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# Where were you the day **Nelson Mandela** died?

Every so often in history, an iconic moment passes. A moment forever etched in time and memory, a pivotal reminder of a crucial happening or memorable day. A moment which brings us together, uniting peoples of different colours, creeds or convictions, offering a glimpse of stillness amidst chaos. Where were you the day **Nelson Mandela** died?

With a curious mixture of great sadness and admiration, I can vividly recall the day. The iconic moment. Our country literally closed down and went into mourning. Every television channel and newspaper dedicated an insert, story or memory about this remarkable man, the father of our nation. People wept openly in the streets. The moment that everyone knew was close, yet resisted, had arrived. One of the greatest statesmen in the history of mankind had passed. But it should not be Mr Mandela's death that touches us the most; it was his life.

// Mandela was the greatest exponent and living example of Ubuntu Africa //

### PRINCIPLES OF UBUNTU

It was epitomised by an African way of life or living, known as *Ubuntu*, which is very difficult to explain. In a nutshell Ubuntu refers to the oneness of people that transcends everything, integrating a state of mindfulness, neighbourliness and respect. It is a way of facing life that is as old as the hills, and is rooted in rural village communities. Simplistically put, the great principle of Ubuntu determines for instance, that if you have food, and I have a pot, we will both eat. For the benefit of both of us, we share and survive. My humanity is linked to yours, as Desmond Tutu once explained. It is a communal code that has provided – and still provides – a source of resolve, strength, solidarity and hope for millions of people, living in difficult or impoverished conditions.

As a white South African growing up during apartheid, I was as brainwashed as the kid next door. Growing up within the system blinkered me, and it was only until I was a teen that I instinctively realised that everything was wrong. I began to question. The propaganda of my peers taught me the Nelson Mandela was a terrorist to be feared, incarcerated for

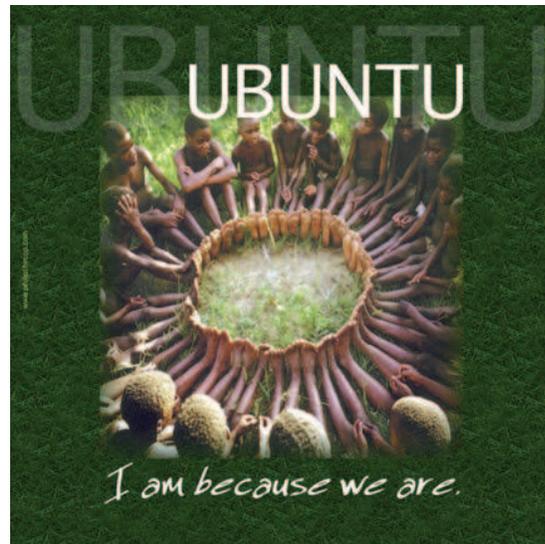
the good of all South Africans. His image was banned; I had no idea what he even looked like.

But throughout this dark deathly chapter, I was constantly touched, amazed and inspired by the ability of Africans to overcome and be hopeful. To laugh when, in reality, there was hardly anything to laugh about. I wished I could have what they had.

It can be argued that Nelson Mandela's attitude of forgiveness and courage can be rooted in the Ubuntu principles. Perhaps though it's a tad naïve to assume this in its entirety, as he was indeed an exceptional person, but I do believe his African-ness defined him. And provided a source of courage and inspiration to buck the system. Often, stillness can be seen as a weakness, and confidence as arrogance, but not with Mr Mandela. It was authentic.

### APPLY AT HOME

But how does his great legacy affect me? And, in facing the reality of my own personal trials and tribulations, how or what can I learn from him? For





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starters, if he was alive today, I believe he would remind us that he was no bigger than the principles of Ubuntu. His fortunes were connected to the fortunes of the people around him, even in prison. How then could the principles of Ubuntu translate and be applied to a situation in your office or home? Easily, I would suggest.

We all are constantly seeking to break the chains of some form of conflict and some form of fear in our lives. The fear of not being recognised or supported, or the fear of managing impending change or an unknown outcome. These are our realities, which although hardly as severe as the gross violation of human dignity of a 27 year prison sentence, are indeed our realities. Ubuntu teaches us that we cannot minimise the impact of someone's problems, simply because they do not compare or are not as severe as our own. This would contradict the humaneness of the principles.

### THE POWER OF LISTENING

One of the most impressive things I remember about the day I met Nelson Mandela, was how he listened to people when they spoke to him. It did not matter if you were a gardener, a chambermaid, a chef or a policeman, he would give you his undivided attention. He wanted to know your story. The power of listening and understanding goes a long way in establishing the Ubuntu principle, as they reach across divides saying I want to share your story, so I can help to share your load.

There are so many people who ask about Nelson Mandela: "Where did it come from, this ability to forgive and empathise?" Perhaps it was Ubuntu. Perhaps it really was as simple as that. If this is the case then we all surely can learn the lessons Mr Mandela did about managing conflict. The ability to control your anger, and network your energy into solutions as opposed to problems. Creating and maintaining channels of authentic, unhurried and good listening dialogue. Focussing on the oneness of your team by sharing problems, allowing each player the freedom to use his or her strength in doing so. Sharing knowledge,

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resources, inspiration and energy to move ahead. Or, and possibly ultimately, to not holding on to power too tightly.

Nelson Mandela was the greatest exponent and living example of Ubuntu Africa, and the world, has ever seen. And perhaps it was the essence of his humility in overcoming hopelessness and hardships without bitterness or anger or revenge, which made him human after all.

And as a result, millions of people all around the world will remember where they were on the 5th December 2013. ■■



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