



EMINENCE: Thanks to Nelson Mandela’s influence a full-blown civil war was averted, achieving a compromise that paved the way for the establishment of a democracy, the author writes. PICTURE LEON MULLER

Mandela understood art of compromise

Honouring Madiba is to work towards a life of dignity for all

ONE OF Madiba’s lasting legacies is his capacity to lead opposing groups to reach morally acceptable compromises. Nowhere was this more evident than during our transition to a democracy more than two decades ago. Thanks to his influence, South Africans averted a full-blown civil war and instead achieved a compromise that paved the way for the establishment of a democracy based on a Constitution with a Bill of Rights.

Some people do not like the word compromise. That is unfortunate because the word has positive potential. Compromise literally means that we together (com) promise. We promise that, although we settle now for less than the ideal, we will work together to the ideal; although all of us settle now for second prize for all, we are committed to work towards the first prize for all. Madiba helped us to make promises together as South Africans, to make communal commitments.

The first prize South Africans work for is described in the type of life envisaged in the Bill of Rights. We are namely committed to building a society where there is inalienable dignity for all, with its four constituent features of the healing of the wounds of all South Africans, embrative justice for all, responsible freedom for all, equality of worth and esteem for all. Leaders like Madiba helped us to embrace this vision of dignity as our communal first prize, and to work together towards the fulfilment of that vision.

For the sake of the most vulnerable and wronged in our societies, the materialisation of this first prize of a life of dignity for all is a non-negotiable priority. If the poor and the marginalised is not prioritised in our joint efforts as a nation, the compromise made more than two decades ago is morally questionable. The credibility of this compromise under Nelson Mandela’s leadership, as well as the credibility of Madiba himself, is at stake in how we work towards fulfilling the vision of dignity for all. To honour Mandela truthfully is to work towards a life of dignity for all, especially for the poor and marginalised, the vulnerable and wronged.

Three sets of communal practices can help us build a life of dignity for the poor and the desti-

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tute in our society. We need to develop practices of compassion, practices of justice, and practices of temperance.

Years ago former president Thabo Mbeki reminded us that we are the keepers of our brothers and sisters. Pleading for a collective South African compassion, he argued that we cannot sleep at ease if we know our fellow countrywomen and men are hungry and homeless. Earlier Nelson Mandela called his fellow South Africans flesh of my flesh.

The theologian and leader in Geneva, John Calvin, referred centuries ago to the suffering of others as the suffering of my own flesh. In our country where so many struggle and suffer, we desperately need this communal empathy, this living in the skin of the other, this standing in the shoes of the other, this looking through the lenses of the other; this compassion for the other, especially for the most vulnerable.

Practices of justice are crucial for addressing the plight of the poor and the destitute. South Africans need to embrace justice as vision, justice as value and justice as virtue. According to our Bill of Rights we embrace justice as vision. We

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dream a South Africa of justice; we dream an Africa of justice; we dream a world of justice. Justice is also the central value that guides all our choices and decisions, policies and priorities. Justice as value is consistently translated into decisions and policies that advance justice for all, especially for the most vulnerable. Various theories about justice assist us in this complex task to move from visions and values of justice to policies of justice.

Justice is also a public and civic virtue. It is not enough to adhere to justice as vision and value. We also need to embody justice; we need incarnated justice, practised justice, i.e. justice as virtue, as predisposition, as intuition, as sensibility, as tendency, as moral habit, as second nature. We, therefore, need virtuous persons of justice.

To advance a life of dignity for all, especially for the most excluded in our midst, we thirdly need practices of temperance. In contexts and cultures of greed and gluttony, egoism and self-enrichment, consumerism and materialism, extremes and the unquenchable thirst for more, we need to heed the plea of Mahatma Gandhi: live simply so that others may simply live. Temperance is related to moderation, to the quest for the right measure.

We need the right measure with regard to matters like how much we may morally earn, how much we may morally eat and drink, how much we may morally possess and enjoy. Where societies lose sight of the right moral measure, gaps develop between rich and poor, the poor becomes poorer and a few become even richer. This we see so clearly in South Africa.

Is the compromise to which Nelson Mandela and his colleagues led us a curse or a blessing? The answer to this question will be determined by our progress as South Africans with the building of a life of dignity for all, especially for the poor and destitute. The compromise at the birth of our democracy calls us to freshly promise together, to freshly commit to practices of compassion, justice and temperance.

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