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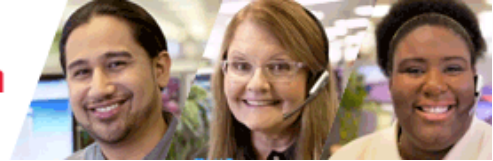
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SOUTH AFRICA

Nelson Mandela, 1918–2013: Remembering an Icon of Freedom

TIME's former managing editor writes about the man he knew — a prisoner turned peacemaker who carried South Africa out of apartheid and changed the world

By [Richard Stengel](#) | Dec. 05, 2013 | [332 Comments](#)

Nelson Mandela was always uncomfortable talking about his own death. But not because he was afraid or in doubt. He was uncomfortable because he understood that people wanted him to offer homilies about death and he had none to give. He was an utterly unsentimental man. I once asked him about his mortality while we were out walking one morning in the Transkei, the remote area of South Africa where he was born. He looked around at the green and tranquil landscape and said something about how he would be joining his “ancestors.” “Men come and men go,” he later said. “I have come and I will go when my time comes.” And he seemed satisfied by that. I never once heard him mention God or heaven or any kind of afterlife. Nelson Mandela believed in justice in this lifetime.

It was January 1993, and I was working with him on his autobiography. We had set out that morning from the home near Qunu, the village of his father, that Mandela had built after he was let out of prison. He had once said to me that every man should have a house in sight of where he was born. Much of Mandela’s belief system came from his youth in the Xhosa tribe and being raised by a local Thembu King after his own father died. As a boy, he lived in a rondavel — a grass hut — with a dirt floor. He learned to be a shepherd. He fetched water from the spring. He excelled at stick fighting with the other boys. He sat at the feet of old men who told him stories of the brave African princes who ruled South Africa before the coming of the white man. The first time he shook the hand of a white man was when he went off to boarding school. Eventually, little Rolihlahla Mandela would become Nelson Mandela and get a proper Methodist education, but for all his worldliness and his legal training, much of his wisdom and common sense — and joy — came from what he had learned as a young boy in the Transkei.

Mandela might have been a more sentimental man if so much had not been taken away from him. His freedom. His ability to choose the path of his life. His eldest son. Two great-grandchildren. Nothing in his life was permanent except the oppression he and his people were under. And everything he might have had he sacrificed to achieve the freedom of his people. But all the crude jailers, tiny cells and bumptious white apartheid leaders could not take away his pride, his dignity and his sense of justice. Even when he had to strip and be hosed down when he first entered Robben Island, he stood straight and did not complain. He refused to be intimidated in any circumstance. I remember interviewing Eddie Daniels, a 5-ft. 3-in. mixed-race freedom fighter who was in cell block B with Mandela on the island; Eddie recalled how anytime he felt demoralized, he would just have to see the 6-ft. 2-in. Mandela walking tall through the courtyard and he would feel revived. Eddie wept as he told me how when he fell ill, Mandela — “Nelson Mandela, my leader!” — came into his cell and crouched down to wash out his pail of vomit and blood and excrement.

I always thought that in a free and nonracial South Africa, Mandela would have been a small-town lawyer, content to be a local grandee. This great, historic revolutionary was in many ways a natural conservative. He did not believe in change for change's sake. But one thing turned him into a revolutionary, and that was the pernicious system of racial oppression he experienced as a young man in Johannesburg. When people spat on him in buses, when shopkeepers turned him away, when whites treated him as if he could not read or write, that changed him irrevocably. For deep in his bones was a basic sense of fairness: he simply could not abide injustice. If he, Nelson Mandela, the son of a chief, tall, handsome and educated, could be treated as subhuman, then what about the millions who had nothing like his advantages? "That is not right," he would sometimes say to me about something as mundane as a plane flight's being canceled or as large as a world leader's policies, but that simple phrase — that is not right — underlay everything he did, everything he sacrificed for and everything he accomplished.

I saw him a handful of times over the past few years. He was much diminished. The extraordinary memory that could recall a particular dish at a dinner 60 years before was now such that he often did not recognize people he had known almost that long. But his pride and his regal bearing never left him. When he "retired from his retirement" (as he put it in 2004), I thought it was simply because he couldn't bear not remembering familiar things and he could not bear people seeing him in a way that did not live up to their expectations. He wanted people to see Nelson Mandela, and he was no longer the Nelson Mandela they wanted to see.

In many ways, the image of Nelson Mandela has become a kind of fairy tale: he is the last noble man, a figure of heroic achievement. Indeed, his life has followed the narrative of the archetypal hero, of great suffering followed by redemption. But as he said to me and to many others over the years, "I am not a saint." And he wasn't. As a young revolutionary, he was fiery and rowdy. He originally wanted to exclude Indians and communists from the freedom struggle. He was the founder of Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation), the military wing of the African National Congress, and was considered South Africa's No. 1. terrorist in the 1950s. He admired Gandhi, who started his own freedom struggle in South Africa in the 1890s, but as he explained to me, he regarded nonviolence as a tactic, not a principle. If it was the most successful means to the freedom of his people, he would embrace it. If it was not, he would abandon it. And he did. But like Gandhi, like Lincoln, like Churchill, he was doggedly, obstinately right about one overarching thing, and he never lost sight of that.

Prison was the crucible that formed the Mandela we know. The man who went into prison in 1962 was hotheaded and easily stung. The man who walked out into the sunshine of the mall in Cape Town 27 years later was measured, even serene. It was a hard-won moderation. In prison, he learned to control his anger. He had no choice. And he came to understand that if he was ever to achieve that free and nonracial South Africa of his dreams, he would have to come to terms with his oppressors. He would have to forgive them. After I asked him many times during our weeks and months of conversation what was different about the man who came out of prison compared with the man who went in, he finally sighed and then said simply, "I came out mature."

His greatest achievement is surely the creation of a democratic, nonracial South Africa and preventing that beautiful country from falling into a terrible, bloody civil war. Several years after I finished working with him on *Long Walk to Freedom*, he told me that he wanted to write another book, about how close South Africa had been to a race war. I was with him when he got the news that black South African leader Chris Hani was assassinated, probably the closest the country came to going to war. He was preternaturally calm, and after making plans to go to Johannesburg to speak to the nation, he methodically finished eating his breakfast. To prevent that civil war, he had to use all the skills in his head and his heart: he had to demonstrate rocklike strength to the Afrikaner leaders with whom he was negotiating but also show that he was not out for revenge. And he had to show his people that he was not compromising with the enemy. This was an incredibly delicate line to walk — and from the outside, he seemed to do it with grace. But it took its toll.

And because he was not a saint, he had his share of bitterness. He famously said, "The struggle is my life," but his life was also a struggle. This man who loved children spent 27 years without holding a baby. Before he went to prison, he lived underground and was unable to be the father and the husband he wanted to be. I remember his telling me that when he was being pursued by thousands of police, he secretly went to tuck his son into bed. His son asked why he couldn't be with him every night, and Mandela told him that

millions of other South African children needed him too. So many people have said to me over the years, It's amazing that he was not bitter. I've always smiled at that. With enormous self-control, he learned to hide his bitterness.

And then, after he forged this new South Africa, won the first democratic election in the country's history and began to redress the wrongs done to his people, he walked away from it. He became the rarest thing in African history, a one-term President who chose not to run for office again. Like George Washington, he understood that every step he made would be a template for others to follow. He could have been President for life, but he knew that for democracy to rule, he could not. Two democratic elections have followed his presidency, and if the men who have succeeded him have not been his equal, well, that too is democracy. He was a large man in every way. His legacy is that he expanded human freedom. He was tolerant of everything but intolerance. He deserves to rest in peace.

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