

# FOLLOWING A SATYAGRAHI'S COMMITMENT TO STEADFASTNESS OF THOUGHT, VISION, AND ACTION. A TRIBUTE TO NELSON MANDELA

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**ABSTRACT.** Freedom fighter. Terrorist. Guerilla. Statesman. Global icon. Gardener. South Africa's first black president. These words and phrases have appeared repeatedly in the countless tributes to Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela (July 18, 1918 – December 5, 2013) since his passing. Scholars, activists, and leaders involved in liberation struggles are among those who have, fittingly, likened Mandela to Mahatma Gandhi, especially when speaking to Mandela's adaptation of the Gandhian notion of satyagraha – an “insistence on truth” or a “truth force” undergirding non-violent civil resistance – in his fight against apartheid. This tribute reflects on what educators can learn from Mandela as untrammelled capitalism spreads across the globe. What lessons can we learn and what duties can we fulfill in terms of forging courses that foster connections and togetherness across differences (of race, culture, gender, nation, and, class)? What will we cultivate? Gain? Lose? Forgive? What will we yield in order to achieve the larger vision of freedom and humanization in an increasingly interconnected, interdependent global context?

Freedom fighter. Terrorist. Guerilla. Statesman. Global icon. Gardener. South Africa's first black president. These words and phrases have appeared repeatedly in the countless tributes to Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela (July 18, 1918 – December 5, 2013) since his passing. Scholars, activists, and leaders involved in liberation struggles are among those who have, fittingly, likened Mandela to Mahatma Gandhi, especially when speaking to

Mandela's adaptation of the Gandhian notion of satyagraha – an “insistence on truth” or a “truth force” undergirding non-violent civil resistance – in his fight against apartheid. Each of them lived for others, sacrificing self (and family) to end the domination of a white minority occupying their respective countries. They led long struggles – even from prison – against the material, physical, and psychic horrors of colonialism, apartheid, and racism, towards the independence of their respective nations. Although Mandela was born nearly five decades after Gandhi, he belongs to the same era, representing a century of great world leaders who fought against their colonizers to reclaim their home countries.<sup>1</sup>

Superlatives understandably pepper tributes to Nelson Mandela. At the same time, Mandela had his critics – abroad, at home, among scholars and pundits – during the long decades towards the official end of apartheid and also since his release from prison and his election as South Africa's first black president. Mandela has been described as a terrorist and a guerilla and also, following the official end of apartheid, as being too conciliatory towards whites and insufficiently attentive to reducing the gap between the poor and the rich. Superlatives and criticisms notwithstanding, it would be shameful on our part to fail to acknowledge and learn from Nelson Mandela's achievements, particularly his *commitment to steadfastness of thought, vision, and action*.

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## **Making Compromises on the Path to Freedom**

Satyagrahis such as Gandhi and Mandela recognized the dehumanization, the terrible injustice of colonialism and apartheid and knew them as ultimately, fundamentally weak. They developed participatory ways to dismantle them, building a national consciousness at the same time. And they committed themselves to the work of attaining freedom, remaining steadfast in terms of vision and action over the course of their lives. For instance, citing several instances of leaders who recognized the need to make compromises in order to attain larger goals, Ghanain-born author Ayi Kwei Armah (2006) wrote of Mandela:

Dreaming of African emancipation, he saw the sheer destructive power of the European machine, knew it would take generations to defeat it, and in the meantime, accepted the necessity of working within available spaces, expanding them as part of the organization for a future African society. (p. 70)

And, in her beautifully cogent *Nelson Mandela: A very short introduction*, South African-born scholar Elleke Boehmer (2008) discussed the influences that contributed to “how he shaped and reshaped his nationalist stance” in response to political developments in South Africa, “while also increasingly reaching for transnational models of resistance, and appealing to an international audience” (p. 3). She noted, “Mandela was exposed to the social flexibility and creative collisions – the *discrepant attachments* – that late colonial modernity

in African involved” (p. 110-111, emphasis in original).

Indeed, Mandela (1994) saw beyond the “us-them” divide and sought creative, hybrid, resolutions to problems with deep, widespread roots. In his autobiography, *Long walk to freedom: The autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, he wrote:

In prison, my anger toward whites decreased, but my hatred for the system grew. I wanted South Africa to see that I loved even my enemies while I hated the system that turned us against one another.

I wanted to impress upon the reporters the critical role of whites in any new dispensation. I have tried never to lose sight of this. We did not want to destroy the country before we freed it, and to drive the whites away would devastate the nation. I said that there was a middle ground between white fears and black hopes... “Whites are fellow South Africans,” I said, “and we want them to feel safe and to know that we appreciate the contribution that they may have made toward the development of this country.” Any man or woman who abandons apartheid will be embraced in our struggle for a democratic, non-racial South Africa; we must do everything we can to persuade our white compatriots that a new, nonracial South Africa will be a better place for all. (p. 495)

The strength of this vision lies in its thoughtful clarity and the effort it implies – monumental though that effort is. It reveals the weaknesses of fear-driven political systems and agendas and urges

all towards the power of truth and community. Mandela understood the need to engage history, and to build carefully from what already existed even as he worked to dismantle apartheid and white rule in South Africa. Of course his efforts at synthesizing a middle ground have not necessarily been popular with all.

Such vision also has powerful implications in terms of arriving at freedom – not only for those oppressed but also freedom from tyranny for all humankind, including the oppressor who by dint of his perpetration of tyranny dehumanizes both self and other. In his Nobel acceptance lecture, “This past must address its present,” Nigerian-born poet, Wole Soyinka (Akinwande Oluwole Soyinka), recommended that it is “perhaps our very last peaceful duty to a doomed enemy” to get past “the scorched earth strategies of colonial and racist myopia” (1986). Soyinka said:

There is a deep lesson for the world in the black races’ capacity to forgive, one which, I often think, has much to do with ethical precepts which spring from their world view and authentic religions, none of which is ever totally eradicated by the accretions of foreign faiths and their implicit ethnocentrism.

Lessons in the hollowness of domination and the agentic, humanizing strength of forgiveness, the endurance of long-known ways of being. Lessons in truth.

## Doing the Gritty Work of Gardening

Returning then to creating a middle ground and healing the splits between “us” and “them,” perhaps like Thich Nhat Hanh’s (1992) “organic gardeners,” we can practice and foster a culture of “looking deeply” (p. 58). Hanh – a Vietnamese monk, Zen master, and peace activist – wrote:

When we have a compost bin filled with organic material which is decomposing and smelly, we know that we can transform the waste into beautiful flowers. At first, we may see the compost and the flowers as opposite, but when we look deeply, we see that the flowers already exist in the compost, and the compost already exists in the flowers. ... When a good organic gardener looks into her compost, she can see that ... she values the rotting material and does not discriminate against it ... We need the insight and non-dual vision of the organic gardener ... (p. 58)

Indeed, this was Mandela’s practice – he gardened. In prison, Mandela became a gardener – he grew vegetables. As a prisoner in an oppressive system he asserted freedom, provided nourishment. Elleke Boehmer (2008) described Mandela’s gardening as “his alchemy of *freedom-through-reconstruction* (rather than revolution)” (p. 162, emphasis in original). She wrote:

The activity of working a garden, of keeping in contact with the earth, in many ways corroborated the processes of regeneration to which he looked forward: as well as relaxation

and enjoyment, gardening afforded a readily available correlative for the strategies of political transformation he was sketching in his mind. (p. 162)

Mandela's approach to envisioning and cultivating his garden as a prisoner on Robben Island was systematic. He read manuals, he talked to experts and "began to measure beds, and weigh and grind compost. The garden was to be productive, not merely decorative: it would grow nutritious vegetables for the prisoners" (p. 163). Mandela thought, envisioned, and did – even within the confines. So must we.

Further analyzing "the sustained importance of gardening to the prisoner Mandela" (p. 165), Boehmer wrote:

Within the spectral seclusion imposed by the life sentence, gardening also allowed the prisoner to explore the *spirit* of certain key ideas – of regeneration and reconstruction, for example – in a reassuringly *gritty*, material medium.

....

With his cultivation of a patch of earth – discovering a common love of soil and plant-rearing with his captors – Mandela developed important insights into the qualities of forbearance and co-operation, and into the *accommodations* that eventual mastery, including self-mastery, would entail. (p. 166, emphases in the original)

Grit. Spirit. Envisioning and cultivating a shared occupation in a hostile context. Creating a middle ground in which “beautiful flowers” of sustenance emerged from the compost of race-based hatred and fear. Lessons in commitment, lessons in love.

### **Committing to Satyagraha and Education**

For those of us concerned particularly with postcolonial directions in education how can we (continue to) be satyagrahis and affirm our commitment to steadfastness of thought, vision, and action? Following Nelson Mandela, what lessons can we learn and what duties can we fulfill in terms of forging courses that foster connections and togetherness across differences (of race, culture, gender, nation, and, class)? What will we cultivate? Gain? Lose? Forgive? What will we yield in order to achieve the larger vision of freedom and humanization in an increasingly interconnected, interdependent global context?

*July 2013 – in line for the security check at the international airport of a mid-sized U.S. city, right on the eastern edge of the mid-west. The names, in white lettering, on the back of a fellow traveler's bright, deep blue t-shirt – in fact the same blue that U.S. Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officials wear – catch the eye. Five or six names in a list with a two-digit number after each name. All ending in “Singh” or “Kaur.” The date at the top of the list is 08.05.12. A few minutes to realize... – this traveler is wearing a t-shirt memorializing those killed by Wade Michael Page, a white supremacist, who attacked a gurudwara (the place of worship for Sikhs)*



*in Oak Creek Wisconsin, USA, on August 5, 2012. The two-digit numbers are the ages of Page's victims.*

*Wondering about the woman's decision to wear this TSA-blue t-shirt while flying: Does she wear it every time she flies? What are her thoughts and feelings as she goes through the security check? Is the choice of the color intentional? Is this an act of resistance? Then a glimpse of the front of the t-shirt – "I pledge humanity" – provides an answer.*

Education scholars and practitioners in various parts of the world have grappled with debilitating inequities for decades. Individuals, schools, and communities, have worked to address them in productive ways and we have been making progress – imperfect though it remains. Evidently, we still have a ways to go...

And this is, of course, the very reason we need to commit to *steadfastness of thought, vision, and action* in tackling the challenges that face us today. As we look towards the second quarter of the twenty-first century, many of us are taking in with a sort of horrified fascination the bloated, self-gratifying tyranny of untrammelled capitalism spreading across the globe, its stultifying effects on education, and our own implicatedness. For instance, just five decades after the official end of centuries of colonial rule in India and early in India's era of "economic liberalization," widespread amnesia regarding colonialism and its aftermath – induced by the bright glittering lure of capital gains – was evident among its youth. Similarly, the "born frees" in South Africa (those born in and after 1994, the official end of apartheid), occupied in pursuit of economic gains, are not quite in touch with their recent historical past (Quist-Arcton, 2013). Perhaps

this is a generational inevitability in nations that have newly freed themselves and are seeking their own, independent economic footing. But more directly in relation to education work, it is troubling, indeed, when science is reduced to grant-getting, the arts and humanities are construed as inconsequential, and we find ourselves “teaching by numbers” in an age of accountability and standardization (Taubman, 2009).

Although implicated (for instance, by dint of the very fact that we are constrained to earn a living, say), we cannot – must not – see ourselves as entirely helpless as we take in the signals indicating the demise of deep thought and dwindling investment in foundational work. Following Nelson Mandela, we need to see our way to cultivating gritty spaces of freedom and sustained nourishment, making thoughtful compromises when necessary, in order to dismantle structures erected on a foundation of avarice. At the same time, we need to lay a path that will help future generations to emerge from the wreckage that is bound to come down on us (witness the fallout of colonialism, racism, apartheid) even as they make their way towards a stronger, more evolved humanization. To these ends then we need to remember, honor, envision, and do. We need to commit anew, every day, to generous and steadfast teaching and learning.

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