

A World and a Word without Mandela

Erik Doxtader

Bound by grief and unsteady, we inhabit a world that is now missing a center of its own gravity.

In the next days and weeks, millions upon millions of people will pause to reflect on Nelson Mandela's life and mourn his death. I will be one of them. Around the globe, praises will be sung for the father of South Africa's democracy. We will remember the revolutionary leader of a movement who stood up in a Pretoria courtroom in 1964 and delivered a "speech from the dock" that challenged the law of apartheid with an account of justice that was as personal as it was universal. We will celebrate a man whose spirit never succumbed to the bitterness that might well have followed decades of imprisonment and who worked tirelessly to transform a deeply divided country and indeed a world into a "home for all."

If Mandela's passing is an unspeakable loss, it is all the more important that we remember one of the principles that defined his life – a deep and abiding care for the transformative power of language. As Mandela himself put it in a speech at the 2000 International AIDS conference, "It is never my custom to use words lightly. If twenty-seven years in prison have done anything to us, it was to use the silence of solitude to make us understand how precious words are and how real speech is in its impact upon the way people live or die."

Words can make all the difference – if we let them, if we stop mistaking their power as a means of control.

As a young lawyer and leader of the African National Congress Youth League, Mandela pledged himself to creating a country in which all citizens could express themselves freely. Imprisoned on Robben Island after his conviction for sabotage, Mandela wrote an autobiography – *A Long Walk to Freedom* – that fueled the flame of struggle and helped mobilize international outcry against apartheid's crime against humanity. In the late 1980's, at the risk of being branded a traitor by his comrades, he undertook secret talks with government officials in the name of finding the common ground needed to end apartheid. After his release in 1990, he led the "talks about talk" that gave way to South Africa's negotiated revolution, a transition to non-racial democracy that surprised and inspired the world, not least as it demonstrated that revolution can unfold through words of reconciliation.

We live in a world that too often takes the freedom of speech for granted at the same time that it tempts us to distrust complex oratory and dismiss the value of simple expressions. Mandela refused these presumptions. To listen to Mandela, to hear him fully, is to grasp the powerful art of saying what needs to be said and saying it in a manner that strengthens the very fabric of the human condition.

What worlds can we make when we learn that words constitute some of our most profound deeds? What change can occur when we recognize that our own principles are ethical only as they allow us to still our voice and genuinely listen to what we may not care to hear? What power can we create when we grasp that violence does not begin with arguments but when our capacity to disagree is subverted by those unwilling to change their minds? What hope is created as we struggle to find and fashion the words between us, the words that disclose a common bond and move us to discover new ways of living together?

From Cape Town to Cairo to Columbia, these are the questions that Nelson Mandela has bequeathed to us – all of us. It is not enough to say that Mandela will live on through the traces of his voice and the record of his words. We abide with him only as we learn to speak beyond ourselves, for a world that awaits.

Enkosi, Madiba. Hamba kahle. Thank you, Mandela. Go well.

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