

Recollections With Leading World Figures
By Daisaku Ikeda

**Nelson Mandela, President of South Africa—An Indomitable Fighter Whose
Struggle Brought an End to Apartheid**

PRESIDENT Nelson Mandela's smile is something quite special. It has the purity of an honest cultivator of the earth and the gentleness of a true champion who has led the people toward freedom with the unwavering strength of his convictions. It wouldn't be possible for a cold-hearted, power-hungry ruler to have such a smile. In fact, there is not a single harsh line in the president's face.

We met for the first time in five years on July 5, during his second visit to Japan. He was brimming with confidence and seemed to have grown stronger and wiser with each passing year, like a mighty, deep-rooted tree. It was a little over a year since he assumed the presidency of South Africa. He is living proof of the saying that high positions make great people greater and small people smaller. The indomitable fighter for human rights was hale and hearty, and I was glad to see that. Who could be more precious than this warrior who fought against oppression and won? As we spoke, I prayed in my heart for the long life of President Mandela, who would celebrate his seventy-seventh birthday later that month.

President Mandela seemed to share my joy at our reunion. Our talk leapt from topic to topic, including plans for exchange between South Africa and Japan and points he has in common with the late Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi. Mr. Mandela also spoke optimistically about the issue of whom his successor might be, a subject that had been attracting a great deal of public interest.

Throughout our conversation, his humor and his smile never waned. It has been said that he was an expert at using humor to cheer up his comrades while he was in prison. I am reminded of someone remarking to me once that the smile must have been discovered by someone in the midst of the greatest suffering. President Mandela's life has been so hard that he had to learn to smile just to survive.

He was imprisoned for more than 10,000 days—twenty-seven-and-a-half years. The mind reels trying to comprehend his struggle in prison. President Mandela once said, "South Africa's prisons are intended to cripple us so that we should never again have the strength and courage to pursue our ideals." Uniforms, for example, were especially designed to rob the prisoners of their dignity by making them appear ridiculous. Some were given oversize, baggy clothing, while others had to wear clothes so small that they were made to look like children. Even the food was not fit for human consumption. Many prisoners were deprived of beds for a long time, and the two blankets that they were given to cover themselves with during the cold nights were as thin as paper. They were awakened before dawn to begin hard labor, which on occasion included being forced to build their own cells. Sometimes they were placed in solitary confinement, without access to reading or writing materials, or anyone to talk to, where, Mr. Mandela said, "An hour was like a year."

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Each summer during the eighteen years of President Mandela's imprisonment on Robben Island, South Africa's maximum security prison for black political prisoners, he was forced to quarry limestone. Led to the quarry in chains, he cut stones from the hard lime cliffs under the burning sun. The stone, however, remained impervious to the blows of the pick, even when he struck it so hard his hands went numb. Nonetheless, his guards continuously shouted at him to work harder. One guard even had a Nazi swastika tattooed on his wrist. Over time, the dust from the limestone damaged President Mandela's eyes.

The prison regulations, down to those governing the most basic requirements of prisoners, were deplorable, and even their observance was left to the whim of the guards. But the born fighter Mandela rose up to demand improved conditions for the prisoners. He was severely punished for his protests, but he would not be defeated.

It was also Mandela's nature to share whatever he had with others, including his knowledge—so much so that people began to call Robben Island, Mandela University. Despite his hellish circumstances, President Mandela devoted himself to befriending all those around him. Even the guards gradually came to respect his indomitable spirit. But the cruelest torture he had to endure was his inability to do anything to help his family or save them from persecution. The authorities were determined to destroy the entire Mandela family. Their home was attacked and his wife was repeatedly arrested, abused and prevented from working. The laws of South Africa allowed the government authorities to arbitrarily arrest and imprison anyone they chose. This policy claimed uncountable victims. Many children had one, or both, of their parents taken away from them in this way.

It was in prison that President Mandela learned that his mother had died of a heart attack. As her only son, he was deeply grieved by her death. From the early days of his youth, he had been engaged in the struggle for human rights. It filled him with immense pain and sorrow to think that his mother should have died still worrying about whether he was safe. Shortly thereafter, he was told that his eldest son was killed in a car accident. This was nearly too much, even for President Mandela. He mourned alone all through the night.

How cruel can human beings be to each other? South Africa had become a laboratory where the depths of human cruelty were being tested. Indeed, human depravity went so far that black men and women were not even regarded as human beings.

When President Mandela and I met five years ago, I proposed holding an antiapartheid exhibition, a South African photography exhibition, lectures and symposiums on human rights, and various cultural exchange programs. This has since happened. I wanted to support the people of South Africa, not merely with words, but with actions. President Mandela accepted my suggestions with genuine joy. And the words of his secretary, Mr. Meer, resonated deeply in my heart with their poignancy. He said that our offer of cultural exchange was a gratifying recognition of his people as human beings—a recognition, he says, that had been denied them in South Africa, where they were subjected to the indignity of having to register as "blacks." How horrible this is, and how terribly our friends

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in South Africa have suffered!

To refuse to regard others as fellow human beings and, instead, view them according to some label is a tendency that, unfortunately, is not restricted to South Africa. This delusion is always at the root of the suppression of human rights. The same is true in Japan.

When we simply lump people into collective categories such as “Korean” or “Chinese” or “Communists,” our ability to imagine their thoughts and feelings stops functioning. We can no longer perform the perfectly natural act of putting ourselves in their shoes. We stop seeing them as individuals. They are there before us, but we do not see them. For the same reason, when we adults forget that children are people in their own rights and merely categorize them under the collective label of “children,” we can no longer understand what’s in their hearts.

The South African oppressors turned their attack on the African National Congress (ANC), which commanded a vast organization fighting for Black African liberation. The white authorities were firmly committed to their belief that blacks were a mass of ignorant people unable to think for themselves—a belief that underscored their contempt and disdain for the people. The authorities did not regard the black population as people of flesh and blood, but as automatons who would blindly do whatever they were told. It never even occurred to them to see the prayers, the hopes and the anger that were behind the movement for liberation.

“The struggle is my life”—true to this pivotal conviction, President Mandela even transformed the court in which he was tried into a battleground of courageously articulated ideals and eloquent appeal for justice. Standing before the judge, he demanded that the universal right to vote be extended to all people, including Black South Africans. He declared, “I consider myself neither legally nor morally bound to obey laws made by a parliament in which I have no representation.” Of course, no one could legitimately dispute him.

In my peace proposal commemorating SGI Day on January 26, last year [1994], I called for voting rights to be extended to North and South Korean permanent residents of Japan. Over 700,000 men and women with permanent residency in Japan fall within this category. They pay the same taxes as ethnic Japanese citizens, but they have no right to vote. They have many obligations, but are denied comparable rights. I am aware that there are many sides to this issue, and that the situation is a complicated one. But if we allow it to continue, if we fail to recognize the basic human rights of these people who have endured unspeakable discrimination in many areas of their lives, including employment opportunities, this negative legacy, this failure of the past, will be perpetuated into the twenty-first century and passed on to the next generation.

A half-century has gone by since the end of World War II. Now is the time for Japan to embark on a course of courageous reform. Unless it does, how can it avoid having the reputation of a nation that is backward as far as human rights are concerned?

From his prison cell, President Mandela continued to inspire the people of South Africa. Though he couldn’t communicate with them, his very existence was a

source of hope. The sun still shone brightly, no matter how some tried to obscure it with clouds. The rest of the world supported his opposition to apartheid by leveling economic sanctions against South Africa and other measures. Impatient, the government offered him compromise plans several times. But President Mandela refused to compromise, choosing to remain in prison. He declared, "I cannot and will not give any undertaking at a time when I and you, the people, are not free. Your freedom and mine cannot be separated." In his eyes, all of South Africa was a prison.

At last the day of his release arrived. It was February 11, 1990—the birthday of my beloved mentor, second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda, who spent two years in prison for his adamant opposition to the wartime militarist government. As I rejoiced at this new dawn of hope and freedom for South Africa, I could not help but recall Mr. Toda, who was also an indefatigable fighter for human rights.

On the day of his release, President Mandela addressed a rally in Cape Town. Responding to the joy and the enthusiasm of the people, he said:

I stand here before you, not as a prophet, but as a humble servant of you, the people. Your tireless and heroic sacrifices have made it possible for me to be here today. I therefore place the remaining years of my life in your hands.

President Mandela is motivated neither by the desire for popularity nor concern for his own interests. It is his boundless love for the people, his devotion to his comrades, who had finally won out over so much suffering and hardship. He wanted to praise and embrace each one. The selfless way he has dedicated himself to the people reminds me of the late Chinese premier Zhou Enlai.

President Mandela dreams of a land ruled neither by blacks nor whites, but of a rainbow land in which people of all colors are equal. He says: "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."

Do any of our national leaders in Japan today cherish an ideal in their hearts for which they are prepared to die, or for which they would endure 10,000 days in prison? Do any of our leaders have the ability to give unlimited hope to the people? President Mandela told me during our meeting that he has never forgotten the warm greeting he received on his last visit from our youth, with their "sparkling eyes," as he put it. That expression struck me. "Ah," I said to myself. "That was the president's dream. To bring a sparkle back to the eyes of the South Africa's youth who had been robbed of all hope."

The human race is one giant living organism. That is why none of us can be truly happy as long as there are people who are suffering somewhere on this planet. Since we are all one, let us stand together—with the people of South Africa, with youth around the world, with all oppressed peoples. With this unity, we can construct a world filled with hope in the twenty-first century.

Ah, toward such a brilliant future, I want to call out at the top of my voice: "Tomorrow!—eternal promise shines on your horizon." □

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