

The Heroism of Nelson Mandela

Nelson Mandela was a great leader. A great number of people in his country followed him and the world leaders held him in high esteem. During a lifetime of resistance, leading to imprisonment, Nelson Mandela led South Africa out of apartheid and into an era of reconciliation. His presidential leadership was not one of revenge, getting even or seeking power. His heroism was born of decades of struggle.

At the same time, Mandela exhibited a deep humility. He showed humility when he stepped down from the role of president after one term, although he could have stayed a president for life. One of his most famous descriptions of himself which also shows his humility is: "I am not a saint unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying." He was definitely a person who was aware of both his strengths and his limitations. He made mistakes. Heroism is trying to get on the right track again after making them.

Heroism is enhanced by excellent friendships. Mandela knew that ending apartheid would never be possible if not for friends, working together in solidarity. "I was in the company of great men," he once said, "some of them more qualified than me." Shortly after he turned 80, Mandela received an honorary doctorate from Harvard. "I know that through this award, you are not so much recognizing any individual achievement, but are rather paying tribute to the struggles and achievements of the South African people as a whole," he said in his address.

He was not centered around himself. As a special guest on The Oprah Winfrey Show, when he came to the studio, he asked the producer what was the subject of tonight's show. "You, sir, are the subject," replied the producer. Mandela couldn't believe he was the subject for the whole hour.

Mandela also embodied different habits of excellence. Perhaps, most notable, was his forgiveness. "Resentment is like drinking poison and hoping it will kill your enemy," he said about his oppressors. He made peace with those who sought to destroy and kill him, starting the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as president.

Being humble means that our purpose in life is not to seek power and fame, but to seek how much of a difference we can make in the lives of others. In this way, Mandela's long walk to freedom was a sacrifice for a greater cause. "To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."