



Book Review: *Long Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela

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When the votes had been counted at the end of the four-day, one-person, one-vote multiracial election in South Africa, the white minority conceded defeat. Nelson Mandela, the black boy who had been identified as a "good prospect for education while minding sheep," who had gone on to become a freedom fighter and a Nobel Peace Prize-winner, had been elected President of a new government of national unity. In the same year, Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, was published; it became an international best seller.

Long Walk to Freedom is a fascinating memoir in which Mandela chronicles his life as a member of South Africa's oppressed majority. He recounts his experiences as a student of law and a practicing attorney in the apartheid society, and the emergence of his political consciousness. There is passion in his poignant description of how his engagement in and leadership of a liberation movement led to his being imprisoned for more than 27 years.

An epic of an individual's and a nation's struggle to bring an end to the discriminatory and dehumanizing practices of the apartheid regime, the book should be of interest to persons in diverse fields. I ventured into it slowly, drawing from the author's intricate de-

scriptions content that related to social work; more specifically, I found information in the areas of human diversity, human behavior and the social environment, and micro-social work practice. There is abundant material for those interested in social policy, legislation, and community organization as well.

Mandela's presentation of his life story highlights the efficacy of the ecological perspective and offers support for the humanistic theory that argues the presence of an innate goodness in all of us. The descriptions of his personal experiences convince the reader of the powerful effects of education and of cultural practices on shaping personality, behavior, value, and belief systems. The gender-based differential treatment in tribal societies and the inter-ethnic group conflict among the nation's non-European majority as they struggle to unite and liberate themselves from the rule of the white minority compel the reader to explore the possible reasons for such universal practices.

The aforementioned, along with the victory of resilience and desire for self-determination over the oppressor's attempts to crush body and spirit and the use of survival techniques characteristic of Victor Frankl's logotherapy approach

to treatment, have relevance to social work educators, students, and practitioners alike.

The book begins with a description of the author's childhood in the rural Transkei province in the southeastern region of South Africa. The reader quickly becomes magnetized by the evolutionary process of Mandela's conception of and feelings about race-based discriminatory practices. His experiences in the white-sponsored, for-blacks-only, high school and college that he attends transform him. Reading, meeting with fellow students from different tribal and socioeconomic groups, and observations of the interactions between white and black faculty lead to the young Mandela's increased awareness that a black man's limitations are the result of lack of opportunity rather than lack of ability. His view of the white man as a benefactor becomes a view of the white man as an oppressor. Progressively, and with greater clarity, Mandela comes to understand that "an educated man cannot be oppressed because he can think for himself."

It is with these new insights and with an element of anger that, at the age of 19, Mandela makes the journey to Johannesburg in search of more promising life opportunities. In this multiracial but geographically, legally, and relationally segregated urban society, he experiences hunger. He discovers that in every aspect of life, blacks must make do with a pittance, while whites enjoy one of the highest standards of living in

the world. Apartheid makes race the single most important arbiter of individuals. Professional and economic advancement are founded on and protected by the color of one's skin. The attempts of the non-whites—Indians, 'coloureds', and blacks—to unite and challenge the oppressive government are hindered, however, by counterproductive intra- and inter-group discriminatory practices.

During his years in Johannesburg, Mandela pursues a law degree, practices law, forms



alliances with multiracial groups, and begins to earn the title of a freedom fighter. The accumulation of a thousand and one slights and indignities produces in him "anger, rebelliousness and a desire to fight an immoral unjust system which bred contempt for its laws and regulations." Mandela describes the transformations that change him from a chronicler of injustice to a fighter for justice, and from a non-violent protester to one who selectively uses violence in order to dismantle "the harshest society that the world has ever known."

Mandela provides a vivid account of his numerous arrests, court appearances, and detentions. He acquaints the

reader with the brutal tactics of South Africa's police force, the subjective interpretation and application of apartheid laws by white prosecutors and judges, and the way in which the regime even manages to discriminate against "non-Europeans" while they are imprisoned—black prisoners are given short trousers to emphasize the fact that they are considered "boys" by the authorities.

At the end of his final trial, for sabotage and conspiracy, Mandela is sentenced to life imprisonment. In 1964, at the age of 46, he is taken to Robben Island prison, where the non-European prisoners spend their days in primitive living conditions and are subjected to both brutal and pettily nasty treatment by the white guards. As described by Mandela, however, we come to see how, even in such conditions, exceptional human ingenuity can develop survival skills and how oppressed and deeply wounded men reach "heights of character," feel compassion for, and even come to grant forgiveness to, their oppressor. "No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love" are the words that Mandela uses to express forgiveness and to instill hope.

The final section of the book focuses on the process of bringing apartheid in South Africa to an end—the negotiations with the white ruling party, Mandela's release from prison

on February 11, 1990, the one-person, one-vote election of 1994, and the formation of an interim multiracial government under Mandela's leadership. It points to the plans for national elections in 1999 to form a multi-party democracy.

Throughout the book, Mandela discusses the rapidly changing, Westernized South Africa, as well as the traditional tribal cultural practices that he continues to uphold. After finishing the book, readers are left with a sense of having completed an ethnographic interview that has given them the opportunity to raise global questions and to understand the meaning of cover terms. Thus, one comes to learn about tribal marriage arrangements and ceremonies, birth and death rituals, rites of passage, relational hierarchies, and expectations for inter-generational behavior. This is information that is relevant, and can be useful, to any social worker who is concerned about culturally sensitive practice.

In the end, what is most deeply stirring to the reader is Mandela's unshaken faith in man's ultimate goodness. He expresses this faith abundantly, while at the same time describing a system whose goal was to make his life as wretched as possible. With impressive objectivity, he draws a distinction between the person—the white police officer, the prosecutor, the judge, the prison warden—and the system, and reaches the conclusion that these people's "in-humanity" is something that was foisted upon them by an evil social and political system.

Thus, his anger towards individual white men slowly dissipates, while his hatred for the apartheid system that turns the nation's people against each other grows.

Reflecting upon a sympathetic comment from the "most callous and barbaric" officer on Robben Island, Mandela writes: "...he revealed another side to his nature; a side that had been obscured but still existed...



ultimately, he was not evil... he behaved like a brute because he was rewarded for brutish behavior."

The conclusion that Mandela reaches after observing and analyzing the behavior of those who have control over his fate is that: "There is a streak of goodness in man that can be buried or hidden and it emerges unexpectedly... man's goodness is a flame that can be hidden but never extinguished... Deep down in every human heart there is mercy and generosity... Love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."

Mandela's interpretation of his oppressor's behavior and his fundamental belief in the goodness in each one of us have deep affect on the reader, as they come from a man subjected to hardship and cruelty by his fellow men that is barely imaginable. This orientation rescued him from giving up in despair and, as President Clinton stated during his recent trip to South Africa, from allowing "his heart to turn to stone." Such an orientation can serve to instill hope in the reader during moments of personal or societal crises.

I have returned to *Long Walk to Freedom* more than once. Reading of how Mandela bore with and drew strength from his epic trials lends a steadying influence in difficult moments (though those moments could not remotely approximate the obstacles and difficulties that he faced). What I have taken from this book has served me; it has strengthened my belief that a streak of goodness must be a part of human nature. Nourishment from readings like this sustains us in our efforts to help our clients and our communities. This reading gives a sense of hope that we should wish to transmit to the generation that will follow our—and Mandela's—footprints. □

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