

In search of the real Nelson Mandela

A decade after the death of the former president, and amid growing disenchantment with the ANC, South Africans are questioning the one-dimensional figure of popular myth



Members of the Public Servants Association of South Africa marching past a statue of Nelson Mandela in Cape Town in November 2022 © Reuters

Jonny Steinberg DECEMBER 1 2023

In the South African summer of 1946, a young military veteran named Jules Browde enrolled as a law student at Wits University in Johannesburg. As he waited for his first seminar to begin, a “very tall, handsome” man walked in. “He was strapping,” Browde recalled decades later — and everyone looked up and clocked him. The most distinctive thing about the young man, though, was neither his height nor his broad shoulders: it was the colour of his skin. Nelson Mandela was the only black student in his class.

Mandela made his way to an empty chair next to Browde's. The moment he sat down, the student sitting on the other side of him made a great show of getting up and going to sit on the opposite side of the room.

Nobody said a word. The professor walked in, and the lecture began.

When the class was over, Browde introduced himself to Mandela and the two became lifelong friends. For half a century, neither mentioned what had happened that day.

And then, in 1996, exactly 50 years later, by which time Mandela was president of South Africa and among the most feted human beings alive, Browde attended a lunch the president was hosting. At some point, Mandela caught Browde's eye, called him over, and asked him to convene a reunion of their law class.

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"And Jules," Browde recalled Mandela saying, "do you remember when I came into the class and sat down . . . and the man next to me got up . . ."

"I do remember." Browde replied. "His name was Ballie de Klerk."

"Please see that you invite *him* to come."

"Why?" Browde asked.

Because, Mandela said, he wanted to remind De Klerk of what he had done. "I don't mind whether he says he remembers or he doesn't remember. Because I want to take his hand and I want to say, 'I remember. But I forgive you. Now let's see what we can do together for the good of this country'."

I recount this story because it is slippery. What it conveys about Mandela isn't straightforward at all. This is a not a man who has made peace with what happened to him in the past.

Forgiveness seldom wears its deepest motivation on its sleeve. It is hardly a sign that the anger preceding it has dissolved; it has instead been reworked into a more gracious state.

At the 10th anniversary of Mandela's death on December 5 2013, it is difficult to square the complex, opaque man he was with the one-dimensional figure that his country remembers — and with whom it has grown increasingly angry.

Earlier this year, a young black office worker in Johannesburg told The New York Times that he avoids looking up at the statue of a beaming Mandela that he passes on his way to work, lest he become “a walking ball of rage”.

His feelings are increasingly common, and the reasons are not hard to find. The African National Congress (ANC), which led South Africa to freedom under Mandela in 1994, has been in power nearly 30 years. Although a disenchanted electorate may well vote it back into office next year — mainly for want of a credible alternative — its reputation is shot. Once celebrated as the movement that brought freedom, the ANC is now widely associated with failed institutions, corruption and organised crime.

Its record in government is truly awful. South Africa's expanded unemployment rate stands at more than 40 per cent. Its inequality is staggering, its Gini coefficient the highest in the world. And much of the country's poverty is concentrated among the black population, a horrific reminder that although apartheid ended almost three decades ago, its legacy remains.

With little to show for itself, the ruling party reaches instinctively for the memory of Nelson Mandela. It has named 32 streets after him, has erected nearly two dozen statues of him, has stamped his face on coins and banknotes. And what it says about him is as uninspired as one might expect. He is invoked to encourage inclusiveness, generosity and service to others. He is used to entreat people to be good.

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For many young black people this saccharine niceness is more than uninspiring; it is offensive. If Mandela is the founding father of what we see around us, they increasingly think, then he was a man who let his people down.

In the face of this, the best way to commemorate Mandela is to retrieve something of who he actually was. And how surprising he turns out to be.

One person who knew him as well as anyone in the years after his release from prison was Barbara Masekela. His chief of staff from 1990 to 1995, she spent some 16 hours a day with him.

“He was one of the saddest human beings I have known,” she told me. “From time to time you felt it come out of him. It was sadness and anger mixed together: *fierce* anger.”

She recalled a trip to Tanzania. “[We were driving] into a village; the people had lined the street to greet him. They were simple, rural people. They just shouted, ‘Mandela! Mandela!’ It was really quite moving. He was fine, cheerful, his usual self. But as the convoy got to the village and we found ourselves among these people shouting, it came over him . . . He stopped waving. There was just a stillness, a grim, frightening stillness, and an almost unbearable sadness.”

What was the origin of these feelings?

During the 27 years he was in prison, Mandela's personal world fell apart. His eldest son Thembi dropped out of his studies and drifted before dying tragically young. Makgatho, his younger son, also abandoned his education, became an alcoholic, and struggled to orchestrate a career. As for Mandela's youngest daughter Zindzi, in the 1980s Mandela used his escalating influence to place her in university, only to discover that behind his back she had joined a renegade armed force commanded by her mother.

For Mandela, it was as if a grenade had turned his family to shrapnel. Poorly educated, without the wherewithal to defend themselves, the next generation of Mandelas, he wrote despairingly to Makgatho, are to “be condemned forever to the degrading status of being subservient to . . . other human beings.” To Zindzi he pleaded, “how can I be expected to lead a nation when I cannot care for my own family?”

And that was the point. Mandela felt that he had failed in the most sacred responsibility of all. To father black children in apartheid South Africa, the most hostile of lands, and to fail to protect them: for a man with even a modicum of honour, that was unforgivable.

After he was released from prison in February 1990, inaugurating South Africa's transition to democracy, Mandela used his gathering power to try to save his family, sometimes in disturbing ways. His wife Winnie Madikizela-Mandela had, infamously, commanded a gang of violent youths in the midst of South Africans' insurrections, and was now in trouble.

Shortly after Mandela's release, Winnie was charged with kidnapping. On the eve of her trial, four of her co-defendants and a key witness vanished; they were secretly spirited across the border by ANC personnel whom Mandela had delegated "to manage the situation", as a close associate of his put it to me.

It was a quixotic, misguided thing to have done. As if his newfound power could heal his wife, save his marriage and resurrect his family. What he was trying to restore had long died.

During her time as chief of staff, Masekela routinely observed Mandela as he prepared for public engagements. "We would watch him primping just before some delegation or person came to talk to him. You could actually see him becoming this Nelson Mandela, the great forgiver . . ."

As his guests arrived, he would switch on his mesmeric charisma, creating an aura of celestial calm.

Throughout his career, this was Mandela's genius: not just his capacity to perform, but to craft the persona required by the politics of the moment. In the mid-1950s, he was the dapper lawyer, his muscular frame wrapped in expensive suits, his car a little too fancy. To be stylish and beautiful and black in the early apartheid years was powerful, provocative: he was a living, breathing glimpse of an alternative world. Then, in the early 1960s, when Mandela went underground to launch an armed struggle, he grew his hair and his beard and donned a trenchcoat; the slick lawyer had become a guerrilla, the embodiment of a people willing to use violence.

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Once he was caught and put on trial, the personas came and went in dizzying succession. The indigenous African in a white man's court, clad in jackal skins and beads; the Christ-like martyr quietly telling a judge that he was prepared to die.

Why, in the 1990s, did he choose the persona he did: so avuncular, so light, so gracious?



Mandela in the late 1950s with his co-defendants outside the 'Treason Trial' in Johannesburg © Gamma-Rapho / Getty Images



Mandela in 1995 with 94-year-old Betsie Verwoerd, widow of apartheid's architect Hendrik Verwoerd © Getty Images

Because he believed that his country was prone to war. And a war now, at apartheid's end, would lay South Africa to waste. He understood that as the leader of black South Africa, who he was in public — not just what he said, but the ineffable spirit of his presence — was vital. And so he chose to perform generosity. And what a show he put on. Towering above the diminutive Betsie Verwoerd, widow of the architect of apartheid, his arm wrapped protectively around her, sheltering her from all she feared. Raising the Rugby World Cup aloft with the Springboks' strapping white captain, thus taming a great symbol of Afrikaner power.

These stagings were brilliant. But they were born from a modest sense of what was possible. Mandela was no Martin Luther King, who believed that there would be no common future until human souls were transformed. He was a hard, pragmatic man. He thought that he could use his unique position to bring the institutions of constitutional democracy to his country without provoking civil war. That task alone, he thought, was difficult enough.

The result is that the version of himself he chose to show his people, black South Africans, was highly edited. And what he excluded, ironically enough, was what he shared most intensely with them: the scarring, the anger, the searing pain. The political arena of late apartheid, he felt, could not contain such feelings; if there was going to be a future, they would have to be reeled in.

He has been dead 10 years. I doubt he'd be surprised at the discontent pervading his land, nor that some of it is directed at him. To the charge that he left unfinished business, I suspect he'd plead guilty. He did what was possible in fragile times. The rest was always up to those who followed.

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