Consulting Corner

By JULIAN B. KIGANDA

COME DECEMBER STILL, IT WILL MARK TWO YEARS SINCE THE PASSING OF NELSON MANDELA, BUT HIS LARGER-THAN-LIFE SPIRIT WILL LIVE ON FOREVER. AS SOUTH AFRICANS MOURNED HIS PASSING THAT DAY, THEY CELEBRATED HIS LEGACY BY SINGING AND DANCING IN THE STREETS.

“He was a man who loved life and he would have wanted us to celebrate him in this way,” said one South African when asked about the celebrations. Indeed, in picture after picture that I found of the beloved Madiba—as his countrymen affectionately called him—he was smiling. And that is the first lesson I learnt from this leader who changed the world.

1. SMILE. DON’T ALLOW EXTERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES TO MAKE YOU LOSE YOUR ABILITY TO SMILE, LAUGH, AND FIND JOY IN JUST BEING ALIVE.

How many times do we lose our joy because of things beyond our control that ultimately impact our lives? After 27 years spent in jail under harsh circumstances that could break anyone, Mandela walked out of jail smiling and waving to half a million supporters. Throughout his life, he continued to smile, enjoying a newfound lease on life and sharing his unconditional love and humour with humanity. What a better place this world would be if we all learnt to smile and laugh more. Mandela urged us to:


2. LOVE YOUR ENEMIES AND WORK WITH THEM WHEN NECESSARY.

Even at the expense of losing support from some of his own people, Mandela literally and figuratively reached across the aisle and made a deliberate effort to work with his former enemies for the good of his country. He recognised that the development and progress of his country could only be achieved through collective action—even with people who had once oppressed him.

As he said, “If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner.” Often in life, we find ourselves at odds with individuals and groups who have different ideals than we do. It’s our job to figure out if working with them is necessary to better serve others, and if so, find common ground on which to build a platform for change.

3. FORGIVENESS IS FREEDOM.

“I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I’d still be in prison.” How many of us are living in our own self-imposed prisons because we hold on to bitterness that is not only poisoning our spirits, but our external surroundings? You cannot truly have peace until you’ve let go of past hurts or grudges. As the late Madiba so aptly stated:

“Revenge is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies.”

4. NEVER STOP LEARNING.

At the age of 70, and while still in prison, Madiba earned his law degree through a correspondence programme from the University of London. He believed that “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”

Lifelong learning comes in many forms: to some, it’s pursuing a degree; to others, it’s learning a new language; and, still to others, it’s staying curious and actively seeking out knowledge to become a better-informed, more empathetic citizen of the world. Regardless of your age, you should never stop learning.

5. YOUR PURPOSE IS NOT ABOUT YOU.

Mandela, in a rousing speech that was meant to be censored, but somehow made its way out to the world, proclaimed right before he was sentenced to life in prison for sabotage: “During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. 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 need be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.”

And throughout his life, Mandela continued to prove his determination to fight. “I am not the first to say that, indeed, our time on earth is about serving others first and foremost, and leaving behind a legacy that future generations can build upon.”

6. DO NOT ALLOW OBSTACLES TO DETER YOU FROM FULLY FULFILLING YOUR DESTINY.

Mandela believed that “difficulties break some men but make others.” In life, we encounter many challenges that can easily take us off track and blur the vision we initially had for our lives.

In all his years in prison, Mandela’s inmates attested to the fact that despite the harsh conditions they encountered, this man of vision, remained determined, kind, and a leader even beyond bars. When given the opportunity to gain his freedom by renouncing his stance on ending apartheid, he refused. He would not compromise his ideals for the easy way out.

After his eventual release, he stated, “There are few misfortunes in this world that you cannot turn into a personal triumph if you have the iron will and the necessary skill.” Words for all of us to live by.

7. BELIEVE IN THE POWER OF YOUR DREAMS.

“No one can be prepared for something while secretly believing it will not happen.”

Mandela believed that his vision of a free South Africa would one day become reality. He dedicated himself so much to that goal, that he brought the rest of the world along with him.

The anti-apartheid movement grew out of the collective efforts of individuals who believed in their dream of freedom—a dream that was represented by one man’s larger than life vision for his country. As with all great leaders, the end goal was more important than the obstacles to realising it. What dream do you believe in enough to put everything you have behind it?

Parting Thoughts

The greatest tribute we can pay to this man who has made an impact on his country, his continent and humankind is to live out the rest of our lives applying his universal ideals. For:

“There is no passion to be found playing small—in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living.” — Nelson Mandela

What lessons did you learn from Nelson Mandela?

South Africa's former President Nelson Mandela smiles as newly appointed President Jacob Zuma makes his speech during his inauguration in Pretoria, South Africa. AP Photo/Themba Hadebe, Pool.

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