Read with a Purpose

Read the following selection to learn how imprisonment affected Nelson Mandela's view of freedom.

from

LONG WALK TO FREEDOM

by Nelson Mandela

The policy of apartheid created a deep and lasting wound in my country and my people. All of us will spend many years, if not generations, recovering from that profound hurt. But the decades of oppression and brutality had another, unintended effect, and that was that it produced the Oliver Tambos, the Walter Sisulus, the Chief Luthulis, the Yusuf Dadoos, the Bram Fischers, the Robert Sobukwes\(^1\) of our time—men of such extraordinary courage, wisdom, and generosity that their like may never be known again. Perhaps it requires such depth of oppression to create such heights of character. My country is rich in the minerals and gems that lie beneath its soil, but I have always known that its greatest wealth is its people, finer and truer than the purest diamonds.

It is from these comrades in the struggle that I learned the meaning of courage. Time and again, I have seen men and women risk and give their lives for an idea. I have seen men stand up to attacks and torture without breaking, showing a strength and resiliency that defies the imagination. I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. I felt fear myself more times than I can remember, but I hid it behind a mask of boldness. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.

I never lost hope that this great transformation would occur. Not only because of the great heroes I have already cited, but because of the courage of the ordinary men and women of my country. I always knew

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\(^1\) Oliver Tambos . . . Robert Sobukwe: freedom fighters against South African apartheid.
that deep down in every human heart, there is mercy and generosity. No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite. Even in the grimmest times in prison, when my comrades and I were pushed to our limits, I would see a glimmer of humanity in one of the guards, perhaps just for a second, but it was enough to reassure me and keep me going. Man's goodness is a flame that can be hidden but never extinguished.

We took up the struggle with our eyes wide open, under no illusion that the path would be an easy one. As a young man, when I joined the African National Congress, I saw the price my comrades paid for their beliefs, and it was high. For myself, I have never regretted my commitment to the struggle, and I was always prepared to face the hardships that affected me personally. But my family paid a terrible price, perhaps too dear a price for my commitment.

In life, every man has twin obligations—obligations to his family, to his parents, to his wife and children; and he has an obligation to his people, his community, his country. In a civil and humane society, each man is able to fulfill those obligations according to his own inclinations and abilities. But in a country like South Africa, it was almost impossible for a man of my birth and color to fulfill both of those obligations. In South Africa, a man of color who attempted to live as a human being was punished and isolated. In South Africa, a man who tried to fulfill his duty to his people was inevitably ripped from his family and his home and was forced to live a life apart, a twilight existence of secrecy and rebellion. I did not in the beginning choose to place my people above my family, but in attempting to serve my people, I found that I was prevented from fulfilling my obligations as a son, a brother, a father, and a husband.

In that way, my commitment to my people, to the millions of South Africans I would never know or meet, was at the expense of the people I knew best and loved most. It was as simple and yet as incomprehensible as the moment a small child asks her father, "Why can you not eat the mealies we had for dinner? We are not poor children like those in the orphanage, and they can have the leftovers.

I was a young man, I was broke, I was a Marxist. I could not understand why my mother could not make a decent living. I was a rebel. I was a prophet, stream into the sea of all blacks' suffering, roasting my heart on the broad brazier of my conscience, as I obeyed God's laws and he obeyed his laws. I was an outcast from my customs, my country, and the laws of the land.

It was during my boyhood in Transylvania had discovered that I had already made up my mind to hanker after the freedom of the world, a freedom of the world unknown to me. I knew what I was doing. I was a young man with a burning zeal for the basic: freedom, equality, and dignity of the man. I had great potential and had not had my will obstructed.

But then I discovered I was not going to get the freedom I had fought for. Freedom of every individual is the basic freedom of every individual. That is what the African National Congress,}

Vocabulary obligations (uhb uh GAY shuhnz) n. duties to carry out.
can you not be with us?" And the father must
utter the terrible words: "There are other
children like you, a great many of them..."
and then one’s voice trails off.

I was not born with a hunger to be free.
I was born free—free in every way that I
could know. Free to run in the fields near
my mother’s hut, free to swim in the clear
stream that ran through my village, free to
roast mealies under the stars and ride the
broad backs of slow-moving bulls. As long
as I obeyed my father and abided by the
customs of my tribe, I was not troubled by
the laws of man or God.

It was only when I began to learn that my
boyhood freedom was an illusion, when I
discovered as a young man that my freedom
had already been taken from me, that I began
to hunger for it. At first, as a student, I wanted
freedom only for myself, the transitory freedom of being able to stay out at night, read
what I pleased, and go where I chose. Later, as
a young man in Johannesburg, I yearned for
the basic and honorable freedoms of achieving
my potential, of earning my keep, of marrying
and having a family—the freedom not to be
obstructed in a lawful life.

But then I slowly saw that not only was I not free, but my brothers and sisters
were not free. I saw that it was not just my
freedom that was curtailed, but the freedom
of everyone who looked like I did.

That is when I joined the African National
Congress, and that is when the hunger for

2. mealies: in South Africa, ears of corn.
3. transitory: passing; temporary.

**Ask Yourself**

What institution in our nation’s past was similar to South African apartheid?

**Vocabulary**

obstructed (uhb STRUHKT ehd) v.: prevented; made difficult.
my own freedom became the greater hunger for the freedom of my people. It was this desire for the freedom of my people to live their lives with dignity and self-respect that animated my life, that transformed a frightened young man into a bold one, that drove a law-abiding attorney to become a criminal, that turned a family-loving husband into a man without a home, that forced a life-loving man to live like a monk. I am no more virtuous or self-sacrificing than the next man, but I found that I could not even enjoy the poor and limited freedoms I was allowed when I knew my people were not free. Freedom is indivisible: the chains on any one of my people were the chains on all of them, the chains on all of my people were the chains on me.

It was during those long and lonely years that my hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the freedom of all people, white and black. I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred, he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity.

When I walked out of prison, that was my mission, to liberate the oppressed and the oppressor both. Some say that has now been achieved. But I know that that is not the case. The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed. We have not taken the final step of our journey, but the first step on a longer and even more difficult road. For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.

The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning.

I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended.