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AMANDLA!



Compassion and Corruption

choosing the difficult path

Pierre de Vos

IN HER NEW book, *Good Morning, Mr. Mandela*, Zelda La Grange (who served as Nelson Mandela's personal assistant for many years during his presidency and into his retirement) recounts how she gradually changed and grew into the woman she is today. La Grange describes her life journey and how she was transformed from being a deeply conservative Afrikaans white woman (she herself admits having been an avowed racist) into a more caring person with at least some understanding of how racism dehumanizes black people and how necessary it is to treat others with respect and dignity.

The role Nelson Mandela played in this remarkable journey lies at the heart of the book. In La Grange's telling, Mandela exudes compassion and understanding for others. He consistently treats even those who have wronged him and should be considered his opponents or enemies with charm and (often) with respect. Even when people made mistakes, even when they faltered and disappointed him, Mandela was almost always ready to forgive. These traits are far removed from what I have come to understand to be the hallmark of most successful politicians, who are eager to put as much distance as possible between themselves and their colleagues who make mistakes or are caught doing something reprehensible or illegal. Showing such regard for others who are not like us and with whose actions we disagree profoundly is also the antithesis of what we, as white South Africans, did during apartheid.

Although far from perfect (there is far too much name-dropping of famous people like Bono and Bill Clinton, for example), La Grange's book moved me deeply. This is perhaps partly because she tells her own story in unpretentious prose. The English version of the book (which I read) is littered with the grammatical ticks that are familiar to most South Africans. Many of us whose home language is Afrikaans (the language of apartheid and thus the language of the oppressor) write or speak in a similar kind of English.

But I suspect the book also moved me because the story—of a struggle with a shameful past—awoke personal memories of my own attempts to deal with growing up Afrikaans in apartheid South Africa

Amandla.
Silkscreen. 100 ×
70 cm. Courtesy
of The Goodman
Gallery and Brett
Murray. ©2010
Brett Murray

and acquiescing to, and benefitting from, that evil system. Like La Grange, I also grew up in apartheid South Africa in a racist community. Like her, I was an unreflective racist who mindlessly disrespected black South Africans without even knowing it. Like her, I have been grappling with ways of dealing with the racism deeply embedded in me. Like her, I have become aware of the inherent and unearned privilege that attaches to being a white person in a racist world.

The portrait drawn of Mandela by La Grange is both affectionate and respectful. She obviously reveres the man. He seems to have treated her like a stern but loving patriarch would treat his favorite daughter. For her part, La Grange was prepared to put her life on hold to attend to Mandela's needs and to protect him from the demands of the thousands of people who wanted to be near him, meet him, touch him, take selfies with him, get him to do favors for them.

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(Some of them appear to have been rather vulture-like in their behavior and, as I read La Grange's descriptions of some of the people who tried to exploit Mandela for their own purposes, I felt a quiet despair for the human race.)

Despite its affectionate and respectful tone, La Grange's book serves as an important corrective to the beatification of the man who, after all, was also a canny politician whose loyalty and commitment to the African National Congress (ANC) (which he led into government after apartheid ended in 1994) and its leaders is now often airbrushed out of history by those

who wish to claim him as a universal figure of love and forgiveness. *Good Morning, Mr. Mandela* contains several reminders that, as a politician, Nelson Mandela could be both hard-nosed and steely. He could also be stubborn. La Grange relates several instances when Mandela's famous ability to forgive and to treat even political opponents with respect ran out and he would cut off all contact with that person. One such person was the former apartheid President P. W. Botha who acted in an extraordinarily rude and racist manner to Mandela when he was already retired, after which Mandela refused to take his calls. His sense of self-respect precluded him from having anything further to do with the former President.

The other apartheid politician who felt the brunt of Mandela's anger was F. W. de Klerk. On December 20, 1991, when De Klerk was still President of South Africa, he delivered an obnoxious speech at the opening of formal negotiations at the Convention for a Democratic



Cash Is King.
Silk Screen.
Courtesy of
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South Africa (CODESA 1) in which he attacked the ANC. Ahmed Kathrada, Mandela's old friend who served with him in prison on Robben Island for many years, has said that this was only one of two times that he saw Mandela lose his temper. Mandela delivered a cutting response

to the attack by F. W. de Klerk on the ANC, calling De Klerk “less than frank.” He then continued,

Even the head of an illegitimate, discredited, minority regime as his, has certain moral standards to uphold. He has no excuse, because he is a representative of a discredited regime, not to uphold moral standards. He has handled—and before I say so, let me say that no wonder the Conservative Party has made such a serious inroad into his power base.

Mandela was loyal to a fault—especially to his comrades in the ANC—and often assisted them even after credible allegations of corruption and fraud had been leveled against them.

You understand why. If a man can come to a conference of this nature and play the type of politics which are contained in his paper, very few people would like to deal with such a man. We have handled the question of *Umkhonto we Sizwe* in a constructive manner. We pointed out that this is one of the issues we are discussing with the Government. We had bilateral discussions but in

his paper, although I was with him, I was discussing with him until about 20h20 last night, he never even hinted that he was going to make this attack. The members of the Government persuaded us to allow them to speak last. They were very keen to say the last word here. It is now clear why they did so. And he has abused his position because he hoped that I would not reply. He was completely mistaken. I am replying now. We are still to have discussions with him if he wants, but he must forget that he can impose conditions on the African National Congress and, I daresay, on any one of the political organisations here.

What angered Mandela was not so much that De Klerk had launched an attack on the ANC and on its military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, but on what he saw as De Klerk’s duplicity and lack of honesty. *Good Morning, Mr. Mandela* confirms that Mandela found it hard to forgive those who did not deal honestly and openly with him. But there is a paradox here. His loyalty to the ANC and to its leaders seemed to have sometimes trumped his insistence on honesty and integrity.

Mandela was loyal to a fault—especially to his comrades in the ANC—and often assisted them even after credible allegations of corruption and fraud had been leveled against them. The manner in which he treated Jacob Zuma, who later became the President of South Africa, illustrates this point. In June 2005, Schabir Shaik (who was Zuma’s “financial advisor”) was convicted of fraud and corruption. The judge found that Shaik had solicited a bribe of R500 000 per annum (\$50,000) for Zuma from an arms company with the understanding that Zuma would protect the arms company from investigation for corruption. The judgment further found that Shaik had made many small donations to Zuma to create a “mutually beneficial relationship” between himself and Zuma: he would take care of Zuma financially, and Zuma would use his political influence as a leader of the ANC to advance Shaik’s business dealings. Zuma, who was then the Deputy President of the country, was fired by then President Thabo Mbeki because of the judgment which clearly implicated Zuma in criminal activity. A few days after he was fired as Deputy President, Mandela wrote Zuma a R1 million (\$100,000) check to assist him to pay his creditors. In this case, Mandela’s loyalty to Zuma (and to the ANC) seemed to have trumped his disgust at corruption and nepotism. Zuma was later charged with more than seven hundred counts of corruption, but these charges were controversially withdrawn by the prosecution authority a few weeks before Zuma became President—despite prosecutors’ insistence that they had a watertight case against the future President.

La Grange also recounts several situations in which Mandela used his name and his clout to secure funds from private businesses to benefit others. For example, he raised funds for scholarships to enable some of his grandchildren to study in the United States. There is no hint of any illegality in these transactions, as Mandela solicited the funds without providing any benefit in return. Because of his name and stature, many people with money felt honored to adhere to Mandela’s various requests for money—also for his charities, like the Nelson Mandela’s Children Fund. There is also no hint that he ever used his name to enrich himself.

Yet, a keen observer of the South African political landscape may well wonder whether this willingness to overlook serious ethical lapses on the part of friends and colleagues and Mandela’s willingness to use

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Monopoly.
Wood and
Plastic. 119.5 ×
189.5 × 4 cm.
Courtesy of
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Murray. ©2012
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his name and position as global icon to solicit funds from others may have encouraged other, less scrupulous members of government to become corrupted by money. The truth of the matter is that corruption—of politicians in government, of officials, of private business leaders—has steadily increased over the past fifteen years in South Africa. A perception has taken hold—rightly or wrongly—that many large and small government contracts are secured through corrupt practices. Although the South African government has adopted exceptionally good legislation to combat corruption and has instituted a raft of policies and rules to prevent corruption in the securing of goods and services by the government, there seems to be some reluctance on the part of law enforcement agencies and prosecutors to investigate and prosecute corruption. Officials who are caught are often reprimanded or moved to different positions, instead of being criminally charged and sent to jail. In a culture that can sometimes appear similar to that which allowed sexual abuse of children to thrive in the Catholic Church for so many years, the recognition that corruption is wrong and should be rooted out clashes with a culture of forgiveness and giving those who “made mistakes” a second chance.

To be fair, it would be problematic to argue that South Africa is uniquely corrupt or that the South African authorities are uniquely reluctant to deal with the consequences of corruption. Any U.S. reader will probably be familiar with the various corruption scandals surrounding the Blackwater Company, which happened to have been closely associated with former Vice President Dick Cheney. For an outside observers of the U.S. Supreme Court, its 2010 *Citizens United*

judgment opening the floodgates to allow unlimited corporate money to influence U.S. elections, and its 2014 judgment in *McCutcheon et al v. Federal Election Commission*, which suggests that only *quid pro quo* corruption—that is, corruption in which money exchanged hands with the specific understanding that a favor would be done in return—could be regulated in the U.S., appear astonishing. If only *quid pro quo* corruption had been illegal, President Jacob Zuma might never have faced any criminal charges at all, given the fact that it is often impossible to prove the causal link between a specific donation and the actions of a politician.

It may also well be that the problem of corruption faced by present-day South Africa would have emerged even if Nelson Mandela had been less forgiving of his colleagues and friends and had taken a stronger stance against the alleged corrupt activities of other members of the ANC. South Africa is a troubled country: the extraordinary transition from apartheid to democracy did not (as it could never have) address the structural injustices created by more than three hundred and fifty years of colonialism and apartheid. Many South Africans who bravely fought against apartheid may well look around them at the extraordinary accumulated wealth of white South Africans, who were never asked to pay even token compensation for benefiting so handsomely from the racist exploitation of black South Africans, and think that skimming some money from the state to catch up with white wealth may not be such a bad thing after all.

For me, the more interesting and compelling question that arises from the example of Nelson Mandela's extraordinary ability to show understanding, compassion, and forgiveness—even to those who might have done wrong—is whether it can teach us anything about being both principled and compassionate. Is it possible to be both? Can one insist on the importance of integrity, but show understanding for others who have strayed? For a white South African like me, this question may be particularly urgent and pressing. I would argue that many white South Africans are bewitched by deeply embedded but racist stereotypes which tell them that white South Africans are generally competent, trustworthy, and honest, while black South Africans are not. This is nonsense, but this does not mean that many white South Africans do not unwittingly see public events and the actions of public figures through the prism of this set of racist stereotypes. When I speak to white South Africans about

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Progress.
Plastic, wood.
129 × 99.5 cm.
Courtesy of
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Gallery and Brett
Murra. ©2010
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allegations of wrongdoing leveled against a black politician or business leader, I am often taken aback by the certainty with which some of them embrace the truth of such allegations—long before any court of law or other independent inquiry has found the person guilty. But the converse is also true. I think many black South Africans find it difficult to admit that a black person might have done something corrupt or illegal, because, by doing so, one runs the risk of endorsing the racist stereotypes held by so many white South Africans about black people.

As a white person who often comments on public events in South Africa, I am acutely aware of the racial politics of corruption. If I remind

my readers that President Jacob Zuma faced more than seven hundred charges of corruption, and if I support moves to have these charges against Zuma reinstated (such moves are now underway in the South African courts), am I merely peddling or endorsing racist stereotypes or inadvertently promoting such stereotypes? Why would I not be more compassionate, understanding, and forgiving of what President Zuma may or may not have done? After all, Nelson Mandela forgave even his most ardent enemies who jailed him for twenty-seven years. As a white Afrikaans South African, I am a direct beneficiary of this forgiveness. Is it not churlish to insist on the law taking its course, and on the appropriate punishment being meted out, if a person is convicted of corruption?

And yet, when corruption becomes endemic, it benefits the well-connected and the rich and condemns the marginalized and vulnerable to lives of poverty and neglect. Poor and marginalized individuals disproportionately depend on an efficient state to assist them and their children with a hand up. Where the state only serves the interests of those with political connections, it becomes very difficult for the state to help the very poor to escape from the spiral of poverty. And if there are no tangible adverse consequences for those who are corrupt, if we show too much compassion and understanding and do not insist on the corrupt being punished, are we not contributing to the perpetuation of the vast race-based inequality created by apartheid?

These are difficult questions to answer. My tentative response is that it is important not to undermine the rule of law, and to insist that all wrongdoers be treated in the same manner. It is also important to prosecute the corrupt, and for those convicted to be punished appropriately. This does not require one to take a vindictive delight in the fall of others. Neither does it preclude one from having compassion and understanding for those who strayed and have been caught. Understanding why somebody did something need not translate into condonation of what they did.

I have no idea if this is the position Nelson Mandela would eventually have settled on if he had been pressed to take one. In a way, it does not matter. What matters is that Mandela's example reminds us that following the easy path—refusing to forgive our enemies and to feel compassion for those whose views or actions we might abhor—might not be the wisest course of action. It is often far more difficult

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to recognize the humanity of those with whom we might disagree, or whose actions might be destructive or harmful to others, than to show understanding and forgiveness.

The late Nelson Mandela is now often spoken about in hushed tones, as if he were close to a saint. He was not. To my mind, recognizing that he was not a saint, that he sometimes made difficult decisions based on a complex set of loyalties and principles, makes his life all the more remarkable and turns him into a more interesting and complex human being than the half-saint of many of his obituaries. Doing so also renders his example more applicable to our own lives, reminding us that it is when we blindly hold on to our easy beliefs that we might be most in danger of losing our humanity. 🌐