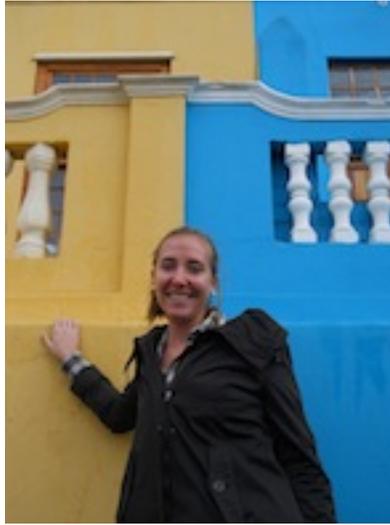


Conversations with Myself by Nelson Mandela



Review by Claire Kelly

Nelson Mandela was a political activist who denounced the apartheid regime in South Africa through both peaceful and violent tactics. Conversations with Myself fleshes out the personality of South Africa's most iconic leader, but it also presents Mandela as a real person. In 1962 he was convicted of conspiracy and sentenced to life imprisonment in the Rivonia Trial. Mandela continued his activism from jail, where he opened dialogue with President F.W. de Klerk. He was finally released in 1990 and worked with de Klerk to end apartheid and establish multi-racial elections in South Africa. Mandela was elected the first black president of South Africa in 1994. At that point the population had a 33% unemployment rate and about half the population was living in poverty. His government promoted a liberal economic policy to promote foreign investment. (This was actually quite an evolution from some of Mandela's early socialist views. His mind was changed by industrial leaders at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland who "expressed their views very candidly on the question of nationalization".) Mandela's government extended education, land rights, healthcare, electricity and water access to people who had formerly been excluded. Mandela stepped down after just one term as president but remained active. He founded The Nelson Mandela Foundation in 1999 to combat HIV/AIDS, address rural development and build schools.

According to Mandela, "One issue that deeply worried me in prison was the false image that I unwittingly projected to the outside world; of being regarded as a saint. I never was one, even on the basis of an earthly definition of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying." It describes an incredibly humble man with cool-headed perseverance and a deep capacity for forgiveness. Perhaps this is not saintly, but it is certainly beyond what most people are capable of.

The book delves into a darker side of Mandela's life when we read about his role in the violent side of the struggle. Mandela believed in nonviolence as a tactic as opposed to a principle. He tried to be nonviolent but when that proved unsuccessful in resisting apartheid, he had to switch his tactics. He actually helped found and lead the ANC's militant arm, the Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK). In 1962 he went on a grand and secret tour of nine African countries, not only to enlist their support but also to receive military training. "When the only way of making a forward movement, of solving problems, is the use of force: when peaceful methods become inadequate. That is a lesson of history, right down the centuries and ... in every part of the world." Mandela's unwavering focus on the cause of the black South African people combined with his clear headed logic, ability to shift tactics, and amazing capacity for forgiveness allowed him to steer back to the course of nonviolence when it was once again a useful tactic.

While it was Mandela's recent death that brought this work to my attention, I chose this book to learn about South Africa's struggle and progress towards racial and social equality. Mandela not only fought for equality but also for freedom from poverty. Today's South Africa is a land of extraordinary wealth disparity. While much progress has been made, it is clear that adequate economic opportunities are still lacking for a large percentage of the population. And anyone who has visited South Africa cannot help but notice the racial lines along which these economic disparities fall. I think this more in depth understanding of South Africa's political and social history through Mandela's words will better inform my upcoming trip to South Africa. I'm looking forward to seeing how our partner, Small Enterprise Foundation, is giving economic opportunities to South Africans.

In this second half of my report, I'd like to share some of the insights I gleaned into the realities of Mandela's life, his evolving philosophies and his personality through this work. Conversations with Myself is a collection of Nelson Mandela's private archive. The book pulls from the prison letters, personal notebooks, the draft of an unfinished sequel to A Long Walk to Freedom and interviews with Richard Stengel and Ahmed Kathrada. Reading the book feels like walking through curated exhibits at a museum. The primary sources are composed more thematically than chronologically, allowing the reader to absorb and draw his or her own conclusions. Adding to the museum mood, photographs of the actual pages and notes he wrote are included so the reader can see his handwriting. Sometimes the handwriting is small and tight, like in the letters he meticulously transcribed in prison, while notes from a conference are taken using looping cursive.

At first I was left wishing I had read his autobiography, A Long Walk to Freedom, before Conversations with Myself, but following the detailed notes available with this collection allows the reader to reference people and events as needed. In 2011 I visited Robben Island, where Mandela spent 18 years in prison and I came away with a strong sense of his cell, the quarry, the island etc. However, Mandela served a total of 27 years in prison; Robben Island is not the whole story. Another asset of this book is its ability to make the reader understand the different stages of his imprisonment and evolving political role.

Obviously being locked in prison for a quarter of a century would essentially rob a person of their life. This point is hammered home as his children grow up without being able to see him regularly, and family members pass away. He sacrificed his personal life for his fight for equality for all people of South Africa. "I have often wondered whether a person is justified in neglecting his own family to fight for opportunities for others. Can there be anything more important than looking after your mother approaching the age of 60..."

My favorite part of this collection was the ability to meet Mandela, as a person. He states, "I will be at home wherever home will be." He remains true to his values and clearly guided by his moral compass in everything he does. He recalls some of the horrible ways he was treated in prison, for example, "Whenever there was some bad report about the family, they would put the cutting on my table. Very dirty." However, he still manages to have positive relationships with many of the guards. He recalls how the guards would often turn a blind eye to the prisoners smuggling letters and notes to each other. But one time, another prisoner did so in such a flagrant way, right under the nose of a guard, that it caused Mandela to feel "humiliated" because he felt that they were abusing the trust which the guard had granted them. I can only imagine the complex dynamics of a relationship between prisoner and guards, but to be able to separate the indignation of political imprisonment and actually respect his guards and feel compassion for their feelings is an incredible feat.

He does make formal complaints about the indignities he suffers in prison, mostly his mail getting censored and visitors being intimidated. These complaints are meticulous, logical and persuasive; the embodiment of his lawyerly side. But that doesn't make him a dry person, in fact, his charisma literally jumps off the page at times. He recounts being asked to leave a meeting at the United Nations because his responses to people greeting him were a huge disruption. Mandela explains, "I can't shake hands sitting, you know? With diplomats and especially ladies – diplomats who are ladies – and when somebody comes you see I get up and I – I instinctively get up and shake hands."

For me, the most interesting artifact was his personal notebook/day planner. He records events but without any explanation – perhaps because of lack of space and also his reluctance for the document to fall into the wrong hands in prison. Here are the journal entries that I found expressed different facets of his life at that time: the harsh realities of daily life in prison, the extent of his political involvement from prison, and his personality.

14 June 1979 – “21st wedding anniversary.”

5 May 1982 - “Packet of Bistro (powdered gravy) given to kitchens by Ad (Adjutant) Terblanche with instruction that one teaspoon be used on Wednesdays only. First teaspoon used.”

18 August 1986 - “Film of Muhammad Ali in Germany, also ‘The Nerds take Revenge’ and a short.”

10 September 1986 - “Zondo (Sibusiso), Sipho Bridget Xulu and Clarence Lucky Payi executed.”

20 August 1987 - “Measurement of cell 6.4m X 5.4m.”

12 March 1989 - “Received 674 birthday cards from Cape Democrats.”

20 June 1989 - “Advised that the plan has fallen through.”

12 August 1989 - “Report that OR had stroke, flown to London.”

13 December 1989 - “Met State President F.W. de Klerk for 2 hrs 55m.”

From a notebook:

1) Phone Ted

2) Kofi Annan

3) Jakes Gerwel

4) Oprah Winfrey

5) Elastic socks

After reading Conversations with Myself, I feel as if I’ve been allowed a glimpse of Mandela’s human side – he is a man who enjoys gravy and buys elastic socks. He was constantly questioning, learning and revising his opinions. I’ve also gained a great understanding for the personal sacrifices he made while leading the South African people in their struggle against apartheid. Indeed, Mandela never stopped trying on his quest for equality, opportunity and freedom from poverty for all South Africans.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelson_Mandela