Thursday 12/12/13

A Tribute to Nelson Mandela at the UMass-Amherst Faculty Senate

By Mzamo Mangaliso

I thank the Faculty Senate for allowing time on its packed agenda for this tribute to former President Nelson Mandela. I am honored, and I know my colleague Stephen Clingman also feels the same, to be given the opportunity to pay tribute to this global icon who passed away a week ago today.

The name Mandela was given at birth was, “Rolihlahla.” In isiXhosa it literally means one who drags the tree branch or, colloquially – the troublemaker, a foreboding for what he would represent for the system of apartheid. Many of us in South Africa affectionately call him, “Tata” (father), or with his clan name of “Madiba.” He was also known by other names, such as “Khulu,” which means the Great One (in isiXhosa - a shortened form of grandfather). And, as a member of the abaThembu royal house, his name was Dalibhunga, which means the “convener of caucus or dialogue.” The most appropriate way to greet him in that role would be with the salutation, “Aah! Dalibhunga!”

What drove a man of such high pedigree and stature in his community to devote his life to the fight for justice and equality? The one word answer is Apartheid – the system of government introduced by the National Party in South Africa after the 1948 election. It was based on the assumption that blacks were inferior, and so they had to be prepared to play a subservient role in all spheres of life in the country.

One of famous quotes that summed up apartheid was from Hendrik F. Verwoerd, Minister of Native Affairs. “There is no place for the ‘Bantu’ ‘in the European community above the level of certain forms of labor ... What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice? That is quite absurd. Education must train people in accordance with their opportunities in life, according to the sphere in which they live.” The stories of the atrocities of apartheid and the fight to abolish it, both by people inside South Africa, and by the international community, especially in the US and the UK, are well documented. The University of Massachusetts Amherst played its role in the divestment movement that proved to be a key to weakening apartheid.

Mandela attended missionary schools, eventually graduating from Healdtown High School, and later attending college at the University of Fort Hare. He became a member of the Students’ Representative Council (SRC) at Fort Hare, but his strong student activism led him to being expelled in 1940. He later became involved with the African National Congress (ANC), founding its Youth League in 1944 with Oliver Tambo and Walter Sisulu.

In its opposition to apartheid, the ANC had adopted the non-violent resistance philosophy modeled on the principle of satyagraha, coined by Mahatma Gandhi, and later used by Martin Luther King. But the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre, in which 69 blacks were killed by the police, forced the ANC to abandon its non-violence stance and form a military wing, which was called Umkhonto Wesizwe, with Mandela as
its commander in chief. In explaining the change, the ANC stated that non-violence was a strategy, not a moral principle as was the case with Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

In the government crackdown that followed, most of the ANC leaders were arrested and tried or left the country. During the Rivonia Trial, the remarks Mandela made at the end of his four-hour statement to the court sum up the guiding principles by which he worked for the liberation of South Africa:

During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. 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 I hope to live for and to achieve. But, if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

We know that he was sentenced to life imprisonment, and freed after 27 years. But most of us will remember him for putting his life on the line in his decades-long fight to end injustice and oppression in South Africa, and for setting an example of reconciliation afterwards. He led the country’s peaceful transition to democracy and served as its first president just for one term before gracefully handing over the office to his democratically elected successor, Thabo Mbeki, something that several other leaders on the continent failed to do. In his characteristic self-effacing humorous way, he stated that, “An octogenarian has no business running a country.”

Even though he took the limelight when it was necessary, Mandela was happiest when stepping back to let others take the lead. He often described himself as just “a country boy.” In his autobiography he recalls eavesdropping on the endless consensus decision-seeking deliberations of the tribal council and noticed that the chief worked, “like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are directed from behind. Those who worked with him spoke of his ability to identify what was needed and to pursue it with single-minded determination.”

Mandela would adopt this as his leadership style and successfully implement it during the consensus-driven CODESA (Congress for a Democratic South Africa) talks that led to the blueprint for the Government of National Unit. It is believed that none of the many decisions taken by the 23 parties involved in the negotiations was reached by vote. They were reached by consensus. The success of the CODESA talks led to Mandela and F.W. de Klerk being the joint recipients of the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize.

In their book, Good to Great, Jim Collins & Jerry Porras define the highest form of leadership, which they call Level-5 Leadership, as consisting of two elements. On one hand is a profound sense of humility and, on the other, a strong will or unwavering resolve to accomplish ones goals. Of the 1,435 Fortune 500 CEOs they studied between 1965 and 1995, only 11 qualified for Level 5 Leadership. I strongly believe that Nelson Mandela would have made that list. He possessed both modesty and humility, never letting his ego get in the way of the ultimate goal. He frequently refused to take credit for the things he was generally known to have spearheaded
and, instead, attributed them to his comrades. He once said that he was a man with ordinary capabilities, whom his organization (the ANC) saw fit, in their collective wisdom, to use for furthering the goals of the struggle for a free South Africa. Yet he was willful and fearless to the point of dying for the cause he espoused as witnessed in the statement he made at the Rivonia Trial cited above.

There are many levels at which Nelson Mandela’s legacy can be deconstructed. For me, there are at least three: the systems level, the group level, and the level of self.

At the first level Mandela’s story tells us to stand up and fight any system that perpetuates injustice and inequality based on race, gender, or creed. Mandela saw the apartheid system as contradictory to the values of humanity or Ubuntu, i.e., treating others as fellow humans. He decided to fight the system at every turn, even to the point putting his own life on the line when he faced the death penalty for his role in the struggle to overthrow it. If the apartheid experiment had gone on without a challenge, who knows how many other leaders would have used it as an example for running their countries? Such a possibility brings to mind Martin Luther King’s view that the existence of injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

At the second level Mandela reminds us to challenge our own base when it takes positions that are unjustifiably harmful toward others, and/or violate their humanity. It is easy to generate a list of demands that the other side must comply with. It is equally easy to go along with what one’s own base wants to hear. But one of the greatest tests of leadership is the ability to tell one's followers things they would rather not hear, and make them do things that it would rather not do. In the case of Mandela, after his release from incarceration, he challenged the throngs of his black supporters who were calling for revenge against the white oppressors to, “Take your guns, your knives, and your pangas, and throw them into the sea.”

There was also the time when the post-apartheid sports committee wanted to remove the Springbok emblem used on the jerseys of the national rugby team, which was widely seen as a symbol of exclusion of blacks from the national team, and replace it with something that reflected the new African identity. Mandela rejected this suggestion, much to their surprise, telling the officials that embracing the symbols that whites cherished was an essential part of making them feel at home in a black-led South Africa. He later he wore the Springbok jersey, cheered for the team, and went on the field to celebrate with it when the team captured the 1995 Rugby World Cup against the formidable New Zealand All Blacks, as seen in the movie “Invictus.” This is bold leadership by standing firm on convictions instead of cow-towing to popular demands was instrumental in Mandela’s success in unifying South Africa into the Rainbow Nation of today.

At the third level, the lesson is to stand up against ourselves when emotions and human instincts compel us into taking action that might undermine the overall goals of the struggle. In the case of South Africa, that goal was a free, non-racist, non-sexist, democratic society. He admits to feeling bitterness and anger toward the apartheid government for robbing him of the prime of his life. But, in spite of the 27 years of incarceration, most of which were spent on Robben Island, Mandela understood that the only way to a peaceful resolution in South Africa was by
suppressing the bitterness in his own emotions and “talking to the enemy.” Years later, when asked why he was not bitter for having had the best years of his life taken away from him, he replied that emotions get in the way of strategy. If he had allowed emotion to dominate, and chosen the route of revenge, South Africa would easily have been engulfed in flames and rivers of blood. One of the most important keys for the peaceful transition from the brutal system of apartheid to democratic rule was the domination of the brain over emotion.

A leader of Mandela’s stature comes around only once in a lifetime. In a homily at the Holy Cross Church in Nyanga Township, Cape Town this past Sunday (December 8, 2013), the Archbishop of Cape Town, the Most Reverend Thabo Makgoba, remarked that Nelson Mandela would forever be remembered as the greatest statesman of our time. His political leadership steered South Africa through the most difficult time in its history, all the while never succumbing to political pressure, never compromising his ideals or principles, and never pandering to the world’s media. He will go down in history as one of the world’s greatest leaders because of the impact he had, not just on the lives of South Africans, but on the lives of countless people around the world; he has made an irreversible difference to the global fight for democracy and human rights.

We should all feel honored to have lived during the time of Mandela’s life on earth. While we mourn his loss, we cherish his example, and know that it will continue to inspire, strengthen and bring hope to people for generations to come. The highest honor we can pay this extraordinary man is to renew a commitment to his vision of democratic and free societies in which all persons live together in harmony and mutual respect.

Celebratory or sorrowful gatherings in Africa are typically accompanied by music or poetry. In the days leading up to his funeral, one of the things that may be seen in the TV coverage of the Tributes to Madiba are recitations by praise-poets, known in isiXhosa as 


**Ukufa**

By S.E.K Mqhayi (with adaptations)

Aah! Ngqonge-ngqongendini kaqubul' egqitha
Hoooooyina!
Thambo-dala kade bemqongqotha
Diza-dala kade bemkhwahlaza
Wen' ukad' ukhonkothwa zizinja
Wen' ukad' unethwa nazimvula
Gqala lamaggqala,
Tshawe lama Tshawe,
Kufandini akuva
Kwakudala-dala kwaMhlamnene
Kwamandulo phaya entlandlolo
Waw' usel' ukad' uququzela
Gqogq' eqhuqha nqvelo yogoduko
Choph' emanxebeni, xhaph' axel' ixhwili
Ntondini-ndini.
Hamba kakuhle ke, Madiba!
Wena mfo kaHala, kaDlomo, kaNxeko, kaNtade
Amabhong’ uwafezile,
Bonk’ ubunt’ ubugqibile
Lala kakuhle Dalibhunga!
Ugxalaba libanzi elathwal’ iinzingo zoMzantsi Africa
Yiyo loonto sisithi ngolo hlobo
Yoo ho ho ho ho, ndeee grham, yoooo!

Thank you!