. A number of those in the Rivonia group, including Madiba (Mandela's traditional Xhosa clan name), told me later how much that ministry and the ministry of my successors (my security clearance was abruptly withdrawn after a few months) meant to them. Ahmed Kathrada, one of the only three Rivonia Trialists still living—and the only Muslim in the group—also shared how in those early horror days on Robben Island, that brief moment of humanity helped them all.

It was 20 years later when I next heard from Madiba. Still in prison, he used one of his precious letter-writing privileges (initially one letter every six months and later slightly relaxed) to congratulate me on being elected to lead the Methodist Church in Southern Africa, and to express his appreciation for the care the church had shown to him through its chaplains, and shown to Winnie his spouse in her banishment and suffering at the hands of the "system." It was in that letter that he referred to his first encounter with the Central Methodist Church in Johannesburg in the 1940s, when he was struck by the message outside: "The greatest glory in living is not in never falling, but in rising every time you fall." That message, he wrote with typical understatement, "tended to steel a person against the host of traumas he was to

experience in later years.”

After his release our paths crossed often. I guess the most special personal occasions were when I shared a platform with him in 1993 at the centenary of Gandhi’s arrival in South Africa and on the first Freedom Day in 1995, when I presented him with a sculpture forged out of melted-down guns collected by Gunfree South Africa. On both occasions we had some laughs about this proud former commander of the ANC underground army who had become peacemaker, and these two determinedly nonviolent moments.

At the massive memorial service on December 10, World Methodist Council General Secretary Ivan Abrahams, himself a former South African Methodist leader, expressed our feelings in one simple sentence: “We are gathered here not so much by grief as by love.” The Mandela I knew became beloved by me not so much for his grand gestures, although he was a master at political theater, but for the lesser known acts that revealed a truly human genius for *ubuntu*—the awareness that his life was inextricably bound up with the lives of all his fellow human beings, including his enemies. He was the great includer; nothing was too much trouble if he could cajole or charm another opponent into friendship.

This was a man who would not bend an inch in his determination to win freedom for his people, nor bow to the cruelty of his prison guards—yet who said to his comrades as soon as they arrived on the island, “Chaps, these Afrikaners may be brutal, but they are human beings. We need to understand them and touch the human being inside them, and win them.” And he did.

On behalf of the one Muslim among them, he badgered the prison authorities literally for years (six, I believe) until they yielded and granted permission for Ahmed Kathrada to walk the 50 yards outside the prison doors to pray in the *Kramat* (a holy place commemorating an 18th-century Muslim Imam exiled to the island by the colonial Dutch) there. The whole Rivonia group accompanied him.

And when his former spouse Winnie shamed the Mandela name with her involvement in the kidnapping of some young men in Soweto and the killing of one of them, he struggled to understand the role of his church in the drama and criticized our actions from his prison cell. But then, when we managed to send him a true record of what had happened, Mandela sent a personal apology to us requesting “forgiveness for having misjudged you.”

In his first parliamentary session as president, he announced that nursing mothers and children under six would receive free health care, “whatever had to be done to pay for it.”

There was the time that Mandela invited the spouses and widows of former white presidents and prime ministers to tea. Then he heard that Betsy Verwoerd, the widow of Hendrik Verwoerd, the most virulent racist of them all, had “diplomatic flu.” He decided to surprise her in her whites-only community, and arrived in his helicopter and knocked on her door. Later she appeared with him in a smiling photograph. When told by his staff that the parliamentary office building would no longer be named after Betsy’s husband, Mandela suggested they hold off until she had passed on. “There is no need to hurt her unnecessarily,” he said. “It can wait.”

Another time one of his personal armed bodyguards was removed for having links to a far right-wing racist group. Mandela said, “I don’t think we should do that. He is young and immature and it will destroy him. Let’s give him another chance.”

When we presented him with our list of nominated Truth Commissioners so he could make the final cut, Mandela asked, “Have we sufficient women on the list? We must have gender equity.” And when we told him that we had been able to find only one candidate of integrity from strife-torn KwaZulu Natal, he disregarded the process and appointed a Methodist bishop from the region, knowing that unless KZN was better represented, the Truth Commission would have no traction there.

When I led a small delegation to Pretoria to meet with Mandela about the crisis of guns and killing going on in 1994, he came shuffling into the grand conference room next to his presidential office wearing an old pair of slippers. He sat down and said, “I’m tired, Peter. It’s been a hard day. You chair the meeting please,” and he closed his eyes. He wasn’t asleep, however; at some point he looked up from the list of participating religious groups and asked, “Where are the Dutch Reformed Churches?” I said that it had been very difficult to persuade them to support the gun hand-in campaign. “Well,” he said, “If I’m to be patron of this, you need to get them in.”

He asked me to write a speech he was to give to a church conference. Then, wherever I referenced the “role of the churches” in the liberation struggle or in leading protests or caring for victims, he struck out the word “churches” and inserted the words “faith communities” in order to be more inclusive of other faiths

in the diverse nation he now governed.

Mandela never tried to hide his feet of clay. He lived comfortably in his skin and never lost an opportunity to deprecate his own accomplishments and lightly deflect praise to others. What a human being!

> How blest are those of a gentle spirit . . .
>
> > How blest are those who hunger and thirst to see right prevail . . .
> >
> > > How blest are those who show mercy . . .
> > >
> > > > How blest are the peacemakers . . .
> > > >
> > > > > How blest are those who have suffered persecution for the cause of right . . .

I am grateful that God made Nelson Mandela, purified him in suffering and gave him to our divided land to help us become the kind of people we were meant to be. And I am grateful that he rests now.

He always said the future was in our hands. Now it is.