



Publication: Cape Times - Opinion
Title: Opinion: Madiba embodied habits, virtues longed for by societies
Publish date: 18 Jul 2023
Page: 6

Reach: 10921
AVE: R 62778.41
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Madiba embodied habits, virtues longed for by societies

As we celebrate Mandela Day, let's remind each other of the need to work together

COMMENT



NICO KOOPMAN

TODAY, July 18, we celebrate the birthday and wonderful legacy of the first president of a democratic South Africa, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. In celebrating Madiba, we must remember we still need him, and also more than him.

The late professor Jakes Gerwel, the director-general in Madiba's office, was always concerned about the risk of misunderstanding Madiba and what he stood for. Gerwel reminded us that Madiba's values should not be viewed in an elitist fashion. We must not think those values were only meant for moral elites, for a few extraordinary people who are committed to sound values.

The ethical citizenship and leadership Madiba espoused was meant for all of us. To create a society that is undergirded by sound values, we need the ethical living of role models like him, and the ethical living of all citizens and leaders.

Because we need the example set by people like Madiba, we should celebrate it. But we also need to accept the challenge to follow this example when remembering and celebrating his life.

Ethical citizenship and leadership need to be nurtured by all in all walks of life. Ethical living has at least three dimensions. Ethics comes from the Greek word "ethos", which refers to a habitat, a space where life thrives and flourishes. To live ethically is to build a South Africa that is a habitat for all who live in it, a safe space where people flourish. Ethical living implies we live with a vision of a society where life is cherished and where all enjoy the necessities and goods of life.

A second dimension of ethical living comes from the Latin word "habitus". Habitus refers to the habits,



PUPILS in Caxias do Sul, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, paint an image of Nobel Peace Prize winner and former president Nelson Mandela. | AFP

virtues, predispositions, tendencies, inclinations, and intuitions that we embody.

Virtues refer to the good that we embody and practise, almost without even having to reflect upon it. This good comes almost naturally. We are simply inclined to do good. We have intuitions for the good.

Virtues form our characters. Character literally means that good values are engraved into us. It means we have integrity. The good that we desire and think about, and the good that we choose and do are all integrated and in harmony.

To build a new society, we need people of virtue and character.

The third dimension of ethical living refers to our choices, decisions and

actions. Our decisions and policies, actions and practices should reflect our habits and should help to build the habitat that we envision. Where all of us are committed to a new habitat, new habits and new actions, there we overcome the corruption and under-performance that threaten our vision of a new society.

Madiba lived with ethical integrity. For him, habitat, habitus and actions were integrated. Unsurprisingly, this perspective informed his choices, practices, decisions, policies and actions. Yes, Madiba was a loyal leader of a liberation movement and later a political party. But he prioritised the country as a habitat where all people should prosper. He envisioned South Africa as a habitat where a life of dignity for

all, healing of all wounds for all, justice for all, freedom for all and equality for all should blossom. The political party was not an end in itself, but a vehicle to build this habitat.

Madiba embodied so many of the habits and virtues longed for by societies all over the world: wisdom and discernment to deal with plurality, ambiguity, ambivalence, paradoxicality, tragedy and dead-end streets; discernment to see the bad and good, to identify problems and possibilities, crises and opportunities; moderation and temperance that avoid extremes, but seek in everything a healthy balance, level headedness, equilibrium, and equity; fortitude and civil courage to say no where we should, even though everybody else says yes and vice versa; fortitude to persevere with a good cause; and justice as fairness in everything.

These are the habits and virtues that we need in societies where principles seem to have been forgotten and thrown away, and where ulterior motives seem to drive us. Where the capacity to imagine innovative alternatives and to work towards those exciting alternative habitats seems to have disappeared.

Where there is a lack of love, sympathy, empathy and interpathy (feeling and thinking us into the plights of those from other backgrounds, world views, cultures, customs, creeds, colours, classes, countries, continents, genders, orientations, abilities and age groups).

When we honour the life and legacy of Madiba, we should always remember that he was human like us, capable of so much goodness, but also fallible. This will help us in our efforts to live up to the vision, virtues and actions of a society of dignity for all that he espoused.

As we celebrate another Mandela Day, let's also remind each other of the need to work together to ensure South Africa survives and thrives. The habitat, habit and actions that people like Madiba strived to embody, should guide and guard us in this regard.

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