

Ivor Ichikowitz

Can Madiba magic last?

We all have our favourite Madiba moment – a quote or a gesture, a spontaneous smile at the approach of a child, his famous shuffle, and many of the characteristics that made him not only unique but also a giant presence in our lives.

The author (right) enjoyed a number of meetings and encounters with Madiba over the years, before, during and after his Presidency

In fact, everyone I know has many special memories of him, and choosing the one defining feature that dwarfs all others is not an easy task, for, like most great historical personalities, he was also a complex human being like the rest of us.

Unlike the rest of us, however,

he left a huge impact on the people of our country and the world. His legacy will be celebrated and written about long after we too have departed, causing us to pause for a moment and reflect on how fortunate we are to have had the privilege of his presence during our lifetime.

I had the privilege of knowing him personally, and enjoying a number of meetings and encounters with him over a period of years before, during, and after his Presidency. Sometimes the issues on the table were quite straightforward, requiring just a yes or a no: at other times the issues were delicate and fairly complicated, which brought out the best of his wisdom and humanity, and his commitment to the best interests of all concerned.

We know he never flinched when faced with difficult choices. He dis-

played the full range of human emotions, from barely constrained anger to unrestrained joy and happiness, and everything in between.

Whatever the circumstances, in public or in private, he maintained a special dignity and gentlemanly air about him, with a lively sense of humour and a refreshing enjoyment of the simple things in life. Even his jailers grew to respect and admire him, which was an extraordinary achievement. He was a lesson to all of us.

Putting all of that together, and considering the South Africa he emerged to lead in the early 1990s, I would have to say the enduring feature of Nelson Mandela was his focus on reconciliation as the foundation upon which a new rainbow nation would be built.

Reconciliation was his starting point, and just about everything he said or did could be understood by that measure. He had no illusions about the hurdles that lay ahead, and the opposition he would face both within the ranks of his own movement and from other sectors of the population, but he forged ahead.

By the time he ascended to the Presidency in 1994, he had succeeded in uniting the country in a manner that had never before been witnessed in South Africa. He stunned the world as much as his own country, and leaders of all persuasions beat a path to his door to witness his inauguration as President at the Union Buildings in Pretoria on 10 May, 1994. It was an extraordinary spectacle, barely imaginable a year earlier.

Can the centre hold?

Madiba's central theme of reconciliation seemed to ignite the goodwill of a people weary of division and conflict, yearning for an opportunity to reach out to fellow South Africans and seek unity in their shared citizenship of their country and their shared humanity. He gave them that opportunity, and the prospect of dreaming of a better future.

South Africans responded with enthusiasm, while foreign leaders did not always know what to make of it. Was it too good to be true? Could it last? The answer is that it has lasted, albeit being a little frayed at the seams.

Old divisions began to reappear, together with a few new ones, shortly after Mandela's retirement from public life. Populists began feeding on the politics of identity (always a cheap and easy route in a diverse nation like South Africa), stoking resentments (real and imagined), and preaching the language of anger and contempt for the civil discourse that Mandela had bequeathed us.

Commentators have been observing this, and wondering if the centre

'Healing the wounds of the past and freeing ourselves of its burden will be a long and demanding task.' - Mandela, '95

can hold. But this, after all, is South Africa. We have weathered much worse before, and while it might not be pretty, we are building a maturing democracy which, warts and all, is standing firm in respect for the Constitution.

Coalition governments are functioning in our major municipal centres: nobody questions the legitimacy of elections; nor does anyone question the rulings of the Constitutional Court; we have a free and independent media, and a vibrant civil society.

Building the institutions of a free and open democracy was always going to be a messy business, and with all its imperfections, South Africans know from their everyday life experiences that their country is a much better place to live in than it was in the past.

The centre is holding much better than might appear on superficial examination. We all wish Mandela's principle of reconciliation would come back into sharper focus, and most of us believe it will. It never went away, but it certainly could do with a little polish and shine.

Consider this quote from President Mandela on 16 December, 1995, on National Reconciliation Day:

"We, the people of South Africa, have made a decisive and irreversible break with the past. We have, in real life, declared our shared allegiance to justice, non-racialism and democracy, our yearning for a peaceful and

harmonious nation of equals.

"The rainbow has come to be the symbol of our nation. We are turning the variety of our languages and cultures, once used to divide us, into a source of strength and richness.

"But we do know that healing the wounds of the past and freeing ourselves of its burden will be a long and demanding task. This Day of Reconciliation celebrates the progress we have made; it reaffirms our commitment, and it measures the challenges.

"The Government of National Unity chose this day precisely because the past had made 16 December a living symbol of bitter division. Valour was measured by the number of enemies killed and the quantity of blood that swelled the rivers and flowed in the streets.

"Today we no longer vow our mutual destruction but solemnly acknowledge our inter-dependence as free and equal citizens of our common Motherland. Today we re-affirm our solemn constitutional compact to live together on the basis of equality and mutual respect."

Hearts and minds

There are many other quotes on the subject of reconciliation, to be sure, but this one remains in my memory, perhaps because it came so soon after South Africa's democratic transition, and set the tone for the remainder of Madiba's public life.

In recent times the compact he spoke of has seemed to dim somewhat, and the rainbow is no longer quite so prominent in our national discourse. We can view this as predictable growing pains of a young democracy, or as warning signs of problems to come. Even more recently, however, we have been given reason for renewed hope and the prospect of a New Dawn. Madiba would have welcomed it.

We are very conscious of the challenges facing South Africa, and equally confident that they will be overcome. It was Nelson Mandela who said "In the end, reconciliation is a spiritual process, which requires more than just a legal framework. It has to happen in the hearts and minds of people." Our history has demonstrated that South Africans have the hearts and minds to do just that. ■

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