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Speech: Madiba the Man

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Madiba the Man

Preamble

In July 1988, I addressed a mammoth crowd of nearly 250,000 people in London's Hyde Park Corner. It was part of the celebrations of Nelson Mandela's 70th birthday, organized by the International Anti-Apartheid Movement whose President Archbishop Trevor Huddleston had said that should be Madiba's last birthday in prison. Not bad as predictions go for two years later he did walk out of prison a free man. Archbishop Trevor

✗ much loved in Sophiatown in the awful days of apartheid's new viciousness demonstrated by the destruction of Sophiatown with its people dumped in the new South Western townships to be universally know by the acronym

✗ Soweto-~~we~~ had suggested that young people should go on a pilgrimage from their various homes in different parts of the UK to Hyde Park to acclaim this

✗ most famous ^{of} political prisoners. Many in that huge crowd had not been born when Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life in prison in 1963 and yet they came in droves to honour someone they had never met nor heard speak in person.

He had become a legend in his lifetime. He had an aura and evoked almost universal adulation-some such as Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had denounced him as a terrorist and Vice President Dick Cheney, had voted against a Congress Motion calling for his release. But those were

glaring aberrations. Virtually everywhere else he was held in the highest possible regard, almost as a paragon of virtue of impeccable integrity, indeed almost of sanctity. The ANC and the anti-apartheid movement were able to use his extraordinary moral stature to galvanize support for their efforts to bring about fundamental change in South Africa and as a rallying point for their call to release all political prisoners. He helped to personalize the struggle, almost to give it a face (though of course, no one outside the prison system knew what he looked like these many years since the Rivonia Trial, since South African law forbade the publication of any such pictures.) Somehow he incarnated that struggle and many considered him to be untouchable. He was a good man. No, he was a very good man. It is difficult to know how this reputation came to be, for the outside world knew very little of what was happening behind the grim walls of Robben Island. Whatever its genesis, the fact is that he had become a hero for many with almost superhuman attributes.

It posed something of a dilemma for the liberation movement. He was a valuable asset as someone with this impeccable stature, but what if it turned out that the idol had feet of clay then the edifice of the movement's moral rectitude would come tumbling down when people were disillusioned to find that this giant or what they had always thought to be a giant among men was but a fallible lesser mortal. Rumours began to fly around that some

might want to engineer his assassination in prison so that were it to be true that he was a lesser mortal the world would be none the wiser. And then that magical day dawned, February 11th, 1990, when he walked tall and regal out of Victor Verster Prison in Paarl near Cape Town. But it was after his inauguration as the first democratically elected President of South Africa in May 1994 that the world realized it had not been duped. This man was something of a phenomenon. The world was in awe of his remarkable magnanimity and nobility of spirit in how ready he was to forgive his erstwhile oppressors and tormentors. He invited his white jailor to attend his inauguration as a VIP guest. He invited Dr. Percy Butar, the prosecutor in the Rivonia Trial, who had argued for the death sentence to be imposed to lunch at the Presidential residence and went to visit Mrs. Verwoerd, the widow of the architect and high priest of apartheid.

He donned the Springbok rugby jersey with the number 6 of Captain Francis Pieneers. This was a spectacular act of magnanimity for rugby had been, like all the others, an all white sport but particularly popular amongst Afrikaners considered to be the racists and oppressors par excellence and the Springbok was a sporting emblem much hated in the black community. By this gesture, Madiba had exorcised the demons of racial animosity. It was a very substantial hand of friendship extended to former adversaries who used to hate this communist inspired terrorist. On that day of the Rugby World

New Zealand

X Cup Final between the ~~NEZ~~ All Blacks and South Africa's Springboks at Ellis Park

X this park in Johannesburg when he strode onto the turf the whole place

erupted and the vast majority of those spectators who yelled and shrieked

'Nelson Mandela' like teenagers at a pop concert of their favorite pop stars

were Afrikaners. He demonstrated in that one gesture for racial

reconciliation and harmony what an entire library of words would have

failed to get in a month of Sundays. Much later when the TRC summoned

the former State President, Mr. P.W. Botha to appear ~~if he demanded~~

Madiba offered to accompany him and to sit next to him trying to minimize

as far as it could be done any feeling of this being infra dig. He had more

than vindicated those who had invested him with the aura of an untouchable

moral stature. It did seem as if he was devoid of feet of clay. How did he

grow into this stature?

Crucible of Suffering

X Suffering can embitter but ~~is~~ can also ennoble and frequently does.

Often observing the wonders he has achieved particularly in defusing racial

tensions and animosities people will say "What an awful waste of a

wonderful person to have made him languish 27 long years in prison.

Imagine the good he would have accomplished much sooner?" Those who

say this have forgotten that he was at one time relatively free and with his

ANC colleagues had tried to persuade our white compatriots to mend their

ways. It was this campaign to end the injustice of apartheid's awfulness that had landed them all in jail or had caused others to go into exile. Everything in its time-or to use a biblical phrase "in the fullness of time," when the pieces had fallen into place and things had come to a head, when the right moment had dawned not sooner not later. As ~~if~~^{it} were come the hour, come the man'. But perhaps more importantly, those 27 years were not ~~wasted~~^{wasted}.

When Nelson Mandela went to prison he was an angry young man ~~and~~ rightly incensed at the travesty and miscarriage of justice that had just happened, that it should be a criminal offence to demand what were but inalienable rights ~~cushioned~~^{enshrined} in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ~~into which Ben Spurio~~^{Gen. Smuts} one time Prime Minister of South Africa had given assent. The crucible of suffering which he entered was important in his evolution. The prison suffering ~~confirmed~~^{continued} that of his harassed existence before his arrest when he was just always one step ahead of the Security Police, elusive as the Black Pimpernel who did not have the opportunity to enjoy a decent family life with his new young bride Winnie. ~~The~~^{The} furnace of affliction burned away the dross and he progressively grew in a new spiritual depth, beginning to be ~~a~~ more patient and understanding of the foibles of others especially of those of his jailors and the oppressors of his people and their fears of being overwhelmed by the black masses. This is where he was ~~a~~ purified and made to be more compassionate and magnanimous.

When he left prison it was not to a sinecure. There was very considerable politicking and he was not spared domestic unhappiness. One day soon after his release he and Winnie visited us in our Soweto home to enjoy some traditional Xhosa cuisine. You could not miss noticing how deeply in love he was with Winnie. When they walked out of Victor ~~Vester~~^{Verster} prison hand in hand it ~~seemed~~^{seemed}, like the fairy tale ending everyone wished them. In our house, you could see his dotting eyes followed Winnie's every movement. He was almost like a besotted little puppy. Their break up was a very traumatic thing. He was quite devastated, but it was just the culmination of a protracted period of deep anguish for him.

Like many who love deeply, it turns out that he in fact was very vulnerable. He gives the impression of being all steel, impregnable, but this is not so. He can be so gentle, caring, magnanimous and hugely altruistic because he is tender inside. He loves to be loved, not in any obsessional way, but he would wither and wilt without tender loving and caring in return. You see it in how he beams when acknowledging the thunderous cheers. It is an endearing childlike attribute. He actually genuinely seems surprised by it and never takes it for granted. When he came to Bishopscourt to spend his first night of freedom, he kept saying, "There ~~are~~^{were} so many people lining the road of all races" and he seemed to be genuinely amazed that he would be the center of this adulation. He like all of us yearns

for affirmation. The most wonderful thing that happened to him was when
X Grace^a stepped into his life. She was as gracious as her name but more than
anything else she has made him feel wanted, cared for and appreciated. She
X has ~~mostly~~^{molly} coddled him.

We were at Jeff Radebe's wedding in the presidential estate in
Pretoria and I saw her pick off some ~~stuff~~^{fluff} from his shirt like a solicitous
spouse, dancing attention on her beloved. A little while later I cornered him
^ and said "Hey that woman loves you, yun^u?, I saw her dusting you off". He
beamed and said "You saw that did you?" He was like a teenager who has
just kissed his first girl. I am not being chauvinistic-I got into enough
trouble saying one time that he needed someone to bring him his slippers. I
will not repeat that mistake. Most men like their woman making a fuss of
them, spoiling them. I supposed ~~it~~^{it} should be ~~neutral~~^{mutual} .

His chief weakness has been due to a good attribute-his loyalty.
When he was President he should have sacked one or two of his Minister's
who were performing shoddily. He would not because he has an almost
pathological thing about being a loyal member of the party. It was good to a
certain point to remain loyal to those who had supported our struggle such as
Libya and Cuba. But that loyalty should have been tempered with a dose of
real politick realism. It would be in order for a private citizen to maintain
those friendships but it is a different matter when one is President of a

country that cannot afford to alienate too many of the powerful in a unipolar world.

I was disappointed too that his Government accepted recommendations for higher pay for themselves and members of Parliament-^{so quickly} getting on the so-called [^]gravy train. I thought they missed a wonderful opportunity of saying “The Commission recommends higher salaries for us. We will not accept them out of solidarity with the bulk of our people.” Typically, he dedicated a portion of his salary to charity.

He is remarkably altruistic and believes passionately that he is a leader for the sake of the led and so he spends himself prodigally on their behalf raising huge funds for schools and clinics all over the country. His schedule even in his eighties would leave many half his age gasping.

I visited him for lunch one day. At the end he saw me to the door and called out “Driver”, meaning my driver. I told him that I did not have one. A few days later he called me and said he had acted without consulting me but had been concerned that I was driving myself. He had since approached a business friend who agreed to pay for a driver for me and now I am able to get a chauffeur driven car whenever I want it. He cares.

He can sometimes bowl you over with his humility. He has a regal ^{trifled} hauteur and sometimes does not want to be ~~toiled~~ with and can get quite angry if he thinks he has been slighted, but he is in fact charmingly humble.

One of our TRC Commissioners was implicated by an Amnesty witness.

The President appointed a judicial commission to investigate the matter

urgently and reported to the President expeditiously. The President's office

called me to get contact details of the said Commissioner. I was aware that

× Madiba wanted ^{generously} ~~seriously~~ to put him out of his misery quickly, but I told his

secretary, "Please tell the President, I am upset. I am the Chair of this ^{Commission} ~~Court~~

and I should be the first to be told the results of the inquiry." Within

minutes Madiba was on the line and he said "Mpilo (my African name)

you're quite right, I am sorry."

That is the measure of the man. He is big enough to admit when he is

wrong. Only lesser men are always right. How God must love South Africa

to have given us this man to be ^{at} the helm as we negotiated the transition from

repression to democracy and freedom; the right man ^{at} ~~of~~ the right time in the

right place. Praise be to God.