



Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela

Mr. Chancellor:

If a university is the embodiment of the relentless quest for Truth, then we in The University of the West Indies could do no better than assemble to acknowledge one who is best known for his own relentless struggle for the great truths that inhere in social justice, human dignity and individual freedom. His struggle encapsulates the deepest aspirations not only of the entire Two-Thirds World into which he was born but also of his personal life which remains a model for much that gives purpose, place and meaning to humankind on this Planet.

Nelson Mandela, a legend in his own lifetime, has long taken his place in the gallery of the iconic braves of the 20th century – a gallery tenanted by the likes of Marcus Mosiah Garvey, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., to name just three who through their visions, thoughts and actions have served to remind an anguished, desperate and sometimes demented world of the invincibility of the human spirit in the face of great odds and the futility of domination serving as a guiding principle for programmes of governance. The jailer and the jailed are after all in jail.

The trauma of severance and the agony of suffering have been overcome in each case by the triumph of survival and the final proof of one's humanity, manifest in the will and capacity of each to journey beyond survival – in Nelson Mandela's case, to Azania, the dream of a non-racial democratic post-Apartheid South Africa.

None of this is possible without the determination to make definitions about oneself on one's own terms with the capability to proceed to action on the basis of such definitions. That is power in its most elemental sense. And Nelson Mandela has been exploring the route to such empowerment in a variety of ways – from the insolent assertion often associated with those presumed to be 'uppity' by their assumed betters, through hard-headed intellectual advocacy of what is fundamentally and universally right for the development of the human person, through the resort to militant self-defence in order to keep alive, through the endurance of personal incarceration and the cruelties that go with that state of humiliation, coupled with passive resistance which thwarts the repression and simultaneously excites the perversities of the oppressors, to the delicate balancing of sensibilities forged in the crucible of personal suffering and a certain sophisticated refinement of grace under pressure, even developing a capacity to tolerate, if not to love, those who love to hate.

Nothing less would suffice to cope with what must be the greatest obscenity of human experience to have emerged over the past half a millenium, culminating in theories and practices of power which served to bolster imperialism and the arrogant triumphalist spirit of Western civilization, as well as to kindle racism leading to vile and villainous political and socio-economic systems of which apartheid at end-of-century has become the most infamous and possibly the most invidious in its all-pervasive tenacity.

Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress, over which he now presides, will have left to history and for the 21st century a legacy of decency, resoluteness, persistence in the pursuit of liberty, and an uncanny quickwittedness reinforced by an incredible 'cool' in facing the shifting stratagems and tactics on the part of well-seasoned protagonists of Evil and the fickleness of an indulgent wider world, or substantial parts thereof, that would quicker sacrifice ethics for expediency and human wellbeing for the bottomline.

From his early life in the Transkei he witnessed vulgarities of white racism and the injustice and cynicism of colonial rule. A born troublemaker who would stand up for his rights, the young Nelson was given to fighting for the rights of others as well. He was in fact expelled in his third year of study at Fort Hare University College for organising a student boycott of the Student Representative Council after the authorities deprived it of its powers. Nor was he one to give up the fight. And here it bears noting that he was not unknown for his pugilistic prowess as a keen and passionate amateur boxer, with more than a slight resemblance to the young Joe Louis. At age 22 he was back, no doubt with gloves on, to University – this time in Johannesburg where he got the full blast of South Africa's pre-Apartheid white supremacist rule at its oppressive best in the exploitation of migrant workers in the mines and in the practised brutality of the police enforcing the offensive Pass Laws.

The freedom-fighting African National Congress naturally attracted his attachment, loyalty and energies; and he soon founded the ANC Youth League which brought into the Congress more militant policies based on mass action through strikes, boycotts and civil disobedience. As Volunteer-in-Chief of the Campaign for Defiance of Unjust Laws he was in the line of fire for harassment and arrest. Greater leadership responsibilities in the ANC progressively brought more arrests and bannings. And his defiance via the legal practice he set up with Oliver Tambo in Johannesburg added fuel to fire and the white man's principles to Native Black impudence. It made sense then to the by now fully segregationist regime, if not to the rest of the world, that Nelson Mandela should be numbered among the dangerous, charged with treason in 1956 for daring to conceive, discuss and to pin their hopes on the ANC's Freedom Charter. The rest is history.

That history records Nelson Mandela in his testimony at the Treason trial in 1960 as saying: "*We are not anti-White, we are against white supremacy*". One can hardly fail to take note of such display of sanity despite the shocking Sharpeville Massacre of some months before, the banning of the ANC and the increasing denial to the Black Majority of any access to political rights or other fundamentals of civil society, though something called the "independent homeland" was being imposed, masquerading as self-government.

Nelson Mandela, world-renowned and much revered, ambassador extraordinary for millions of South Africans, himself South African born and over 21 years of age, still does not have the vote! With honorary degrees from several universities and awards and honorary

titles from all over the world, he is not even an "honorary white" – an admittedly odd status which the folly of Apartheid might well have been tempted to extend to this thoroughbred of a sibling of Black Africa.

Subsequent atrocities against the African majority and a fresh round of arrests and bannings after 1960 forced Nelson Mandela underground and to the painful admission that he had "*had to abandon my profession and live in poverty and misery as many of my people are doing*". But, he concluded, "*The struggle is my life*".

His life was/is the struggle. Further imprisonment and more trials finally had him sentenced in October 1963 to life imprisonment along with other great warriors of the movement. It is the measure of the man, of his spirit and the integrity of his outrage at the wanton racism and attendant injustices that would put him and his kind beyond the pale, that Nelson Mandela concluded his statement from the dock with these words: "*I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die*". Happily his wish for life continues to be fulfilled. Yet there is no reason to believe that he has abandoned the willingness to pay the supreme sacrifice, if needs be. In the language of our streets, "dis is man". People here, young people, have shouted "Man deh yah", "Man deh yah" which translates, Mr Chancellor, into Standard English not as Mandela but as "Man is here".

The Man is indeed here as he ought to be. And Woman too. For this arc of islands, including Guyana and Belize surrounded by land, is home for him and his great and trusted friend and co-pilot Winnie Mandela.

"....all the perfect people – Azania
[dreams the poet Lorna Goodison]
know that this scream will grow – Azania
to strangle your dreams – Azania
For no one is free – Azania
till the people of Azania
are free...."

In welcoming this visionary, freedom-fighter, statesman and patriot, mentor to the young and to all who prefer liberation to mental slavery, this prophet, priest and in his own way king, warrior compassionate, peacemaker defiant, visionary pragmatic and man for all seasons, this lodestar for all who wish to be on the right side of history – in welcoming him – I call upon you, Mr Chancellor, by the powers vested in you by Council and Senate, to receive into the fellowship of The University of the West Indies, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela and to confer on him the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.

*Special Convocation
Mona Campus
July 24, 1991*