

Meeting President Mandela

In 1990 Nelson Mandela was released from 27 years in prison. In 1994 his autobiography “The Long Walk to Freedom” was published. Also, in 1994 Mr. Mandela was overwhelmingly elected as the President of South Africa.

On reading Nelson Mandela’s autobiography he became my mentor. I had been practicing law at that point for 14 years with no clear mentor. I found in Nelson Mandela a great lawyer. He stood in the shoes of his clients as selflessly as possible and gave them voice. He ultimately stood in the shoes of an entire Country of 50 million people and selflessly led them to forgive. It was an extraordinary series of actions that allowed a Country to begin to heal from unbridled torture, violence, and killings that many could not comprehend forgiving.

In his autobiography so much is covered: the history of South Africa, the history of apartheid, the inner workings of the African National Congress (ANC), his three trials, his early years and his professional lawyering, and the brutality of his imprisonment. Most meaningful to me resulting in him becoming my mentor was his description of his inner life.

The active, disciplined, practice of the path of his inner life involved reciting out-loud and inwardly poems, Biblical verses and other inspirational writings. It was this active, disciplined process of thinking about thinking that allowed Mandela's inner Spirit to be revealed. It was out of this developed spiritual awareness that he transformed anger and always saw the good in another even if it required looking past evil. His highly developed spiritual life impacted all in South Africa and many around the world and still does today. I welcomed him as my mentor into my inner life with a bear-hug.

Mandela's inner spiritual path was congruent with a path I had been pursuing since I was 22 based on guide-posts as provided by Rudolf Steiner. This path had many avenues of approach. It leaves one free to find your own path that is active, disciplined and practiced. One aspect or avenue is Thinking about Thinking using verses, poems, Biblical or other inspired writings such that the process itself of Thinking about Thinking reveals a higher Spiritual Self that touches eternity, infinity and Divinity. Nelson Mandela's long-time self-described path was confirmatory of my endeavors.

So as fate would have it, President Mandela came to where I lived in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1999. It was the last year of his first and last 5 year term as President of South Africa. He was traveling with his cabinet. The first day on his arrival in Minneapolis. He spoke at a large hotel ballroom sponsored by the NAACP. It was a packed house filled to the brim with people likely exceeding all fire codes. Nelson Mandela's words, being and charismatic presence did not disappoint.

The next day he spoke at a luncheon of 200 that was a private gathering. It included Corporate CEO's who had sponsored his visit and political dignitaries and others. By that time President Mandela's autobiography had been out for 5 years. I had given many copies of it away. I had also given a copy to a political dignitary who was sitting close to where President Mandela was seated. I asked the dignitary on entering if he had read the book. He said no, but wished he had. I was with my long-time personal friend, The Honorable Michael J. Davis. I asked the dignitary if he could arrange for me and my friend to meet President Mandela. The dignitary asked the Secretary of State of South Africa traveling with President Mandela if we could meet the President. After a few minutes she

turned to look at us from across the room. The Secretary of State could see that my friend was a tall distinguished middle aged Black man.

Ten to fifteen minutes passed and the Secretary of State and President Mandela rose to their feet, turned around and she motioned with her hand for us to approach. Judge Davis and I rose and with excited anticipation approached President Mandela. He extended his warm soft hand and I, of course, reciprocated. I spoke briefly and said what an honor it was to meet him. Judge Davis addressed him as Mr. President and said what an honor and privilege it was to meet him. Then silence. I broke the silence by saying; "Mr. Mandela you are shaking hands with a Federal District Court Judge." I said; "Such Judges are few in number, appointed by the President for life and approved by the Senate and the decisions they make can have a dramatic effect on people's lives." I further explained that only one Court of Appeals exists between Judge Davis's decisions and The U.S. Supreme Court. As I spoke, President Mandela still had grasp of Judge Davis's hand and he now grasped Judge Davis's hand with both of his hands. As he held Judge Davis's hand, he looked him up and down from head to foot. He did so slowly, more than once. President Mandela then said; "I can tell by

looking at you that you are a compassionate Judge.” It is fair to say both Judge Davis and I melted and floated back to our seats.

President Mandela then proceeded to give the keynote luncheon address. He spoke for about 25 minutes. He had one consistent and repeated theme – “You as fortunate Americans have too much.” President Mandela developed this theme in detail and compared American’s wealth and the wealth of those in the room to the lack of wealth of so many billions around the world. He encouraged all of us to share. He was very complimentary of American Democracy and the economy of the Country, but persisted in explaining wealth inequality. It was apparent that some in the room were becoming uncomfortable. That did not phase President Mandela. He was passionate about his message that we all must share.

As we exited the room President Mandela and Judge Davis were about 15 feet apart and President Mandela looked at Judge Davis and said, “Nice to meet you.”

It was an experience of a lifetime over a 2 day period to be in the presence of and to meet a person of such greatness as Nelson Mandela. His personal transformation and strength of spiritual presence is developed much more in the talks I give about his entire life: Titled either the Greatest

Human Being or Greatest Lawyer of the 20th century. These talks are referenced on my website williamhenrymanning.com.