

Just Imagine . . . A Short Tribute to Nelson Mandela



I am writing this on July 18, 2010, the occasion of the 92nd birthday of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, clan name Madiba. Such is the esteem in which this great man is held that the United Nations has declared this day International Mandela Day. The Nelson Mandela Foundation has suggested that, in honor of his 67 years of political activity and sacrifice in the service of humanity, we all spend 67 minutes

on this day helping others. That challenge has been taken up literally by millions of people both here in South Africa and throughout the world. The suggestion, of course, is that *every* day should be a Mandela Day. Just imagine how that might change the world.

I am sure that Madiba enjoyed his day in his favorite manner, as we have seen him so often do, sitting on the floor, legs outstretched, surrounded by, and in conversation with, children—his own grandchildren as well as others. A grade three pupil (about 10 years old, younger than our democracy), when asked to say something about Mandela, said, “He’s 91 and still has all his hair!”—the sort of remark that would have Madiba roaring with laughter. At his feet we are all his children and blessed with his presence among us for 92 years. May there be many more and may we learn all the lessons his sacrifices, achievements, courage, and above all, his humility (should) have taught us. For he has that essential ingredient that Jim Collins identified in his book *Good to Great* of all great leaders: a mixture of ambition for the cause, not for self, and a personal humility, which Madiba retains despite all the praise heaped upon him.

But what has this to do with the world of prosthodontics? It has been suggested that although we are members of a caring profession, sometimes we may get caught up in the excitement of our technological advances and get carried away by the hype and oratory of the (too often) industry-driven lecture circuits. Perhaps we need to take some time to reflect on the wider influences of our lives on others and our own place in the wider scheme of things. And what better person to study than a man who, despite all that he had suffered at the hands of the criminal apartheid system, emerged with a message of reconciliation, peace, justice, humanity, and above all, hope. His inauguration speech as the first democratically elected president of this country was a most extraordinary display of forgiveness.

There have been many tributes to this man, who is at the center of our modern times, always there to remind us what personal sacrifice and courage can achieve when the ideals of justice and peace for all are the enduring goals. I am not worthy to emulate such eulogies but rather merely wish to add a personal perspective in the hope of doing what Madiba has asked us all to do: touch the lives of others. I have been privileged to have met this great man, and can attest to the most extraordinary feeling one always has in his presence, of being the most important person in his life at that time, and he never forgets who you are.

So I want to usurp the 67-minute theme and suggest a therapeutic alternative for our profession: Just spend 6 to 7 minutes at the end of every day in quiet contemplation and reflection of what you achieved. Did you treat everyone with the dignity they deserve, as Mandela has taught us to do? Did it bode well for you and your patients’ health and welfare? Was there humanity and humility in what you did, just like Madiba? Just imagine what satisfaction you would derive from your life if every day you answered positively. Just imagine the possibilities of the whole world doing the same. Madiba said, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world,” so teach your children and teach your patients to do the same; teach them to teach their children to do the same. Just imagine a little bit of Mandela magic in all of us. Just imagine a world where teachers and academics are paid more than sportspeople, where there is no poverty, and where the public health systems are able to provide for everyone, not just the few who can afford the latest technological advances. What a legacy, what a beautiful world this could be if we stop imagining this and do it. We need to find his magic in all of us all of the time.

It is fitting, therefore, to conclude with his own words: “When all of these hopes translate into a realizable dream and not a nightmare to torment the soul of the aged, then will I, indeed, have peace and tranquility. Then would history and the billions throughout the world proclaim that it was right that we dreamt and that we toiled to give life to a workable dream” (from the conclusion of Mandela’s address to the 53rd United Nations General Assembly, September 21, 1998).

Let’s dream, let’s imagine, let’s emulate. Or at least try.

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