

Biography of Nelson Mandela

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Abstract

Nelson Mandela was a lawyer originated from South Africa. He was the first African involved in politics, who acquired a worldwide renowned for his political leadership notoriety and victorious struggle for the freedom of his contemporary. Mandela and his fellow black South Africans suffered discrimination and rejection, oppression and brutality on the part of their white countrymen. At a very early age, Mandela became conscious that something could be done to better the life of the black people through non-violence struggle. He also knew that it was important to have an adequate high level of education that would allow his voice to be heard. So, he determined to pursue his university education to become a lawyer. The great ideas that Mandela had from his childhood created his ambition that will make him an incomparable leader of the contemporary era. Leadership begins with a vision, takes training and demands the collaboration of others to work toward the accomplishment of the vision. Nelson Mandela embodied beyond these descriptions. He had a difficult childhood, even though he was a descendant of chieftaincy family. The development of the discriminative apartheid regime had reduced all black dignity to naught. Mandela became a contemporary freedom revolutionary who did not fight without bearing the hurt and suffering that it takes to liberate the oppressed from their oppressors. Right in the beginning of his law and political career, he got arrested several times, and finally was in prison for 27 years. When he got freed from prison, Mandela run for president, got elected and became the first black President of the Republic of South Africa.

Biography of Nelson Mandela

Nelson Mandela's life long experience of perseverance in freedom struggle, hardship imprisonment, political campaigns, and effective and successful leadership from bottom to the top level of the South African society, was worth drawing the global attention from all folks of life. The fast rate of globalization development also favored Mandela's support from the world opinion against the apartheid regime his country was sadly experiencing. The South African variety of race and ethnicity, as well as the impact of European colonization, made South Africa the most ethnically and culturally diverse country in the world. In the 1960s, the white population represented 19.3% (about 3,088 million), the black population represented 68% (about 10,928 million). According to the 2011 census, there were 41 million blacks (79% of the total South African population), 4.62 million were colored people (about 8.9%), 4.59 million were white (about 8.9%), 1.59 million were Indians, Asians, or another race (about 2.52%) (World Elections, Race, Ethnicity and Language in South Africa). It is in such a diversity that most original South Africans experienced oppression and fought for their civil rights and political and economic equality for many decades. Mandela was privileged, at a young age, to go to school up to university where he began to be known as a young activist, interested in the African National Congress (ANC), the political party that opposed the government regime in place. His longtime friendship with Sisulu was very significant because Sisulu who led several political youth associations and became the representative and Chair of a local branch of the ANC (Lodge, 2006). It was through his career of lawyer that Mandela fought and went through so many troubles that resulted in his 27-year imprisonment. Even from prison Mandela led his people until his release.

Mandela's Birth and Childhood

Nelson Mandela was born on July 18, 1918 into the clan of Madiba in Mvezo tribe. His was 12 years old when his father died, but he continued to follow his ideas that encouraged him to continue to school (Sims, 2013). When Mandela himself (from prison) talks about his childhood, Lodge (2006) states that Mandela “compiled a family tree and supportive notes for a genealogy passing through ten generations” and indicated that he was “of descent in the Thembu chieftaincy as a member of its left-hand house of King Ngubencuka of the united Thembu community in the 1830s” (p. 2).

His father gave him the name Rolihlahla, meaning “pulling the branch from the tree” or more accurately “trouble-maker”. Most of the time people do not link the name their parents give them to their characters or their future destiny. But, Mandela’s future will tell. Mandela’s clan was at war for a long time. And curiously, the war ended the year he was born. Mandela (1994) states in his autobiography that his father was sometimes “referred to as the prime minister of the Thembuland during the reigns of Dalindyebo, the father of Sabata who ruled in the early 1900’s” (p. 5). Mandela’s father later became the Thembu king and the village locate magistrate. Because of a dispute that arose in the village, the high magistrate deposed Mandela’s father, ending Mandela’s family chieftaincy. As life became difficult to bare, having lost everything, the father let Mandela’s mother move to another village, Qunu, where Mandela spent the happiest time of his childhood.

Mandela spent time playing with other boys in the village. At a very early age, when he was 5, Mandela began to look after sheep and cows in the field. He learned how to use slings to shoot birds in the air. He learned how to gather wild honey and fruits, and how to draw milk from the udder of a cow. While Mandela learned how to fish he would swim in the cold streams. He also became used to fighting with sticks, which was a sports tradition for young people in the

village. Life in the village was beautiful at that time. The boys used nature as their playground, slid on flat stone from the top of the hill down to the valley. Mandela's environment was a place of respect and dignity. Even when he defeated other boys in fighting games he would not dishonor them.

When it was time to send him to school Mandela was 7 years old the day he went to school for the first time. And perhaps because his teacher could not pronounce his African name well, she told him that his new name would be Nelson. School was a good place to be and to learn. Nelson was 9 years old when his father died with his pipe still lit on his lips. Mandela (1994) tells the story that "My father's passing changed my whole life in a way that I did not suspect at the time" (p. 13). Nelson's mother took him and they left Qunu village they walked many miles until they arrived into a large, populated village where they went to the royal residence of the chief of the Thembu people. Nelson was entrusted to the chief named Jongintaba. This chief became Nelson's guardian and mentor for about 10 years. It was the chief who has offered to become Nelson's legal guardian. He treated him well like his own children. Nelson got quickly used to the royal life and treatment. He attended a small school next door to the royal palace. There he studied English, Xhosa, History, and Geography.

Living with and observing leaders such as a village king in a royal palace will positively impact a young boy receiving education. Mandela (1994) states that "My later notions of leadership were profoundly influenced by observing the regent and his court. I watched and learned from the tribal meeting that were regularly held at the great place" (p. 18).

Nelson also attended the protestant church nearby. One day at the church, when he was 16, "he noticed a lovely young woman who was one of the daughters of the Reverend Matyolo" (Mandela, 1994, p.21). The young woman's name was Winnie who became in later days the

well-known Winnie Mandela. Nelson grew up with the chief's son named Justice who was also influential in Nelson's upbringing, for he was four years older than Nelson.

Mandela's Student Life

In 1937, when he was nineteen, Nelson went to the Mealdtown College in Fort Beauford. This city was once a dwelling place for the Xhosa tribe who lived there and farmed in peace. The white British settlers disposed the Xhosa of their land after over a century of conflict. The college was a Christian school of the Methodist church, where life was rigorous, and the students treated with discipline. The young Nelson, college student, was comfortable with discipline, because he had spent the past 10 years in a royal and Christian environment where things were done decently and in order. However, Nelson left Mealdtown College for the University College of Fort Hare, just about twenty miles for the Wesleyan College. Unlike Wesleyan College that had over one thousand students "Fort Hare had only one hundred fifty students" (Mandela, 1994, p. 37) and it was also a Methodist institution. As the Regent, Nelson's guardian, saw him constantly giving counsel to his adopted, he later advised Nelson to study law. Mandela (1994) relates that in his first year of University, he "studied English, anthropology, politics, native administration, and Roman Dutch Law. Native administration dealt with the law relating to Africans and was advisable for anyone who wanted to work in the native affairs department" (p. 38).

As Mandela was growing in knowledge and statute, he made much observations of social life practices within the college, that were odd and undemocratic. He He saw how unacceptable behaviors were made normal in color and racial differences. Eh could not understand why freshman were not represented on the House Committee. He formed a group of students and they discussed about the matter and they decided to break away from tradition and to elect a House

Committee made of two groups. They elected their own House Committee, and the freshmen defeated the upperclassmen at the election. As a result of his bold undertakings, Mandela was elected to lead the newly formed Committee. However, the upperclassmen were not happy. One of them, Rex Tatane, gave an unpleasant speech to the committee to discredit the freshers who had succeeded to overthrow the seniors. Nevertheless, the freshers became the official House Committee, humiliating the seniors in an unpleasant manor. Tatane and his group tried to go through the Warden of the College, Reverend Cook, to have him dismiss the committee. But Mandela and his peers stood firm until they won the battle.

This first experience gave Nelson the feeling of “the sense of power that comes from having right and justice on one’s side.” The Fort Hare student was growing taller and stronger, playing soccer and running the track. He applied diligence and discipline in everything he did. He saw the difference of result between himself and those students who had skills and natural ability, “but who did not have self-discipline and patience to build on their endowment” (Mandela, 1994, p. 40).

Nelson was now a very, multitask, active young man. He joined the drama society and acted in several plays to the amazement of the public and acting mates. Each time he played, he won standing ovations, although his part was a small role, that of one who takes a lot of risks and suffers serious consequences. In his multitask ability, he became a member of the Student Christian Association, and so went in the neighbor towns to teach bible classes. One of his comrades on Bible class trips was Oliver Tambo, a young science scholar who remained Nelson’s friend for a long time.

It was during his second year at Fort Hare that he began to know about the African National Congress (ANC). His friend Paul Mahabane was well known because his father,

Reverend Mahabane, had been an active President of the ANC. Paul's connection to that organization made him to be known as a rebel. He would never accept to serve a white man. Just to know how a believer of the African National Congress could influence the young Mandela, he talks about an encounter Paul had with a white local magistrate in his sixties, who approached Paul on the sidewalk and told him to go buy some stamps, and attempted to hand him some change. Paul refused to take the money. Offended, the magistrate asked Paul: "Do you know who I am?" Mahabane told him: "It is not necessary to know who you are. . . I know what you are." When the magistrate replied to know what Paul meant by that, Paul said heatedly: "I mean you are a rogue." And full of rage, the magistrate said as he walked away, "You will pay deadly for this" (Mandela, 1994, p.43). Nelson was very uncomfortable before this situation. The magistrate would not have asked the service from Nelson. He knew them. He knew Nelson would have obeyed. However, we begin to see how standing against the white oppression was moving him gradually.

The year of his Bachelor of Arts, Mandela began to feel how useful he was going to be for his widow mother back in Qunu. His immediate goal was to go build her a house and furnish it comfortably and make her happy again. He would be able to support his sisters by giving them all those things they could not afford since they were born. He was about to be a blessing for his family in Qunu. That same year at the university, he was nominated to represent the students at the Student Representative Council. This Council was the highest organization at the school. He later resigned because there was a misunderstanding within the group elected, misunderstanding because the students were not happy of the diet. This was his second resignation. Mandela met his adopted brother Justice during the Summer break at Thembu palace. The regent, Justice's father, had made marriage arrangement for the two young men and told them that they were

going to get married immediately. This news was dreadful to them. Nobody could interfere to dissuade the chief. So, the two brothers decided to run away. The farthest place they could go away from the village was Johannesburg.

Adventure in Johannesburg

They managed to leave when the regent was away, and arrived at their destination. They found an accommodation at an old lady's mansion where they were dispatched to the servants' wing. They were happy to spend that night on the floor. The next day, they ran into a series of adventures, trying to find a job at the gold mine. They met a man named Piliso, who had formerly received a letter from the regent and who knew Justice well. Before they found out what was going on with Piliso rough mood and attitude, he handed a piece of paper to Justice, that read: "SEND BOYS HOME AT ONCE." A new trouble began and they had to go look for another place to stay. Mandela found one of his cousins in town as they were going to meet justice at an arranged place, a guard stopped them and asked to search the suit case. He found a gun at the bottom of the case and called the police. As the police was taking the friend away, Nelson told them that the case and the gun were his. Mandela (1994) explained that "I inherited it from my father in the Transkei and I brought it here because I was afraid of the gangsters." However, the police wrote a report and told Nelson to report to the court the next day to pay for a fine.

Mandela went to court with his cousin Garlick. When they entered the court, he was introduced to a young man in his late twenties, a good-looking man from the Transkei, speaking English very well. His name was Walter Sisulu. This name had become prominent as he was a businessman and a local leader. Nelson told Sisulu about his situation at Fort Hare University, and explained that he would like to complete his degree in Johannesburg. He assumed that Sisulu

was a university graduate. But he was shocked to learn that in Johannesburg most outstanding leaders had never been to university. Whereas he was taught that you needed a B.A. to be a leader. Nelson lived with his cousin for some time and moved to a fellow Thembu, Reverend Mabutho, a god-fearing man. But he could not stay there too long, because Reverend Mabutho had found out his circumstance of leaving Thembu. Mabutho entrusted Nelson to the next-door neighbor, the Xhoma family. Nelson had a tiny place of his own, not comfortable, but it was good. Walter also help him to find a position of clerk with a law firm, Sidelsky and Eidelman, while he completed his B.A. degree. It was necessary to work with a law firm to qualify to be an attorney. But first, Nelson had to complete his B.A. degree, which he did not do at Fort Hare.

Mandela was twenty-three years old when he became a resident of Johannesburg. He was clerk and messenger at the same time. When he became more experienced, he would dictate information to the white secretary who felt embarrassed whenever a white client walked in. Sometimes she would give him some change from her purse and ask him to go buy some hair shampoo from the chemist. Various situations occurred that showed a bar of separation of the white from the black. Sidelsky warned Mandela not to get involved in politics. "Politics, he said, brings out the worst in men. It was the source of trouble and corruption, and should be avoided at all cost" (Mandela, 1994, p. 64).

Mandela also met some good white people who did not seem to pay attention on the color difference, like Nat, a colleague, who became a friend and even invited Nelson to parties where he found whites and blacks enjoying together. Nelson heard that the regent had come to Johannesburg and wanted to see him and Justice. He went to meet and greet the regent. Happy to see Nelson and his son Justice, he saw that Nelson had changed a great deal to become a man. But he requested the return of his son Justice to Thembu.

In 1942, the regent passed away, and Justice and Nelson went home for the funeral. That same year, Nelson achieved his B.A. degree. He became closer to Gaur, the man who influenced his way of thinking in the firm. Gaur told Nelson that “Education is all well and good, but if we are to depend on education, we will wait a thousand years for our freedom” (Mandela, 1994, p. 74). Instead of developing theory, Gaur’s thought was to find solutions. He began to mentor Nelson about the need for social change, showing him that the engine of that change was the African National Congress. The ANC was the oldest national African organization in South Africa, since it was founded in 1912. Gaur taught Nelson many things about the political situation. Gaur took him to attend several ANC meetings. Nelson wanted to understand more and more how the political machinery was operating.

The Lawyer and Political Freedom Fighter

In August 1943, Mandela marched with Gaur and other ten thousand participants in the Alexandra bus boycott, because the bus fare was too high. This campaign was very important for Mandela’s change from an observer to an active participant. He became the man to whom common sense and practical experience were more important. A successful career or good salary were no longer so important to him.

In 1947, Mandela began to serve fully in the Executive Committee of the ANC, working directly with the President of the Transvaal Region of the organization. At that time, Africans could not vote. Mandela grew in politics to become the first Deputy President of the National Executive Committee. He was now very active in the fight for freedom. In 1952, he finally opened his own law office. “Africans were desperate for legal help in government buildings: it was a crime to walk through a Whites Only door, a crime to ride a Whites Only bus . . . a crime

to be unemployed, a crime to be employed in a wrong place” (Mandela, 1994, p. 130). The Apartheid regime was reaching its climax.

After his divorce with his first wife Evelyn, Nelson met Winnie again in Tambo’s office. What a coincidence that was. He invited her from time to time. They got married on June 14, 1958. Mandela was already having problem with the regime government, as he underwent the treason trial and was banned from practicing. This affected his finance tremendously. But he did his best to have a good wedding with Winnie Mandela.

Nelson Mandela was arrested at 1:30 in the morning, on March 30, 1960. The police and the magistrate court took him back and forth from prison cell to court to no avail. The reason for the arrest was “Treason.” Many of his friends and ANC peers were arrested as well. Finally, the judge’s verdict was: “Yes, the African National Congress had been working to replace the government with a ‘radically and fundamentally different form of state’ Yes, the African National Congress had used illegal means of protest . . .” (Mandela, 1994, p. 225) Mandela was released and rearrested,

and sentenced to life imprisonment on June 12, 1964 . . . The era of Apartheid formally ended on April 27, 1994 when Nelson Mandela shared the experience of millions of dis” previously disenfranchised South Africans and voted for the first time in his life. On May 10 1994, Rolihlahla Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as President of a democratic South Africa. In 1999, he stepped down after one term as President and shortly thereafter went into retirement at Qunu, his hometown (Bateman, 2011, p. 4)

Nelson Mandela’s leadership was not an easy task to undertake. However, he had a vision, that of the social, political and economic freedom of the people of South Africa. The visionary leader could foresee, when he began to be impacted by Gaur’s mentorship and his

attendance into the African National Congress, he could see the day he walked to the poll with millions of fellow countrymen, to cast a vote for the first time. Nelson Mandela achieved an unprecedented realization that shook the whole world. He continued to lead the ANC from prison, he continued to advocate for his people from prison, and finally came out of prison to become the President of the Republic of South Africa.

Mandela's leadership had impacted the worldview of the world leaders, such as President Bill Clinton and President Barack Obama who sat by Mandela's side at the South African soccer world cup. President Obama states in a preface,

Prior to my election as President of the United States, I had the great privilege of meeting Mandela, and since taking office I have spoken with him by phone . . . But always in those conversations, there are moments when the kindness, and generosity, and wisdom of the man shine through (Obama, in Mandela, 2010)

Rosenbach, Taylor, and Youndt (2012) describe the effective leadership style and characters that perfectly go alongside that which Nelson Mandela has demonstrated throughout his life: "the most effective leadership style is dependent upon the organization's culture, the characteristics of the followers. . . Leadership is all about character, integrity and competence. Effective leaders are confident, adaptable and collaborative" (p. 4).

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