

The Spirituality of Nelson Mandela

Nelson Mandela died on December 5, 2013, at the age of 95, revered around the world as the first democratically elected president of South Africa and one of the great liberators of the twentieth century. At his December 10th memorial service held in the Johannesburg soccer stadium, speakers eulogized him as a giant of history and a global symbol of reconciliation. As a result of extensive media coverage, the broad outline of his public story is now more familiar: born July 18, 1918, in Mvezo, South Africa; educated as a lawyer; joined the African National Congress (ANC) political party and actively opposed the discriminatory apartheid policies of the white minority; arrested in 1962, convicted of conspiring to overthrow the government, and sentenced to life imprisonment; served 27 years, mostly at the infamous Robben Island Prison; released in 1990; negotiated with President F.W. de Klerk for the abolition of apartheid and free elections; received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993; elected the first black president of South Africa in 1994; included various parties in his cabinet; promulgated a new constitution ending all vestiges of apartheid; declined to run for a second term and became an elder statesman advocating for justice and peace until his death in 2013. Much of this story can be found in *Mandela: The Authorized Biography*, by Anthony Sampson, published in 1999. We get a better sense of the man, however, in Mandela's engrossing autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*, which ends with his inauguration as president, and in his *Conversations with Myself*, a carefully edited collection of his writings and talks, published in 2010.

In a 1975 letter to his wife Winnie, Mandela spoke explicitly about the "spiritual life." He pointed out that "internal factors" are more important in judging our "development as a human being" than external factors like social position, influence, popularity, wealth and education. The foundation of the spiritual life consists of virtues "within easy reach of every soul," including "honesty, sincerity, simplicity, humility, pure generosity, absence of vanity, readiness to serve others." Spiritual development demands "serious introspection" and regular meditation that enables us to know ourselves with our virtues and vices. Nelson concluded his letter to Winnie with the reminder that: "a saint is a sinner who keeps on trying."

The spirituality of Nelson Mandela centered on his dominant passion to abolish the dehumanizing apartheid system and to establish a multiracial democracy, where various racial and ethnic groups could flourish. At times, Mandela expressed this compelling passion in terms of a struggle for freedom. At the end of *Long Walk to Freedom*, he wrote: "It was this desire for the freedom of my people to live their lives with dignity and self-respect that animated my life, that transformed a frightened young man into a bold one, that drove a law-abiding attorney to become a criminal, that turned a family-loving husband into a man without a home, that forced a life-loving man to live like a monk." During his "long and lonely" years in prison, his passion for the liberation of his people expanded, becoming "a hunger for the freedom of all people, white and black." He came to see "that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed." A person who dehumanizes another is "a prisoner of hatred" and is "locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness." When Mandela walked out of prison and later assumed the presidency of South Africa, he maintained his conviction that his mission was "to liberate the oppressed and the oppressor both."

Throughout his whole life as an activist, Mandela's passion for personal freedom and democratic rule was deep, enduring and uncompromising. During his 1964 Rivonia trial, Mandela, while awaiting a possible death sentence, gave an impassioned four-hour speech reported around the world that concluded: "I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if need be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die." Mandela's spirituality was focused on a noble cause that constantly engaged his whole being.

Mandela's commitment to his people made it difficult to maintain a healthy relationship to his family, which he cherished. His first wife, Evelyn, strenuously opposed his political activism, leading to their divorce. His five year old son once asked his mother, "Where does Daddy live?" because his father left home so early and arrived home so late. Serving a life sentence in prison, he could not attend the funeral of his oldest son, Thembi, who died at age 25 in an automobile accident, nor could he care for his aging mother during her terminal illness. Concerns for his family moved Mandela, as a young husband and father, to ask himself whether commitment to the cause ever justified neglect of family and whether politics was "merely a pretext" for shirking family responsibilities. After emerging from prison, Mandela longed to return to ordinary family life, but his public popularity made that impossible. He never regretted his commitment to the struggle, but still felt sadness and guilt that he inflicted such pain on his family. His spiritual journey as a freedom fighter placed him in this situation and he was able to accept the inevitable tension.

Regular physical exercise was an important part of Mandela's spiritual regimen throughout most of his life. As a young man in Johannesburg he took up boxing, fighting in the heavyweight division. After entering politics, he typically worked out for an hour and a half in the evening as a way of dealing with stress, getting his mind off the struggle, and improving his physical and mental wellbeing. Even in his tiny prison cell on Robben Island, he ran in place for 45 minutes and did vigorous calisthenics at least four days a week. He believed "exercise is not only a key to physical health but to peace of mind," and, therefore, made physical training "one of the inflexible disciplines" of his life. Mandela reminds us that an effective spiritual regimen must attend to the body as well as the soul.

Mandela's daily meditation had a number of healthy effects. It sharpened his intuitive sense that human nature has an essential goodness. He had a remarkable capacity to detect good qualities in people, even in prison guards who treated him harshly. His prison experience, illumined by personal reflection, reinforced his conviction that "all men, even the most seemingly cold-blooded, have a core of decency, and that if their heart is touched, they are capable of changing." His habit of self-examination also enabled him to detect blind spots in his own consciousness. While heading the militant wing of the African National Congress, he traveled to other African countries seeking support for their struggle. On one occasion when boarding a plane, he noticed that the pilot was black and instinctively began to worry about the safety of the plane. That experience reminded him of the insidious and subtle power of apartheid to produce a false consciousness that accepted black inferiority. Mandela had a deep interior life, nourished by regular meditation, that sharpened his awareness of both good and evil forces in the world.

Mandela's spirituality was rooted in his Christian faith. He was baptized in the Methodist faith and educated in religious schools. Responding to persistent claims that he was really an atheistic Communist, he explicitly asserted on more than one occasion that he was "a Christian and had always been a Christian." He went to church services every Sunday while in his island prison. He used Gospel stories to interpret his own experience: for example, Jesus cleansing the Temple served to justify a more aggressive approach against apartheid, and the trial of Jesus shed light on his own trial condemning him to life imprisonment. In a 1992 speech to a Conference of the Zionist Christian Church, Mandela spoke of Easter as marking "the victory of the forces of life over death, of hope over despair." He celebrated "the resurrected Messiah who without arms, without soldiers, without police and covert special forces, without hit squads or bands of vigilantes, overcame the mightiest state during his time." Denouncing the "ugly sin" called apartheid, he insisted that "all people are created in the image of the Creator," and prayed for "reconciliation among all the people of South Africa." Concluding on a note of hope, he prayed that our risen Messiah would shine on his fellow Christians. Judging from this talk, we could describe the spirituality of Mandela as Christ-centered and hope-filled.

Mandela saw clearly the ambivalence built into religious traditions. He knew all too well how "religion at times provided the basis and even gave legitimization to violent expressions of intolerance and conflict." On the other hand, religious institutions made education available for black South Africans including himself, while the white minority government provided nothing. The world religions gave hope to political prisoners like himself, provided assistance for their children, and played a role in challenging the apartheid system. Recognizing the pervasive power of religious traditions, he counted on their help in creating a more just and equitable society. Mandela's spirituality did not divorce itself from religion, but saw the world religions as "forces of spirituality and innate goodness" and as "partners" in meeting "the challenges of poverty, alienation, the abuse of women and children, and the destructive disregard for our natural environment."

After Mandela emerged from prison, he extended the hand of friendship to his persecutors and offered bold plans for reconciliation. This proved to be a politically wise strategy that made possible the transition to a multiracial democratic society. Mandela, ever the master of symbolic gesture, invited some of his former jailers to sit up front for his inauguration as president. It seems that his many acts of forgiveness and reconciliation were not only politically shrewd, but were also genuine expressions of his Christian sensibilities and converted heart. He alluded to his conversion in this simple statement: "In prison, my anger towards whites decreased, but my hatred for the system grew." Although Mandela did not elaborate on the dynamics of this development, eyes of faith can detect in his spirituality of forgiveness a triumph of divine grace over the common human temptation to harbor resentment and seek revenge. Furthermore, his remarkable political achievements suggest the pragmatic power of Christ's teaching on forgiveness and reconciliation.

Nelson Mandela, liberator of black and white South Africa, lived a reflective spirituality of discipline, discernment, fortitude, inclusion, forgiveness and reconciliation that carries a significance beyond his particular situation. He now serves as an enduring symbol of a rich and dynamic spirituality with universal significance for our conflicted world.

