Nelson Mandela and the Politics of Empathy:

Politico-Moral Conditions for Conflict Resolutions and Democracy-Building in Africa

This paper analyzes Mandela's rhetoric of empathy and its moral-political implications with specific regard to the difficult transition period from Apartheid to democracy in South Africa. I argue that Mandela employed a deliberative, rational appeal to the riches of the human experience as a rallying point for the creation of a new society. Empathy is by no means a panacea for the problems of any society, but it can help establish conditions for deliberations and conflict resolutions.

Politics and Empathy

Introduction:

Prior to Nelson Mandela's release from prison and the subsequent efforts to establish majority democratic rule in South Africa, many commentators in South Africa and elsewhere, especially in the West, feared an unprecedented bloodbath in that country. The oppression of blacks dated back centuries, and observers believed that the majority of blacks would rise up against their historical oppressors and demand justice commensurate to their own pain. What the commentators did not foresee, and indeed few could have, was that South Africa would be a veritable example of peaceful revolution and a case study in peaceful conflict resolution. The importance of what many now call the South African miracle cannot be overestimated, especially since Africa experiences many conflicts. While it is true that the South African experiment is now being studied at universities and is emulated in other parts of Africa such as Rwanda and Congo, it should be born in mind that its fundamental building blocks were laid on universal, age-old philosophical principles firmly anchored in the liberal traditions to which Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu belong. This essay is an attempt to examine those principles. It is hoped that future African political and intellectual leaders can learn from these principles that guided Mandela through South Africa's tumultuous transition. This philosophical examination of Mandela's politics asks a central question: How can his initiatives and his moral capital contribute to inter-regional conflict resolutions and peace initiatives in Africa?

Nelson Mandela, like other architects of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, realized that appealing only to the legal rights of individuals in the post-apartheid South Africa might not achieve the peaceful negotiations and deliberation so urgently needed. The appeal to common decency that every individual possesses in differing measures, might achieve more. To that end, Mandela, like Desmond Tutu, fell back on the shared experience of pain and anxiety as facilitators of his politics. When we speak of politics, we refer to the elementary act of people coming together to deliberate on how to live together in local or global spaces. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt discusses the differences between the Greek understanding of politics and our modern day, hardball paradigm. The Greeks understood political life, or life of the city/state to denote "a very special and freely chosen form of political organization and by no means just any form of action necessary to keep men together in an orderly fashion" (1958:13). Emphasis here is on people coming together to discuss or argue out matters of society in an atmosphere free from coercion.

Arendt points out that Aristotle and the Greeks knew that human life always demands "some form of political organization and that ruling over subjects might constitute a distinct way of life." However, if coming together involves coercion, as it does in despotic or totalitarian regimes, it loses its noble status and therefore "has no relationship with the *bios politikos*" (1958:13). *Politikos* means, of, for, or relating to citizens. Citizenship, for the Greeks, of course, was restricted to men above thirty, who had never been slaves, and who mostly did not have to work for their subsistence.

We are thousands of years past this model of citizenry, and the understanding of politics has undergone transformations that make it difficult to conceive of politics

without thinking of intrigues and ugly attacks on people. Yet, I am attracted to the original notion of people coming together in freedom to organize their state. In our global era, citizenship in most countries, especially in the Western world and those influenced by its liberal ideas, is granted to individuals from diverse backgrounds and lifestyles. It is to these people that Mandela appeals. He challenges South African citizens to think about citizenship in liberal paradigms. It is only within these liberal paradigms, supported by empathy, can South African democracy ever be imagined.

In what follows, I will map out and analyze what I understand to be Mandela's preconditions for a successful association of free individuals from diverse backgrounds. I will consider the attitudes that would make politics and conflict resolutions possible, especially within the diversity of African countries. I assert that Mandela believes that good *politikos* is born of people's ability to will a society in which justice and fairness reign; such a society is possible when individuals imagine themselves to be in other people's positions, when they exercise their capacity for empathy. The idea of people putting themselves in the position of others and adjusting their lives accordingly presupposes the fundamental corrigibility of human nature; individuals can learn from their flaws and improve themselves. This is a fundamental liberal principle. Human nature assumes progress. This is progress understood not in a strictly Aristotelian-Christian teleology, that is to say, of man moving towards a preordained goal. Rather progress understood in this sense refers to humanity's ability to realize flaws and to correct them, remaining aware that one might likely commit the same or similar mistakes again. In that sense, humanity progresses towards goodness in general. Mandela outlines ethics marked by cosmopolitan impulses. I understand cosmopolitanism as Ulf Hannerz

defines it: “an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other. It is an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences” (1990:239). Only when we begin to imagine the experience of other people and the background from which they operate can we freely enter into a dialogue that would enable us to reconcile our differences and to begin to share with others the one world we know. We can help others change their world only if we have inhabited that world, at least vicariously.

Adam Smith argues that, regardless of how selfish people are, there are principles in every person’s nature that allow them to be interested in the fortunes of others even though they may derive nothing other than mere pleasure in another’s well-being. Human beings are naturally disposed to have a “fellow-feeling for the misery of others,” to change places “in fancy with the sufferer.” We feel others’ joy in the same measure as we feel their sorrows. These identifications are achieved not automatically but, according to Smith, primarily by “conceiving what we ourselves should feel in that like situation.” The identifications with others is also achieved when we place ourselves in the situation of the other. To conceive of ourselves enduring the same pain requires a conscious exercise of imagination. In our own ways, we become “the same person with the sufferer of pain, “and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them” (2002:11-12).

Adam Smith’s conception of sympathy would eventually be developed in the fields of psychology and aesthetics, especially in the German speaking world, as *Einfuhlung* or empathy.[1] For Martha Nussbaum “empathy is like the mental preparation of a skilled (Method) actor: it involves a participatory enactment of the situation of the sufferer, but always combined with the awareness that one is not oneself the sufferer” (2001:327).

Nussbaum states that empathy is not a silver bullet for solving socio-political problems; it does not necessarily lead people to become compassionate citizens who are ready to enter into dialogue with others. It is possible to empathize with someone without feeling compassion for that person. According to Nussbaum, a person, after imaginatively reconstructing the experience of the sufferer, might believe that suffering will ultimately be of benefit to the sufferer. Or one might believe that the sufferer deserves his fate and therefore deserves no compassion. One might also conclude simply that the sufferer is just unlucky. What is important is that the sufferer of a given fate be proven innocent and undeserving of suffering. Only then is compassion possible. Even then, there is no guarantee that empathy will lead to compassion. Nonetheless, for Nussbaum, empathy is an important psychological guide for compassion and social responsiveness. Without it, we are likely to remain cold toward others and unable even to know "how to make sense of the predicament we see. It is a very important tool in the service of getting a sense of what is going on with the other person, and also of establishing concern and connection" (2001:329-300).

Neither empathy nor compassion will replace other forms of moral consciousness such as duty or social obligation. However empathy both complements and is necessary to the establishment of connections with strangers with whom we might otherwise have had no contact. We no longer see people as strangers but as people who deserve our attention. It is important that we recall here that human beings generally withhold empathy from others because cultural and ideological narratives present them as irrevocably different from us; in most cases their differences are raised to an essentialist level in which they adopt moral relevance. They are often portrayed as contemptible and

therefore deserving of their misfortune. This kind of portrayal was the secret of the success of the colonial hegemony as Fanon observed. For him "the colonial world is a Manichean world," and:

> it is not enough for the settler to delimit physically, that is to say with the help of the army and the police force, the place of the natives … the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil … The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negative of values. (Fanon, 1985: 32)

Nussbaum makes the same argument regarding Jews in Germany during the Holocaust. The Nazis achieved their goals of obstructing empathy in ordinary Germans by "portraying Jews as a separate kind similar to vermin or even inanimate objects … [the negative portrait thus] obstructed compassion … by blocking empathy" (2001:335). For her, the genius of great cultures lies in their ability to dispose human beings to empathy; these cultures sharpen people's receptivity and their capacity to feel. To me, and in relation to Mandela's politics, his genius lay in making the citizens of South Africa amenable to seeing others as worthy to be listened to and to negotiate with. It is, I think, his belief—and his liberal position—that if people could be taught to listen to one another, they would surely work towards resolving their conflicts.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Old Wine in New Bottles?

It is likely that Mandela established a commission devoted to discovering the truth of South Africa's past because he believed that if people could know the extent of the pain endured by innocent victims of past violence, they would be moved to imagine

themselves in the victims' situations and possibly to change their attitudes. Revealing the guilt of the perpetrators would establish that the victims were not the brutes that the official apartheid ideology had portrayed them to be. With the truth of the past, the victims would reclaim their humanity; it would be understood that their suffering was undeserved. This is important for the experience of empathy and consequently of true healing.

Graybill and Lanegran agree with the common wisdom that "asserts that truth commissions promote individual healing and reconciliation which leads to national healing and reconciliation, which in turn provides a bedrock for democracy." They also acknowledge the result of James Gibson's test of the successes of the South African TRC. Gibson, they note:

> concludes that the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission did indeed succeed in convincing a majority of South Africans across the political spectrum that all sides were guilty of human rights violations and in turn suffered from violations. (2004:4)

Based on the result of Gibson's test, one can imagine that the TRC's admission that all sides were guilty of human rights violations succeeded not only in liberating the victims from what the apartheid state had accused them of being, but also helped the white minority to disabuse itself of its prejudices. The TRC's findings would also liberate the majority of blacks from the belief that all white people are irrevocably racist. Yet, given mounting accusations that the TRC was not meeting the demands of the majority of blacks for justice and fairness, one might wonder whether the TRC experiment could be called a success. In this regard, one might ask what Mandela actually set out to achieve.

What kind of truth and reconciliation did he have in mind when he inaugurated the Commission? While it is easier to understand what reconciliation is, it is more difficult to understand the truth of what happened in the apartheid era. In the thicket of more than five decades of apartheid violence and repression, can the truths of that regime be known?

The achievement of the TRC is close in spirit to the Greek concept of *aletheia*, which has been fruitfully interpreted by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Heidegger translated *aletheia* as disclosure, as that which is revealed. He understands the nature of truth as inextricably tied to freedom. Freedom is not the "mere absence of constraint with respect to what we can or cannot do." Rather it is a positive "engagement in the disclosure of being" (126). Freedom is valued "for what is opened up in an open region." In this way truth "lets beings be the beings they are" (125). Allowing existence to be what it is, is to "engage oneself with beings." Truth is dynamic. It is activated when we engage with others and, in this engagement, reality unfolds. Truth allows us to be *ec-static*, to stand out of stasis, and to ex-sist. If truth is to be understood as disclosure, then untruth would be concealment, or that which tries to deny beings their own existence. Anything that limits freedom, that fails to engage, or that hinders humans from being, is deceit.

When Mandela's government developed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, he was aware that what happened in the fifty years of Apartheid or in South Africa's long history of racism will never be fully known. He must have been aware that there can never be an exact correspondence between statements made in courts of law and the facts of people's experiences of oppression. South Africa, in his thinking and in the thinking of

those of the TRC, did not have the luxury of seeking a correspondence between people's statements and the facts. What was urgently needed was an atmosphere of freedom that would allow South Africans to engage the humanity of others, and in so doing, allow the humanity of all South Africans to discover its own existence. If Apartheid denied human beings their existence, exposing the methods of Apartheid would create the exact opposite condition.

Given that the TRC did not set out to discover factual truths as is done in courts of law through consistency of statements or correspondence to facts, truth became largely symbolic. Symbolism here does not imply that there was no intention to discover or reveal what took place during Apartheid. Quite the contrary. Any revelation of human rights abuse was welcomed by the TRC. The commission's guiding spirit was *ubuntu*. According to Desmond Tutu, the spirit of *ubuntu* involves generosity, hospitality, sincere friendship, caring, and compassion. A person with *ubuntu* is ready to share. In fact that person is prepared "to say, 'My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.' We belong in a bundle of life" (1999: 31).

According to Desmond Tutu and Alex Boraine, chairman and vice-chairman of the TRC, the goal of *ubuntu* was the re-creation of society on principles of restorative justice. Given the moral framework of *ubuntu*, the willingness to acknowledge guilt and to ask for forgiveness was considered a contribution to the truth. But beyond people's willingness to accept guilt, the TRC heard factual accounts from some of the perpetrators of apartheid crime. In these situations, if an apartheid police officer could acknowledge his participation in evil, and if a black militant could do the same, then the process of disclosure must have begun. Mandela therefore was more interested in the truth of the

human condition than in the logic-driven *adequacio* that might have led only to retributive justice. He was interested in the restorative function of *aletheia,* an openness or an open psychological space in which South Africans could meet and deliberate. Whether Mandela's methods and those of the TRC satisfied the large cross-section of society is, of course, a different question. At issue here is Mandela's intention to bring people together to deliberate. He is interested in *bios-politikos,* and the only way to achieve it is through moral appeal.

The Politics of Racial Stratification and the Task of Reconciliation

Informed by Heidegger's understanding of truth, we may ask what apartheid actually concealed. Much has been written about the apartheid regime, and it is not my intention to discuss it in detail. However it is helpful for our discussion to recall a core element of apartheid ideology that effectively blocked people from mutual engagement. Apartheid, like Jim Crow laws in the American South, or Nazism in Germany, sought to classify humans in false racial stratifications. People were placed in various racial categories that determined their value as human beings. Their freedom was determined by their phenotype. Trinh T. Minh-ha has identified such racial classification as a strategy for enforcing hegemony. In her view:

> hegemony works at leveling out differences and at standardizing contexts and expectations in the smallest details of our daily lives. Uncovering this leveling of differences is, therefore, resisting that very notion of difference which defined in the master's terms often resorts to the simplicity of essences. (1990:372)

Racial stratification implies that there is no similarity between members of different groups, no similarity, for example, between Jews and Germans. The denial of commonality between these different groups makes these divisions both arbitrary and simplistic. But hegemony makes no apologies. Its goal is to control, and it achieves that control by denying freedom and truth understood as essential openness. To appreciate the arbitrariness of racial categorization in South Africa, it is worthwhile to consider the wording of the following document:

> The Governor-General [of the Union of South Africa] may by proclamation in the Gazette prescribe and define the ethnic or other groups into which coloured persons and natives shall be classified in terms of sub-section (1), and may in like manner amend or withdraw any such proclamation. (Cited in Salazar, 2002: 4-5)

Mandela's first essential goal was to undo these divisions that had come to be accepted by many South Africans and to dissolve the rigidity of their thinking. This could be achieved by a simple empathic gesture, however symbolic, that would demonstrate that the oppressors had not only recognized the humanity of victims, but had also felt the pain of the oppressed. Changing a society's calcified understanding of life and people, would not be an easy task, but it was exactly what Mandela had to do in order to create a governable society. Creating such paradigm shifts is the most important step in conflict resolution. People must see and feel the humanity of others. Philippe-Joseph Salazar qualified Mandela's job as "attempting the nation's delivery in his speech – 'delivery' as labor or travail of the South African nation" (2002: 21). There is no better place to understand the birth pains of this new nation and Mandela's job as midwife than the speech he gave after the death of Chris Hani, the controversial leader of the South

African Communist Party and chief of staff of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC).

In a nationally televised address on 13 April 1993, following the assassination of Hani, Mandela (2003) said:

> Tonight I am reaching out to every single South African, black and white, from the very depths of my being. A white man, full of prejudice and hate, came to our country and committed a deed so foul that tour whole nation now teeters on the brink of disaster. A white woman, of Afrikaner origin, risked her life so that we many know and bring to justice, this assassin. (471)

Mandela's speech appears skillfully designed to create associations with the past. "A white man, full of prejudice and hate." Almost every black African can say this about the colonial master. But a fresh incident shed new light on that condition. The man who shot Chris Hani was a Polish far-right immigrant, Janusz Waluś. The identity of Hani's murderer was disturbing in many ways. First it made the killing blatantly racial and thus evoked painful historical memories. It rightly shamed many white South Africans. And it presented a quandary. White South Africans had to condemn the immigrant, whose act threatened to cancel ongoing negotiations and derail attempts to overcome past injustice. Yet, in condemning the act, they also implicitly condemned the long history of racial violence in which they may have been complicit. It was important that Mandela highlighted the role of the white woman who identified the white assassin. The woman, who was of Afrikaner origin and a victim of patriarchy, quickly reversed some of the harmful effects of what a white man, the patriarch, had done. In the same vein, Mandela

identified evil and its redress as coming from a single source: humanity, the human condition.

The effect of the assassination was the exact opposite of what the assassin himself had intended. A skillful negotiator, a master orator was needed to connect the dots. Mandela successfully prepared his fellow South Africans for his message of unity. The time was right for all South Africans to unite in support of the very thing which their fellow citizens had been fighting for: freedom for everyone. He went on to appeal to his white compatriots:

> Now is the time for our white compatriots, from whom messages of condolences continue to pour in, to reach out with an understanding of the grievous loss to our nation, to join in the memorial services and the funeral commemorations. (2003:471)

Mandela seized the opportunity provided by white people's expressions of sympathy and condolence. Their sense of loss was proof of their capacity for empathy. Mandela therefore invited them to consider Hani's death in light of the immense collective grief that black people had endured in the past. Chris Hani's death became symbolic of the black experience in South Africa. But Mandela was quick to acknowledge that the experience of pain was shared by black and white South Africans alike. For the first time in South African history, whites and blacks mourned an individual death officially and simultaneously. Mandela himself noted that the mourning was a watershed. He urged South Africans to seize the moment: "Our decisions and actions will determine whether we use our pain, our grief and our outrage to move forward to what is the only lasting solution for our country" (2003:471-2).

Commenting on this (Mandela's) speech, Kenneth S. Zagacki argues that it "represents a significant political, dialogic and performative effort to transform identity-based justifications for violence rooted in the past into certain kinds of ethical and political interaction" (2003: 711). The turning point in the chaos of the transition period, according to Zagacki was arguably when Mandela urged South Africans to recognize "the frailty and mortality of one another" (712). This turning point, which implied the recognition of one's mortality in the pain of the other people, is indeed the ground for empathy. Zagacki highlights the operative virtues and dispositions that would bring the country together; they are the shared commitment to "fundamental dialogic acts, such as empathy, understanding, and shared grief, since these acts revealed the possibility for new relationships and political community" (720). Zagacki argues that by acknowledging the right of South African blacks to mourn, by underlining this experience of pain and grief, and also by welcoming "the sympathy of whites, Mandela identified the ground for a kind of primordial reconciliation between the conflicted races, at least immediately after Hani's murder" (721).

White Women as Examples of People's Capacity for Empathy

Mandela was, first and foremost, a pragmatic politician. As a pragmatic, morally conscious thinker, he strived constantly toward goals that are worthy of those he represented. He knew that one way to win the hearts of white people was to appeal to their own experience of pain and humiliation. White people knew the significance of empathy. Many white South Africans who have transcended race and color have experienced humiliation resulting from ideologies such as patriarchy. In at least two other

speeches, Mandela subtly associated Apartheid with patriarchy—another ideology under which humanity suffers. As the leader of the new nation, he was intent on eliminating these destructive ideologies and to steer the nation out of its morass. The white man was both the architect of Apartheid and the *uber*-patriarch; the white woman, also a victim of patriarchy's oppression, could help white society understand what blacks had been suffering under Apartheid. This is no essentialist claim, but a masterful technique of finding inroads into the hearts and minds of people, especially those in privileged positions from whom empathy would henceforward be expected.

Two such women were Helen Joseph and Ingrid Jonker. Helen Joseph was a South African anti-apartheid activist, born in Easebourne, England, who graduated from King's College London in 1927. She taught in India and came to live in Durban, South Africa in 1930. She took a job with the Garment Workers Union (GWU) and came under the influence of Solly Sachs, among others. Her awareness of social injustice led her to becoming a founding member of the African National Congress (ANC)'s white ally, the Congress of Democrats (COD), and national secretary of Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) in the 1950s.[2] She suffered at the hands of the apartheid regime because of her activism. She passed away on 25 December 1992 in Johannesburg.

Mandela stressed the fact that Helen Joseph, a white woman, had much to teach the country that was then being born. She took a broad view of the directions that people should take in uniting South Africans. In his speech at her funeral, Mandela said that her political involvement:

> was shaped by her experience working with Solly Sachs in the garment workers union. It was here that she encountered the triple oppression suffered by South

> African women and the added repression that the pass laws brought to bear on the majority of black South Africans. Helen's response to the pass laws was that they affected African men and women directly and oppressed all South Africans who were forced either to carry a pass or to watch others being persecuted. (2003:473)

More than her lessons in unity, Helen Joseph's greatest contribution, especially in regard to empathy, was the realization that the victims of oppression were not the only ones to suffer; those who watched them being oppressed suffered also. They suffered vicariously. It was therefore everyone's obligation to end the system that brought oppression and misery to so many. In her view, no society could call itself civilized while any of its members lived under oppression. The pain of one is the pain of all because empathy links us all to a common fate.

In his homage to the iconic South African poet Ingred Jonker, who took her own life, Mandela also paints a picture of shared pain issuing from a single person. Jonker has been compared in temperament and intensity to her American contemporaries Sylvia Plath and Ann Sexton. She knew both personal pain and the pain of the Other. Her father, Dr. Abraham Jonker, a prominent MP, divorced his wife, and left her penniless so that "Ingrid watched her mother descend into poverty and spiral into madness until she commit suicide when Ingrid was 10." Ingrid thus experienced first-hand the pain of rejection as she watched her mother sink into poverty and madness. Her mother's suffering instilled in Ingrid a haunting fear of rejection. Ingrid's case is typical of patriarchal oppression. The pain and humiliation she experienced sensitized her to injustice and oppression.[3] She would draw on the wisdom gained by her experience when

she saw a black baby, who was shot in his mother's arms. According to Helena Noguiera, Jonker underlined Dylan Thomas's words: "after the first death, there is no other," and then wrote: "The child who died at Nyanga.' "Like Dylan Thomas she understood that she could no longer soar above the horror and the moral collapse of her world (Nogueira, "All About Ingrid"). It is pain of the pain of this experience that gave birth to her poem, "Die Kind," translated as "The child who was shot dead by soldiers at Nyanga."

> The child is not dead
> The child lifts his fists against his mother
> Who shouts Afrika ! shouts the breath
> Of freedom and the veld
> In the locations of the cordoned heart
>
> The child lifts his fists against his father
> in the march of the generations
> who shouts Afrika ! shout the breath
> of righteousness and blood
> in the streets of his embattled pride
>
> The child is not dead
> not at Langa nor at Nyanga
> not at Orlando nor at Sharpeville
> nor at the police station at Philippi
> where he lies with a bullet through his brain
>
> The child is the dark shadow of the soldiers
> on guard with rifles Saracens and batons
> the child is present at all assemblies and law-givings
> the child peers through the windows of houses and into the hearts
> of mothers
> this child who just wanted to play in the sun at Nyanga is everywhere
> the child grown to a man treks through all Africa
> the child grown into a giant journeys through the whole world
>
> Without a pass[4]

Seizing on the poem born of this particular experience, Mandela singled out Ingrid Jonker as a model for his dream of a new South Africa. In the speech, "South Africans,

African, and Citizens of the World," he said that she "became a South African, an African and a citizen of the world" (2003:148). It is important to note the active verb "to become," one that emphasizes process, rather than the more static "to be," which denotes what is already there, what has already taken shape. The focus on becoming allows us to see how Ingrid came to be the prototype of the South African, African, and the cosmopolitan Citizen of the World.

Mandela began this speech thus: "The certainties that come with age tell me that among these we shall find an Afrikaner woman who transcended a particular experience." For Mandela, age assumed experience. Age and experience taught him that we become citizens of the world as Ingrid Jonker did, not by barricading ourselves against the experiences of other people, but by being fundamentally open to them. Thus when the black child was shot in her mother's arm by a white policeman, Jonker put herself in the place of that child. It was not that child who died; it was Jonker herself. The poem gives the impression that the child who has just been shot did not die; rather he took on a new form of life and continued to live until he was able to trek through all Africa "without a pass." The poem works specifically at the moment the speaker magically merges with the self of the victim. It is at the point of self-identification with that black child that Jonker became more than herself; she was able to transcend the "I," to connect with the human community which does not discriminate.

Mandela seized on the riches of this gesture of empathy, this conscious reaching out to the humanity of the Other as expressed by Jonker, to implore the rest of society to transcend the artificial boundaries that the old regime had established. It is to Ingrid Jonker and "others like her, we owe a debt to life itself. To her and others like her, we

owe a commitment to the poor, the oppressed, the wretched and the despised" (2003:148). Ingrid Jonker's life teaches "that our blemishes speak of what all humanity should not do. We understand this fully that our glories point to the heights of what human genius can achieve" (151).

Empathy and Reconciliation

Earlier on, I established Mandela's belief in people's mutual recognition of mortality as grounds for empathy. The empathizer acknowledges his own mortality at the moment that he puts himself in the place of another person in pain. At that moment, both the empathizer and the sufferer occupy a common space, a uniform starting point: they are all frail, and they have to help each other face the difficulties of existence. They can therefore begin to negotiate. As Richard Rorty argues in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, exposure to the individuality of others and to their pain has given the modern intellectual world more moral insight than all the abstract metaphysical thinking of Plato, Descartes, and Kant put together (1989: 192).

Certain that he had prepared the ground for negotiations, or for connectivity between disparate groups, Mandela moved on to reconciliation. He kept the ghost of the violent past alive as a necessary, rhetorical device that not only showed the listener that the nation had indeed moved forward, but also that it has not moved far enough; it needed to complete that process of full reconciliation. It was therefore no longer possible for whites to claim that too much was being demanded of them given that they have been made aware of the crimes committed in their name. On the other hand, the black majority could not claim that justice was not being pursued since that was exactly what Mandela

sought to address through civilized means, which included multi-party negotiations. In the address to the plenary session of the Multi-Party Negotiations Process, on 17 November 1993, Mandela balanced the relationship between the past and the present:

> We emerge from a conflict ridden society; a society in which color, class and ethnicity were manipulated to sow hatred and division. We emerge from a society which was structured on violence and which raised the specter of a nation in danger of never being able to live at peace with itself. (2003:128)

Mandela acknowledged that there was still doubt in the hearts of blacks and whites alike. He welcomed these fears as elements of the pain of mutual growth; he then went on to assure them not only that their doubts were normal, but that in spite of their fears, they had a place in the new dispensation. Indeed, they should bring their doubts to the fore specifically because now they share common ground. They would be listened to; others would understand their pain:

> You have a right to raise your fears and your concerns. We, for our part, are committed to giving you the opportunity to bring forth those views so that they may be addressed within the framework of democracy. (2003:128)

True to his role as the father of the new nation, Mandela urged everyone to play active roles in the birth of democracy. To achieve active participation, he had to cast the new society as the exact opposite of the old one that alienated, or even punished, dissenting voices and that thrived on the fear it generated. It was a society built on violence and essentialist stratification, a society in which people never bothered to imagine themselves in the situation of others in pain:

> Together, we can build a society free of violence. We can build a society grounded on friendship and our common humanity – a society founded on tolerance. That is the only road open to us. It is a road to a glorious future in this beautiful country of ours. Let us join hands and march into the future. (2003:129)

There was little doubt in most listeners' minds that Mandela's use of the first person plural, "we" was honest. Kenneth Zagacki, emphasizing what I identify as Mandela's moral capital, points out that "one could only create a civil society through the probity of one's example" (Zagacki, 2003: 712). This underlines the fact that without a trustworthy leader, mere empathy cannot take any society closer to understanding and reconciliation. In The *Politics of Moral Capital*, John Kane discusses four main sources of moral capital: "cause, action, example, rhetoric/symbolism." For Kane, "the real key for Mandela's success lay in the combination of the last two" (2001: 119). Mandela's skillful use of the first person plural is not only a testament to his rhetorical mastery, but also to his belief in the reconciliation exemplified by his own life. He forgave his jailers. Because of the empathic world that Mandela himself had established, his use of the word "we" was an invitation to each individual to consider that he was speaking to them personally. Mandela then invited everyone to join hands with him to fight for the victims of society's violence; the struggle was about those people; the struggle was about victims, empathy, and solidarity. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was born of empathy. Judging from the preceding examples, every South African could lay claim to being a victim of violence and therefore both worthy of empathizing and needing other people's empathy.

In his address to the Interfaith Commissioning Service for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Mandela went on to place emphasis where emphasis belonged—on the victims:

> Too often, victims have been neglected in our society. It is necessary that we identify the individuals who have suffered and their families, as well as communities. But the whole South African nation has been a victim, and it is in that context that we should address the restoration of dignity and the issue of reparation. (2003:132)

Reconciliation is also about overcoming history, not only in the sense of being informed by the past, but also by refusing to be determined by that past. In South Africa, the 16th of December has been and is currently observed for different reasons. It had been the Day of the Vow for Afrikaners, a day of remembrance for the *Voortrekkers* who defeated a Zulu army at the Battle of Blood River. In 1961 it became the day when ANC activists began taking up arms to overthrow Apartheid. It is now celebrated as the day of reconciliation. Mandela's speech on December 16th 1995 brought together the idea of going beyond the past and forging a future that belonged to everyone: "Today we no longer vow our mutual destruction but solemnly acknowledge our interdependence as free and equal citizens of our common motherland" (2003:137). Mandela's gesture is to be understood as a symbol of the ultimate triumph over the past, or at least the intention to go beyond the encrusted categories of victor and vanquished that fanned the embers of hatred.

The TRC and the Global Moral Consciousness

The 21st century, though still in its early years, is replete with examples of antipathy. In addition to war, racism, and oppression in many parts of the world, greed has traced the storyline of this century. Greed and exploitation have privileged the upward mobility of the few and the speedy downward mobility of the many. There is an increasing corporatization of everyday life, which, I think, is the result of measuring success by cold logic and economic Darwinism. The many crises of this new century tell us that the old model of rugged individualism and the survival of the fittest often leads to the exploitation of the weak. But then no one is sure how to move ahead since we cannot, and do not wish to, abandon the liberal ideas that characterize modern democratic societies. Perhaps this is where Mandela's successful application of empathy to South African situation becomes urgently enlightening.

Phillip-Joseph Salazar believes strongly that South Africa could be "a blueprint for the construction of a European nation" (2002: xvii) mainly on the strength of its peaceful transition from Apartheid to democracy. Moreover, South Africa could serve as a blueprint for a new paradigm of social survival, one that depends on people's ability to project themselves into other people's situations and to act accordingly, at least by coming together to negotiate.

While I do not contest Salazar's optimism about the TRC and Europe, I do feel that the African continent is in great need of Mandela's politics and moral capital, but more importantly his philosophy of conflict resolution. Given the conflicts in all regions of the continent, a new philosophy of conflict resolution must be allowed a chance for success in order to prevent the ultimate reign of chaos. This new philosophy of conflict resolution could begin with a strong realization that we share the same world, and we can only

survive if the spirit of sharing is actively encouraged and allowed to evolve into a culture. The success of Mandela's appeal to empathy has proven that it is possible for people share experiences by imagining themselves in other people's situations. The South African experiment therefore becomes a blueprint for our century and especially for the African continent. This experiment, as I have tried to explain, recognizes that we are all dependent on one another even in our quest for rugged individualism. Desmond Tutu (1996) has also praised the spirit of *ubuntu*, the traditional South African philosophy of humanism mentioned above, as a spirit that guided the deliberations of the members of the TRC. *Ubuntu* underlines the spirit of sharing. The consciousness that we share our world with others has ethical implications; it calls on us to reexamine how we relate to others. Against this background, empathy and forgiveness can be seen not as a sign of weakness, but as the courage and the strength to affirm our existence as inextricably linked with the existence of others. In so doing, we reaffirm ourselves as rational, ethically conscious beings. The consciousness of ourselves as ethically rational beings will in turn inform our policies and decisions.

Nelson Mandela realized full well that empathy and the achievements of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission are transient. They have only set the stage for more encompassing and far-reaching deliberations on how South Africans can live together. Other African countries and their leaders would do well emulate the example of South Africa.

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[1] The OED notes that the terminology regarding empathy developed in the early 20th century in the disciplines of psychology and aesthetics. In Ancient Greek, *empátheia* is the power of projecting one's personality into (and so fully) comprehending the object of contemplation. Secondly, it is the ability to understand and share the feeling of another. Empathy is different from sympathy which is understood as a feeling of pity or sorry for someone else's misfortune, e.g., having great sympathy for flood victims. As noun, empathy is understood to be "the intellectual identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another." [What is the source of this definition? Is it all from the OED?]

[2] http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/bios/joseph,h.htm See also http://www.anc.org.za/4076

[3] I do not suggest that all those who experience humiliation automatically learn to empathize with others. In fact there is a high probability that they will themselves become oppressors. However, In Ingrid Jonker's case, the humiliating experience provided an opportunity to reflect on the pain of others and thereby

transcend the artificial conditions and the system that made such a situation possible. What is said about Ingrid Jonker can be said about Nelson Mandela.

[4] Ingrid Jonker, "Die Kind" Selected Poems, Ingrid Jonker; Jonathan Cape 1968. http://www.muurgedichten.nl/jonker.html