Mandela’s Legacy – *A! Dalibhunga!*
By Leslie Hadfield

Former South African president and president of the African National Congress, Rolihlahla Nelson Mandela passed away on December 5, 2013, at the age of 95. Mandela was a remarkable man who has made a profound impact on the world in our time. He is arguably the most famous African. His powerful influence comes from both the figures of Mandela and the real Mandela.

Most people know and invoke one of the figures of Mandela: the great freedom fighter or the great peacemaker. They know he spent twenty-seven years locked away as a political prisoner of the white racist apartheid government. They also hear stories about how he negotiated a peaceful transition to democracy upon his release. Countless stories of his benevolence and “Madiba magic” – a reference to his clan name and personal charm – often contribute to a Gandhi-like, saintly image of Mandela. Many find inspiration in his quoting of W.E. Henley’s poem Invictus, or Marianne Williamson’s passage that begins “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate…”

When we move beyond these alluring figures and dig deeper into who Mandela was, some of this magic fades. Yet, we can learn even more powerful lessons from him and those who worked with him.

Mandela was often the first to say that there are many others deserving credit for liberating South Africa. In fact, his high international profile is in large part attributable to a deliberate decision of the African National Congress (ANC) to make him the face of the struggle against apartheid. The ANC launched the “Free Mandela” campaign in 1980 to make use of modern media and focus international attention on South Africa. The campaign was successful as Mandela became known throughout the world and the international community increasingly pressured South Africa to release its political prisoners. But how many of us know of Oliver Tambo, the president of the ANC in exile for thirty years, who kept a dispersed organization together and campaigned around the world while Mandela was imprisoned? Tambo and his family gave their lives to the struggle. He suffered a stroke and died just over two years after his return to South Africa in 1990. And what about the work of Mandela’s prison mates, Walter Sisulu and Ahmed Kathrada? Or leaders of other movements such as Lilian Ngoyi, Robert Sobukwe, Steve Biko, and Sibongile Mthembu Mkhabela?

To be fair, Mandela’s iconic status is not only a result of the ANC’s 1980s campaign. He was a charismatic person in his early years of political involvement – even considered a hot-head by some. He also played a crucial role in determining the direction of the ANC. As a Youth League member, he helped radicalize the organization in the late 1940s. He was one of the first and strongest proponents of turning to armed resistance and was the first head of the armed wing’s high command. He was arrested in 1962 in part for illegally leaving the country to gain military training. In 1964, he was sentenced to life imprisonment with other members of the high command for conspiring to overthrow the government with violence.

Some may be surprised to learn that this leader of world peace at one time advocated violence. On the other hand, some argue that his over twenty years in prison softened Mandela, that he compromised too much upon his release in 1990. His actions within prison and afterwards
demonstrate both his continued struggle against oppression and his ability to negotiate between differing parties. During negotiations with the government while in prison and after his release, he made calculating decisions based on human respect and a careful study of his enemies. He also held strong to the principles he had fought for. The negotiation process leading up to fully democratic elections in 1994 was a protracted and difficult one. While Mandela recognized the need for compromise, he also refused to disband the ANC armed wing when the South African government perpetuated violence and when F.W. de Klerk retracted support for one person-one vote in 1991. Still, even as massacres and the assassination of Chris Hani threatened to derail the talks in 1992 and 1993, Mandela’s leadership calmed the country and led to resolutions that provided for democratic elections in 1994.

To me, one of the greatest legacies he will leave is that of his self-less service to his people. Like many others who worked alongside him, he did not join “the struggle” to gain political position or status, but because he believed he had no other choice but to work for the freedom of his people. It was something, he said, when facing the death penalty, “for which I am prepared to die.” His sacrifice came at a great cost to his family. He lost precious time with his children and went through two divorces. In 1999, he retired from politics after serving only one term as president, another testament that he did not seek individual political power. His desire was to spend time with his family and work on projects for children, out of the glare of the public eye.

While he had his human frailties, Mandela possessed the noble traits of simple, yet strong integrity and a love for others. Politicians everywhere should emulate these core characteristics of Mandela. We should all strive to have this said of us if the whole world were assessing our lives as we prepared to leave this world.