The Mandela I Knew

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During my incarceration in the same single-cell block in Robben Island Maximum Security Prison with Nelson Rohihlala Mandela between 1977 to 1982 I got to know him intimately and had the advantage of interacting with him on a daily basis.

These were less than ideal conditions, often fraught with the tensions that accompany incarceration, but such hardships provide the opportunity for the best and worst in ourselves to emerge.

The perspicacity of the man was demonstrated the very next day after Aubrey Mokoape, the Late Strini Moodley and I were moved to his B-Section single-cell block from the C-Section isolation block, which was rarely used, save as a punishment and in some instances when specific groups of prisoners were first admitted to the prison after their conviction. Madiba mentioned an incident involving the Late Neville Alexander where the latter was accustomed to use first names which had apparently caused resentment amongst peasant inmates. This was Madiba's way of informing us that he preferred to be called Madiba, although we had used the respectful 'Ntate' (Sesotho/ Setswana for a male elder). He probably foresaw that as we were urban university-student types in our late twenties and early thirties, we could lapse into using first names.

Our respect for him and the older prisoners and our disquiet with using clan/tribal names, resulted in our continued usage of 'Ntate' until it simply became Madiba. Months later, when Zithulele Cindi and Kaborone Sedibe (also my co-accused in the SASO/BPC trial) replaced Aubrey and Strini in the B-Section cell block, Madiba realized that Zithulele as a matter of principle wouldn't use any clan/tribal names. Madiba deftly resorted to calling him 'Ou-Maat', thus opening the door for Zithulele to reciprocate by calling Madiba 'Ou-Maat'. Indeed, when certain Stalinists within the African National Congress (ANC) objected to Madiba fermenting 'puzamandla' (a protein supplement that was given to black African prisoners) to have with his 'mealie pap' porridge each morning, Zithulele - who was beyond the Stalinists' rein - was the source of Madiba's fermented breakfast, which he clearly enjoyed.

The generational and political gaps were obvious and it was much easier to overcome the latter. We naturally accorded Madiba and the older comrades the respect that we were wont to do our elders, which was part of our upbringing, and indicated to them the many ways in which we perceived the world differently, which Madiba and many of the older leadership acknowledged.

The political differences were much more difficult to resolve. The source of tension was the post-June 1976 aftermath which resulted in the largest influx of political prisoners in the history of Robben Island. This portended a ripe recruitment opportunity for the older sections of the liberation movement which were largely comprised of middle-aged members. Initially, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) attempted to avoid recruitment, because of its inherently divisive nature, but the ANC had no such qualms. Madiba and Walter Sisulu – the ANC Liaison with the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) – decried this situation and only when the BCM had dwindled in size around 1980 did they sign a non-recruitment pact. The PAC, then feeling that it had lost out in the numbers game, baulked at signing.

The major political difference between the ANC and us in the BCM was the ANC's four nations hypothesis; that Africans, Coloureds, Indians and Whites comprised the four spokes that emblazon the ANC wheel. We held that all blacks were oppressed by a phalanx of white racist power and privilege that was apartheid and that our unity as blacks in opposition to apartheid was paramount.

In our first encounter that chilly Spring afternoon in 1977, he also invited us to discuss with him when his exams were over (the SASO/BPC trialists were denied study privileges) the question of when it was appropriate for a liberation organization to open its membership to other races. Our response was that the ANC had taken such a decision at one of its conferences in Tanzania and that our BCM was founded on the testimony of all blacks – Africans, Coloureds and Indians – working together in the same formation to actively oppose apartheid. We never traversed this topic again. In many ways, the ANC in Robben Island was different to the ANC outside those prison walls, as most of the information only reached prison much later. The natural tendency in most people - and politicos are no exception – is to retain understandings that we are familiar with.

Although he initially could not understand the birth and growth of the Black Consciousness Movement, he soon began to appreciate our standpoint and accepted the definition of 'black' as essentially embracing all those who were not white. I never heard him use the pejorative 'non-white' after October 1977. Thus it perhaps is that the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa relies on this generic description of blacks (eschewing the narcissistic and demeaning term 'non-white'), as opposed to privileged whites who had generally enjoyed and benefitted from the previous apartheid system.

We asked for and got a meeting with all the Rivonia trialists a few days later to make known our strong reservations about their impending meeting with George Matanzima and members of the Transkei Cabinet, concerning their possible release as part of the Transkei Homeland Independence celebrations. This we did the following day, amidst intense but cordial questioning. The meeting with Matanzima was aborted, and the Transkei anniversary celebrations went ahead without anyone being released from prison. I often wonder how someone who had been in jail for some 15 years, with the harsh prospect of serving life imprisonment would have felt of black hotheads who put principle above all else.

Madiba's initial impression of me as a radical hothead was probably tempered over time and through various interactions of a social, sport and political nature. We used to share early morning runs around the tennis court, have regular tennis matches, and I even learnt to play dominoes which he loved to play almost daily after lunch. He would often share personal and political information and felt obliged to inform the leadership of the various political organizations of any developments that may impact them. He was adamant that all our organizations had been infiltrated by apartheid agents, which the record confirms. Yet some of his fellow trialists could not accept that Gerhard Ludi (an apartheid agent) had infiltrated Rivonia.

There was no rancor in any of our dealings with Madiba and the older ANC leadership, despite the periods of intense tension caused by the recruitment already alluded to. Our engagements were always cordial and grew to an easy camaraderie and deepening mutual respect. Disagreements on political positions never degenerated into acrimony – which was quite rife with the influx of hundreds of post-June 1976 youth into the rest of Robben Island – but always ended with us agreeing to disagree. This is something that our polity sorely lacks, as is seen in our tense and violence-prone political discourse.

From the time that I first met him in those miserable conditions in prison till the time of his recent illness he exuded a regal demeanor and carriage that infused respect amongst all who came into contact with him. A stickler for custom and pleasantries, he dictated the pace of the ensuing interaction, by careful listening, usually without interruption, and then presenting how he saw the way forward. Very few could refuse to take tea with him, by which time any anger and rancor had dissipated.

When he had made up his mind about a position he was committed to it, despite the howl of protests from others around him. But if you could convince him that his position was flawed, he would not hesitate to acknowledge this. In this way he was able, for example, to move white racists in our midst to accept the inevitability of peaceful transformation in our country. And, he led by example, making extraordinary concessions to reconciliation which, unfortunately, some in our country have taken for granted, ignoring the massive exploitation, oppression and suffering wrought by the erstwhile apartheid system.

During his presidency of our country he was magnanimous to many of his detractors within the ANC who, if they had been in power, may not have been as generous. He went out of his way to accommodate numerous former prisoners from across the political spectrum who owe their positions to his ability to rise above partisanship. Beneficiaries of apartheid owe him a particular debt of gratitude for his reconciliatory approach that has permitted them to continue with their enterprises and positions, in most cases reaping unimaginable profit and personal benefit.

Since his release from prison, his accession to political power as our nascent democracy's Founding President and his retirement, my interactions with him were infrequent. I avoided being intrusive. When we did meet, it was always with great fondness and he had the knack of saying the right thing, whatever the circumstances, especially to those I was with, whether family, friends or colleagues. This quality will endear him to all those people that he has interacted with in South Africa and abroad. Each will have their memories of being touched by a 'saint' in his lifetime. Madiba was the first to disavow that he was a saint, but he was far from being a sinner either. There will be other occasions to dissect his foibles. Now is the time for South Africans to acknowledge the debt of gratitude that we owe to his singular contributions. Pity it is that there will be constant squabbling about his legacy. He deserves better. Unfortunately, greatness in public life is not a guarantee of equanimity in private life.

His ability to relate to all sectors of society, his sense of humor and quiet dignity has enamored him to people all over the world who have had the fortune to interact with him. History will record in detail his role in shaping our country. His lengthy illness has allowed most of us to grieve and accept his passing. It's now time to celebrate his life and times that we have been so much a part of, and ensure that what he and we have struggled for will not be in vain.

Dakar, 6 December 2013