

Honouring Mandela's Legacy

Written by Peter Vale

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PETER VALE, MAR 4 2012

A few days ago I was called by a young friend, a journalist, who asked if I could talk to him for a piece he was writing on Nelson Mandela's life.

His intended piece is, of course, only a sliver of a vast subterranean industry that's going on in news- and state-rooms, both great and small, over what will happen when the great man dies – as of course, he must. Put in the idiom of an age where numbers matter most, the “actuarial tables” are against him.

There is something distasteful about all this especially since, rumour has it, some pundits are receiving a monthly retainer so that, when the sad event happens, their comments will be exclusive to this or that international network.

This, of course, is the end of a long line of media trading off the news worthiness of the passing of the great and the good.

I was in my tenth year at school when JFK was assassinated. We were in the midst of our end of year examinations that particular November. We listened both to the drama over the shooting in Dallas and the theatre of the state funeral in Washington. Two years later, Winston Churchill died: as school seniors, now, and cosseted in a Common Room, we listened to the broadcast of the late-January state funeral from distant London.

So, with confidence we can say that Mandela's passing will be listened to in the furthest corners of the world. But what will the commentators say of him, as Richard Dimbleby said of Churchill in 1965 and Walter Cronkite said of Kennedy in 1963?

The thing about Madiba, (as South Africans affectionately call Mandela) is that he belongs to all. He certainly belongs to his political home, the ANC, but perhaps not as exclusively as they would like to believe, despite the joke he once told that on reaching the Pearly Gates, his first question would be, “Where is the nearest ANC branch? I'm keen to join”.

But he belongs, too, to this country's black majority which is not the same thing as the ANC: symbolising their hardship, their struggle against racism, and their emancipation. We should not wear this lightly especially because the end of apartheid was a march that commenced with the struggle against slavery.

But, because of Madiba's unfailing belief in non-racism, he also belongs to everyone who claims to be a South African, black and white together.

Then, and this complicates many things – political, diplomatic and economic, Mandela belongs to this continent and, finally, using the simple street name test, he belongs to the world – even to those who live beyond city lights. In deep rural China in the late-1990s I once tried to tell an old man where I hailed from. His brow remained furrowed until the only word I understood in a somewhat heated exchange between he and an interpreter was ‘Mandela’. After this, his wrinkled face beamed.

How will we memorialise Mandela?

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There is a sense in which South Africa's memorialisation has already begun. The South African Mint has recently announced that a new series of notes will be issued in the coming years – each denomination will carry Madiba's image.

But will this hardly seems sufficient.

On an occasion in the 1990s, I argued that South Africa should follow Bolivia's example and call the country for a liberation hero – in their case, Simón Bolívar. But I now accept that things were different in those times when Revolution was what the Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called the *pensée unique* – in this epoch, when, alas, economics dominates, this has little traction, I fear,

But the question that the Rating Agencies with their pseudo-science will want to know, is this, “What will happen on the ground?”

For one thing – and very firmly, too – we must debunk fear-mongering, especially the view that Mandela's passing will finally bring South Africa to its night of the long knives – a racial genocide in the country with blacks will turn on their white countrymen. Of course, this has been a fear from the day that Europeans put their feet on South African soil.

Happily, the facts – social and other – suggest something entirely different will come to pass.

Deep-seated interdependencies, not to mention, eighteen years of largely successful liberal democracy have drawn South Africans under a common tent. True, it has many leaks and billows in the high winds, and certainly not everybody feels equally warm under its cover. It is however keeping us together while many other things, especially avarice and anger, seem intent on driving us apart – but these two things drive people apart in every corner of the world.

South Africa's momentous achievement (there is no other way to describe it) rests on interdependence – which was probably to be expected because we've lived together since Seventeenth Century – and an unwavering belief in constitutionalism – which certainly wasn't on the cards during the dark years of colonialism and apartheid.

This, of course, is Nelson Mandela's lasting legacy.

And, if we really want to honour it, we should let Madiba live in peace in Qunu, which is deep in the rural Transkei, gazing across the fields where, as a boy, he herded cattle and prepared for an extraordinary life of service.

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