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Nelson Mandela - Inspiration

Nelson Mandela's imminent passing leaves a huge hole in the universe, as though a grand powerful oak tree has fallen in the forest. Yet he has not gone from us, he is with us still. Everyone who was inspired by his example carries "Madiba" into the present and future. His extraordinary life gave meaning to everyone's life journey. After prison, persecution and suffering, he was a man without bitterness. His astute and discerning leadership skills provided the ability to reconcile with people who persecuted him. He astonished both his admirers and his antagonists with this rare streak of equanimity.

An exercise for our times is provided by Rick Stengel, who worked with Mandela on "Long Walk to Freedom" (1994). When beset with life's difficulties and cruel curve balls Stengel would always ask himself "What would Nelson Mandela do?" This mantra is one to do when facing adversity - to find compassion in the face of anger and fear. Mandela gave to the world the meaning of "Ubuntu" - a person is a person because of other people. This is the essence of interbeing and non-discrimination. Nelson Mandela on his release from prison, never once parted ways from his dignity, never gave in to despair and bitterness no

matter what crisis faced him. He provided an example during his life that will perhaps be even more meaningful in his death.

His message to all South Africans was about reconciliation, renewal and transformation. He stood as a true parent to everyone - black, Indian, white, mixed bloods - and was an inspiration to the world. In the twenty-seven years Mandela spent in prison, the connection between truth, ethics and leadership became very clear to him as he matured as a skilful and astute leader. There is no political leader like him in the modern world and he inspired the world with the quality of leadership that brought down the South African system of apartheid. He forgave his oppressors because he knew he would be destroyed if he did not.

Mandela was the closest thing the world has to a secular saint though his gift was certainly not dharma or religion. It was an astute and skilful use of understanding, compassion and insight. Mandela was a

master tactician and strategist. These qualities were sculpted and refined during his incarceration on Robben Island where he often feared for his life. He endured with great fortitude and emerged as a mature statesman who knew what to do and how to do it. He knew he had to inspire – fellow prisoners, South Africans, the world – and serve as a role model.

“Invictus” is a short poem written in 1875 by the English poet William Henley.

Nelson Mandela kept the poem in his prison cell on a scrap of paper during his long incarceration. Invictus is also the title of a 2009 movie directed by Clint Eastwood, starring Morgan Freeman and Matt Damon. Well worth seeing, especially as Morgan Freeman plays the role of Nelson Mandela superbly.

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,

I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.
In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeoning of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.
Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.
It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

Mandela was aware that negotiations with the South African government were not just about principles, but a question of tactics. The most pragmatic of idealists, Mandela saw the world not in simplistic terms but as infinitely nuanced and complex. He led from the back – not entering debate too early – persuading people to do things and think it was to their

credit. He knew to keep his friends close and his rivals and enemies even closer. He studied the language and mentalities of the latter. The past caused him to suffer greatly, but he let it go and did not refer to it publicly. Upon his retirement from politics in South Africa, he championed worldwide awareness for the problem of AIDS in Africa – the forgotten continent. His star shone brightly wherever he spoke and he was a lightning rod for reconciliation between racial and cultural groups in his

own country and worldwide.

At the present time, only a few leaders of such quality exist in political, corporate, bureaucratic and religious domains of life. Leaders who root themselves in a deep spiritual understanding and knowledge of themselves are in a position to bring peace to their nation and to the world, for they will see deeply into the morass of the world’s crises.



Like Mandela they will search for the solutions that balance the existential necessities of life – body with spirit. Their leadership can guide us to happiness for they will have the wisdom to show everyone the pitfalls of ignorance, racism, greed and neglect. The prayer to hold close to our hearts is that Nelson Mandela lives on in the hearts of world leaders.

Pine Gate Newsletter Blurb

Pine Gate is the voice of Ottawa's Pine Gate Mindfulness Community, who practice Engaged Buddhism inspired by Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama and Sulak Sivaraksa. Friends of the community also contribute to the newsletter. Submissions are invited, articles of approximately 700 words, poems and insights that reflect engaged practice and personal experience. The community has many leaders and the newsletter is an organic outcome of collective insight. Effortlessly it appears. The Pine Gate Mindfulness Community welcomes old and new members to its regular and special activities.