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Mandela's Way

John Dear | Apr. 20, 2010 On the Road to Peace

Here's a scene I'll never forget -- sitting in the Edenton County Jail with my comrade-in-dissent Philip Berrigan, both of us on ice until the trial for our Plowshares disarmament action, looking up at TV suspended in our cell. Unfolding on the screen was the inauguration of Nelson Mandela, the new president of South Africa.

Peter Jennings caught up with Mandela later and posed the question: "Did you ever think, during your 27 years in prison, that one day you would be president?" Mandela's face flickered with a look of incredulity and he answered, "Why, every single day my fellow prisoners called me that." Phil and I threw each other a shocked glance. Imagine such faith, vision, hope, determination and leadership!

And single-mindedness. Locked up for years on Robbens Island, toiling in heat hammering rocks in a quarry, Mandela and his friends nonetheless spent every spare minute studying and preparing for a new South Africa. Few could imagine such a thing. But he and his friends not only imagined, but confined as though they were by stone walls and stonier guards -- and a forbidding sea -- they toiled to make it happen.

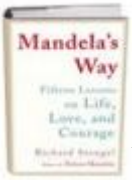
I once spent a week on retreat at a Trappist monastery with several of Mandela's prison comrades, and I asked them how it happened. They spoke of Robben Island as "The University." There, they said, they studied and debated every aspect of government, justice and politics.

Mandela assigned one to draft a new constitution, an untried topic for this poor soul. But he set himself to work as best he could, collecting the world's constitutions and gleaning from them the most just and humane provisos. And when the day came, the new constitution was unveiled -- one that not only abolished apartheid but ended the death penalty and unilaterally dismantled South Africa's nuclear weapons.

So far, Mandela has far outmatched Obama. Now and then Obama's rhetoric lifts spirits in passing, but his actions conform to wearisome American ways. Like his predecessors, he wages endless war -- conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan interminably drag on. And notwithstanding his recent rhetoric to the contrary, he has funneled yet more national treasure into state-of-the-art nuclear weapons facilities. More, his first duty seems to be to the superrich -- multinational corporations have been handed huge sums from the American treasury. An economic apartheid against the world's poor.

Nor, by and large, do I sense Mandela's visionary leadership among the hierarchy of the church. They should be helping us usher in God's universal reign of love and peace. They should demonstrate that same sacrificial spirit and soaring vision.

So what to do when leaders don the trapping of leadership but, out of blindness or corruption, don't lead? We need to become true leaders ourselves. It is we who must take a stand, undergo transformation, help one another change. It is we who must pursue the Gospel vision -- even if we harbor clamoring doubts that such a vision is beyond our grasp.



And how do we do it? For answers we can look again to Mandela. His friend Richard Stengel, who helped Mandela with his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, distilled Mandela's leadership style and listed its traits in a new book *Mandela's Way: Fifteen Lessons on Life, Love and Courage* (Crown). Here are Mandela's lessons:

1.tKnow that courage isn't the absence of fear. For Mandela, courage is a choice, an everyday activity, shown in large ways and small. Learn how not to let fear rule your life. Mandela says we have to act as if we are not afraid. Pretend to be brave, Mandela believes, and you become brave.

2.tBe measured. Stay calm in all situations because calmness diffuses tension and inspires people to act justly. Mandela's "measured response" was a large reason why South Africa did not explode into civil war. Think, analyze, then act, he would say.

3.tLead from the front. "Leaders should lead," says Mandela. "And they should be seen leading." That is to say, be conspicuous. Serve, act, speak openly. Thus keep the movement for justice and peace going.

4.tConversely, lead from the back. Mandela believes in building a team, sharing everything with one another, and pushing others ahead. We keep the pack moving, he says, by steadying it from behind. It's the way to empower others to take a place in the movement. *Ubuntu*, he says: Empower one another!

5.tLook the part -- a matter of carriage and bearing. Walk with dignity, wear clothes that command respect. Self respect was a key ingredient in his fight against racism. And his deportment inspired others to reclaim their dignity. In public, Mandela always smiled, a gesture to show he had moved on from bitterness and anger. A gesture that displayed hope.

6.tHave a core principle; everything else is tactics. Mandela's principle was equal rights for all, regardless of race, class or gender. Not keeping to a core principle diffuses energy. Keeping to it gilds the nuts and bolts of tactics and plans with true focus.

7.tSee the good in others. Mandela, like Gandhi did, tends to see everyone as virtuous until proven otherwise. He begins with the assumption that one is dealing with him in good faith. His many years in prison taught him how apartheid had destroyed otherwise decent people. Apartheid aside, he concluded, people's equilibrium tended toward virtue.

8.tKnow your enemy. To convert a resolute political opponent, one must understand him and discover his weaknesses. Mandela studiously regarded his enemies, and learned to understand them. He learned their Afrikaans language and appreciated their interests and their sports (a theme of the recent movie "Invictus"). By this he found common ground with his jailers and opponents. And though sometimes grudgingly, they came to see him as a human being.

9.tIn the same vein, keep your rivals close. Many in Mandela's own movement opposed him. Young movement radicals, especially -- they embraced different tactics and ideals. Yet Mandela kept in touch so as to be in a position to build relationships and try to reconcile. Likely his strategy prevented the factions from falling into all-out war.

10.tKnow when to say no. Time will arise when one must draw a line and refuse to concede. Otherwise one compromises his core principle.

11.tDon't be naïve; know the game will be long. In prison, Mandela learned to think in terms of "the long run." His perspective was from a historical perch. His goals didn't primarily lie in changing his own surroundings but in nudging history itself. In upgrading social standards. In diverting society down a more humane road. The long-haul view gave him patience, steadied him during set-backs, heightened the wisdom of his decisions.

12.tUnderstand that love makes the difference. Mandela encourages revolutionaries to be loving people, have loving relationships, to have lifelong loving companions. Be loving!

13.tUnderstand, too, that to quit can also be to lead. Mandela's willingness to step down after one presidential term sent a message around the globe: power is not the goal. The goal is a more just, democratic society.

14.tKnow that it's always both. Which is to say, be comfortable with contradictions. In perceiving reality, shades of gray didn't bother Mandela that much. He accepted his limitations in understanding. And his knowing that he could never lay claim to absolute right made him compassionate to those who opposed him.

15.tFinally, tend a garden. In prison, Mandela found himself wanting a garden, and after appeals to the authorities, his wish was granted. The garden afforded him some contemplative space where he could touch the earth and cultivate not only beautiful plants but inner peace. Everyone should garden, he says.

These lessons distilled from Mandela's life help me in my own modest efforts for justice and peace. They push me to see beyond myself and my accustomed ways of thinking, to keep the big picture in mind and stay the course.

My own summary of Mandela's life would be different. I would focus on Mandela's willingness to suffer, go to prison and die for the cause of justice, and the quiet faith and spirituality that undergirded his sacrifice. I would emphasize his sterling forgiveness, his ability to let go of resentment, and his eagerness to reconcile, even as he still insists social, racial and economic justice and peace.

I take Nelson Mandela seriously, and give thanks for his life and witness. And I offer his principles here as we each ponder how to respond to the global crises we face. May we, like Mandela, do our part for a new world of justice and peace, and go the distance.

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To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn. John will lead a retreat, "The Gospel According to John," April 30-May 2, near Stroudsburg, Pa., see www.kirkridge.org; and "Gandhi, King, Day and Merton," at Ghost Ranch Center, Abiquiu, N.M., see www.ghostranch.org. He will lead weekend retreats on "Jesus and the Gospel of peace" in Massachusetts, May 21-23 (see: www.rowecenter.org) and Los Angeles, June 17-20 (see: www.hsrcenter.com). John's latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), along with other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. For further information, or to schedule a lecture, go to www.johndear.org

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