

FRONTLINE

Jessie Duarte - Interviewed By John Carlin

A political activist, she became Mandela's personal assistant (1990 -1994) following his release from prison.



Can you talk about your first meeting with Mandela.

The first time we met was at his house in Orlando West about a week after his release ... I was completely shy to even go and shake his hand and he was surrounded by ... all the luminaries ... I was absolutely overawed...

My first impression of him was that he was very quiet. He was listening to everybody very carefully. I thought this is a great man. He is very silent but he listens. Then something quite incredible happened. He called her [Winnie], Zammi and she said, "Yes tata." And he asked her something about making tea for the visitors. I thought that was absolutely quite incredible. He'd walked back into his house and took charge as the head of the house, in a home where Winnie was the head of the house for many years.

But I was equally impressed with her reaction. It was soft and gentle ... well, later on people say many things, but my first impressions of them were that they had an interesting relationship ...

How did it come about that you had this good fortune to come to work with him?

... Apparently, Madiba had asked for people he could build into his staff. At the time Frene Ginwala was coming back from London, and she would be his researcher, speech writer. He had earmarked Barbara Masakela and myself as people that would be brought to establish his office. When I asked him later about this, he says it was because I had community contact, which he wanted and needed.

And so we complemented each other very well ... I ended up being a PA [personal assistant] to both him and Walter Sisulu, which was incredible, because I had the experience of understanding that relationship in its historical context, and also understanding the support system and how it worked-- what Walter gave to Madiba and vice versa. [They] made an incredible combination of people in the beginning part of establishing the ANC. It was an enormous privilege ... you don't often work for a

legend, and you don't often get to do that with the kind of intensity that I did, and to get close to the people as I did ...

... Walter Sisulu and Nelson ... how did you see the two of them working together? ...

The first thing you realize about Madiba and Walter is the complementary types of people you have here. Walter is a very practical visionary. He can see something a long way into the future, and also put a plan into action. Madiba is a visionary and a great thinker. Madiba thinks very deeply, and between the two of them, there is also this absolute patriotic zest, to have built South Africa into something enormous and great.

I recall the discussions about negotiations and CODESA. Now, Uncle Walter didn't, in fact, get involved directly with negotiations. But every single morning, we had a meeting in Madiba's office, which we were privileged to attend ... and the fine points of CODESA were discussed. The practical issues. What stands out in my mind is the ... emphatic absolute rigidity with which both of them resolved that if political prisoners were not released, the negotiations could not continue. But what impressed me a great deal was the way in which they came to a decision. It was never forced. It was never emotional. It was always carefully talked through. If they weren't satisfied, or couldn't reach consensus, then they would also invite in other people.

It was really a combination of three people. Oliver [Tambo], at the time, was the senior statesman, the world-wise leader who had experienced the international community and their needs. Madiba was the leader that had been projected as the unifier of the country, but also as the symbol of hope for the future. Walter was the practical implementor and this was the combination between the three people that was absolutely magical.

Uncle Walter also is a king maker. That's the way I feel about him. He saw in Madiba, very early on, someone with the courage, the stamina, the intellect and the integrity to take a process forward. He understood that his role in that process was to make sure that this person did it with absolute clarity, was given the support ...

The secret negotiation talks with the government ... isn't it true that Walter Sisulu and then some of his other colleagues in prison were quite horrified when they first discovered what was going on ...

... the concern was that there shouldn't be a situation where the South African government was able to talk to one person [Mandela] in isolation. But they had to have an understanding that that person had a right to consult with the rest of the community that were going to be affected by such talks. They were a little bit uncomfortable, I believe, in the beginning, but it was a short lived discomfort, because the vision of freedom was the one that they all agreed on without hesitation. And if that freedom could be negotiated by peaceful means, they were all happy about that. The issues about the armed struggle came later. It was when everybody was already released. I remember very clearly attending a meeting with Madiba, with MK commanders, where there was a great deal of anger ...

Tell me about that meeting.

It was during 1990 ... the process of the talks had begun. But the question of cessation of the armed struggle was the issue which had to be moved out of the way. We attended a meeting in Cape Town,

where some of the MK commanders were present ... The stock perception that everybody had was we should talk, but we should hold onto our right to continue with our training of our people, and training of the armed struggle. Madiba was absolutely brilliant. What stood out in my mind was that he was, in fact, the person who had started MK, he was the first commander of MK, when it was established in the '60s, and here he was, having to dismantle the organ which really put the pressure on the South African government. His willingness to do that, was for me very incredible.

Secondly, he understood the need to do that. He understood that we cannot go into a process of talking, while at the same time we present an aggressive perspective. But the arguments were equally succinct from the MK commanders. They talked about the right wing Afrikaners, and the fact that they were armed and our people would be vulnerable ... During that entire meeting Madiba's focus was we would have to deal with every single act of aggression against us when we came across it, but it couldn't be that we were arming ourselves to create an atmosphere of tension ... he wanted to go into the negotiation process with the cards clean on the table.

Well, in 1990, as it turned out, some of the MK commanders fears were met. People died. There was the Boipatong massacre. There were the massacres in the East Rand. There were a number of reasons why some of the compelling arguments of the MK commanders should have been heeded. But one thing Madiba said was the South African government was responsible and must be made responsible for the security of our people ... They have to be forced to take that responsibility ... They have to be forced to become part of the solution.

Mandela had the ability to disarm people, wooing people, persuading. Maybe if you could explain how he does it ...

I think we have to step back two or three paces as to where this meeting begins. It begins with the discussion where the whole question of disarmament and the release of political prisoners. It begins with a discussion he has with de Klerk ... I went with Mandela to see de Klerk. My role was to take notes in the meeting, but again, I must say it was one of those very incredible experiences that is etched in your memory ...

De Klerk was, in my view, a very irritable man. He had a huge pressure on his shoulders. He had to deliver to his constituency a sense that he was dealing with people that he could say ... "I am the president of this country, and we are now going to do X, Y and Z" And Madiba has a talent to allow people to vent their anger, to put across their emotional perspective, and finally he'll pin them down on the content issue. "The real bottom line issue that we need to discuss here is not you, your anger, where you come from, but where we all going to." His focus would be absolute on those issues. He started the issue of military disarmament, saying to de Klerk, "If you want me to go and convince my constituency that they have to be disarmed, then you have to convince me that you are capable of taking care of our people in the townships."

Naturally, that was always a very sticky point between him and de Klerk, because the government never could do that, because the "third force" was embedded ... in the army, and in the intelligence services, so it was very difficult for de Klerk to even make that kind of undertaking. But Madiba was able to carry that message to MK commanders along the same vein--that we have to move in the direction where we cannot present a dual government. Where the ANC is governing and the Boers

are governing. "We have to tell these people," --this is how he would put it--"that they have to take responsibility."

His ability was purely based on focus. He would ... very calmly allow you to get very angry. Even with me, even when I was angry with him, he would let me vent, and then at the end he would say, "But don't you think that the focus of where we have to go, is X?" It was always succinct. It was always clear. He never is muddled in his head about what he wants. He knows exactly ...

... What made you angry ...

There was a lot of violence, in Natal and very often my instinct would be organize our own people, go into Natal, fight back and take no prisoners ... and I would get very angry because I remember there was a time when we had information about people who were massacred and I wanted Madiba to go [there] ... My approach to him was, "We need to go," and he said, "Yes, we must go, but we need to do it carefully and properly." I would get angry because he was always so careful. I would say, "Sometimes you have to be radical. Sometimes you have to be ready to move in without any hesitation." He would let me just be this angry woman, and once the anger was gone, he would calmly establish what would be the long term qualitative intervention that we needed to make ... "It's not just your views,"--that's how he would put it to me--"that are important."

He would always say that if you want to win a position, make sure you lay the ground very firmly. We had angry moments on many issues, but what I respected about him, was that Madiba, as great a leader as he is, allowed people to vent their views to him, and he wouldn't patronize you ... sometimes I just knew that it's okay to get angry with him, but I already knew where he would lead me to. He would calmly do this number about what's 'the long vision,' and I think that's his success in a sense, is his ability to let that happen ...

... he got angry once at CODESA for 90 minutes, and I was horrified. I stood behind him and I thought somebody must stop him, somebody must tell him not to be this angry anymore. But, in a sense, it was a calculated anger. He knew exactly what he was doing. He knew that he needed to say to de Klerk, "You cannot pretend to be this man of integrity only. You have to become one. You cannot imagine what it's like when people die and you see women with their breasts slit open, and corpses being piled one on top of the other in mortuaries. You have to become a man of integrity if the process is to move forward." So I respected Madiba's ability to calm people down with logic and calmness. It doesn't mean that he didn't shoot from the hip. He did. Sometimes.

In the East Rand, in Soweto--do you have a recollection of any particular incident when maybe he actually saw bodies or spoke to widows ...

I think it was October 1990, I went with him to the East Rand ... Madiba was absolutely concerned about the fact that the police in the townships were never able to contain the violence ... that particular day there was a march that took place where it was clear that the IFP supporters had been given protection by the South African defense force, and people really were massacred in a most brutal way.

We went to the Germiston mortuary, and I will never forget his face, when we went in ... there were bodies all over the place. We saw the body of a woman whose breast had been cut off, and Madiba, he didn't speak a word. ... He was a man who was deeply shocked by the fact that people will do this

to each other, and when we came out of the mortuary, and we were driving back, he said to me that what concerned him was that black men would never do that to a black woman. It was not something that he understood to be a cultural need in terms of war. He says, "When we go to war, we would kill each other, but not attack women and children."

I had the view that Madiba hadn't actually ever confronted the cold face of the violence during the 27 years of his incarceration. He wasn't accustomed to seeing people bleeding and dying, but he was accustomed to understanding what war meant, and he knew exactly what he was talking about when he said that black men would not attack women in that sort of way. It then turned out, and through the TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission] later on, it became quite clear that there were a number of policemen who were involved in that particular attack ... so he wasn't wrong.

His action afterwards was much more interesting. His view was that if we were to stop the violence, then de Klerk has to take some responsibility for exposing the people within the South African police service, who were part and parcel of it. He pushed de Klerk to have the Goldstone Commission of Inquiry, and he pushed him extremely hard. De Klerk did not have the kind of vision that Madiba had about what the Goldstone Inquiry would bring. But as it worked out, the Goldstone Inquiry then dealt with the police hierarchy ... and showed that, in fact, the commissioner of police, at the time, needed to take some responsibility for the actions of his people in places like the East Rand and KwaZulu Natal.

But again it was the Mandela reaction that I understood. There was no emotional outburst. But he did say that he would not tolerate the carnage of the people, and he moved decisively to make sure that de Klerk acted as the head of state, getting the Goldstone Commission set up, making sure that the people involved were interviewed. And one thing ... I still respect about Madiba very much, is that he doesn't concern himself so much about which individual would ultimately be held responsible. As to getting the issue at hand resolved, and if an individual was going to be held responsible, it was a consequence of that process. So he didn't go after people. Sometimes that made me very angry. I would say, "The commission of police, go for him, ... take him on." He'd say, "It wouldn't take us anywhere. What if he's not the man ultimately responsible? The process will bring us to the person that's ultimately responsible."

On the subject of the violence ...

Madiba is not a moderate man, and anybody who describes him as a moderate man is mistaken. Madiba is a resolute man, but he believes in doing things with depth, rather than doing them quickly ... His view on the violence was that he had to take a position that was uncompromising, if he was going to get de Klerk to move, because his perception was that de Klerk did not move unless you took an uncompromising position ...

The Noble Peace Prize ...

I think he was disappointed that the world hadn't given him recognition in his own right. I was disappointed, and the people in our office, Frene and Barbara, the three of us were not happy that our leader had to share this very coveted prize with F.W. de Klerk. Because, if truth be told, F.W. did play a role to bring the Nats [National Party] to the negotiating table, and we mustn't ever say that he didn't. But I think Mandela's role to bring the international community on board, and his role to

bring the masses of South Africa on board the international community just simply didn't recognize that particular fact. But on the other hand, he was extremely ... humbled by the fact that he was being given this kind of recognition ... I know one day I had a discussion with him, and I said to him, "You seem to be someone who doesn't have an ego at all. Don't you sometimes want to be thanked and praised?" And he said, "Where would it take me to? It doesn't add any quality to my being that people thank me and praise me. I have to do things because I have to do them. I believe in them."

But I think he was a little disappointed that he didn't get this prize for himself ... When we said to Madiba, "What would you feel if de Klerk also got this prize with you?" He said, "Well, that would be the vision of the international community on the perspective of South Africa, and ultimately it does present a unifying position for us as a country." But I still think he deserved it all by himself.

[His clothes ...]

Well, throughout the time that I worked with him, there was always a battle about how the president should dress and look. I recall that we invited one of these up-market image dresser people to come and talk to us about ... when Madiba goes on television, what should he be wearing? And they went through the whole thing about red tie, navy blue ... blue calms people down and all this stuff. And Madiba had a view. He said, "This is Africa. Part of this three-piece suit belonged to the colonial era, when people were judged by what they wore, rather than who they were. If you were a man who wore a three piece suit, then you would be respected."

His people, his own people, didn't have three piece suits to wear; therefore, he needed to begin to dress the way the people dressed. He didn't feel comfortable wearing a three piece suit, and he then decided that we should begin to look for a comfortable way for him to look ... he was very clear, "I want to be comfortable. I want to dress like a man who is living in Africa, because that's where I live. I don't live in London, so I don't need a three piece suit. When I visit London, I'll wear one if necessary," Of course, he did visit London, and didn't wear a three piece suit. He wore a Madiba shirt. So Barbara, who is a very creative woman, started talking to people and saying where do we find material and people to begin to design this look, that would be the Nelson Mandela look. And she found people ...

But for me the thing that really sort of put the lid on it was at the inauguration. I was involved with the inauguration committee, and we had a whole briefing about how people had to dress, from de Klerk's office. I thought this was going to be fun, we were going to go to the president and we were going to tell him that he has to wear a pin-striped suit, pin-stripe pants, and a black top and a hat. I remember saying to him, "It will not be accepted if you don't wear this outfit ... " His response was absolutely immediate. He said, "I am not doing this. I don't like to wear these things. Why can't I dress the way I feel comfortable?" But it says a lot about Madiba, too. He is not a pretender. He doesn't want people to accept him on values that are foreign to his nature. If what you dress in is going to make people like you, then those people perhaps are not worthy of you being liked by them. He wanted to be presented as who he was, and who he is.

On foreign trips, Mandela ... must have been surprised by the general euphoria of the response ...

He was always overwhelmed by the fact that people knew him, which always surprised me. I would just think, "Well why would you be overwhelmed?" because I was on the outside, and I knew the

effort that had been made by the anti-apartheid movement ... his posters were in every country in the world. Madiba did not realize the extent to which posters were taken to the world. I remember, we were in China, and we went to a monastery, and there was a monk, who came and touched him, and said, "You are Nelson Mandela." A Chinese monk who spoke very good English, by the way, ... Madiba was overwhelmed by the fact that this person, who lives an austere isolated life knew him.

Emotionally he was always very humbled by that kind of an experience, where people who were not journalists and politicians, ordinary people doing ordinary things. I traveled with him to West Africa, and I was overwhelmed by the response he got. Good grief, I mean we were mobbed by people in the streets. As he arrived at the airport, there was thousands of people at the airport ... In Brazzaville, the same experience happened. His face was just so recognizable, In a sense, it was also difficult, because he could never take a private walk anywhere. So he had to adjust his whole life to have some privacy. His adjustment came by getting up at five in the morning and taking these long walks ...

He is a celebrity ...

Oh yes, he is. Are you asking if Mandela liked to be adored? I don't know. I think that he's human, and naturally when people give you so much love, your response must be grateful thanks but also maybe you like it a little bit ...

We had been to France, and we were outside of the Louvre, and Madiba was mobbed by the tourists. He wanted to go and see the Mona Lisa. Now Barbara had an idea that we could probably get the French authorities to take us there after hours. But he said, "No, why should we do that? Let's go when everybody else is there." It was very frightening because I was afraid that he would get squashed, he would get smothered. We discussed this and he said the thing that he keeps in his mind all the time is that he would not be this well known if the cause of the ANC was not a correct cause, and he was that symbol ... Madiba was very careful not to be seen as someone who loved to be adored.

One thing which I noticed, is when there were women that adored him, he liked that very much. I teased him about that. He is a flirt. He likes beautiful women ... and as three feminists who work with him, I mean we would go crazy about that. He had a propensity for people who were beauty queens, and I could never accept that. It was one of the arguments we constantly had. But his attitude was, "Why can't you appreciate something beautiful without being made to feel guilty?" I let it rest there, because I thought he is a man from his own generation, he is allowed to do these things that perhaps some of us may consider to be not so progressive. But he wasn't spoiled by adoration, because he didn't see himself as being the one who was being adored. He understood himself as being the representative ...

Talking of beauty queens--Winnie ... What do you recall of the preparations around the [separation] ...

That day and the day before ... when Madiba made the decision that he wanted to separate from Winnie ... he informed everybody as to what he was going to do. His instruction to us in the office was very simple. He wanted a press conference. He was simply going to make the announcement. He didn't want to be asked any questions and he would move out. It was very difficult because the

atmosphere in our office was absolutely emotionally charged for two days, and no one could concentrate very well. He was extremely emotionally overwrought about the decision that he had made; yet, he explained that it was a decision that he had to make. He could not live basically in an atmosphere where he didn't feel comfortable with continuing any longer.

The day before was a day of consulting everybody. He went personally to the homes of the various people. He went to Oliver's house, he went to the Sisulus' home ... and the following morning, before the press conference actually took place, he didn't speak to anyone. It was a very difficult day for him, and I must tell you that if there were any protective instincts that any of us had, it was over that period. Immediately after the press conference, we went off to Durban with Madiba ... Frene, Barbara and I decided that this is it, no one was going to question him about his decision. It was his right to make such a decision, and he was going to be allowed the privacy that a person who makes a decision that is emotionally very difficult, was going to get. And so we hid him for four days in Natal. We organized a get-away place ...

[He felt] very responsible in a sense that if he hadn't gone to prison ... his entire family would have been very different people. He felt, in particular, that Winnie was his friend as well as his wife. She was given no space by the South African government to be a normal person, being a mother in a normal household. She was always detained, always arrested, so the normal family that anyone would expect, wasn't going to be there. Madiba felt very guilty sometimes about his absence. Guilty about the fact that he wasn't around to develop a family, as anyone would want to. He respected Winnie's independence, he actually admires ... her guts, her independence and tenacity. I found that he often spoke about that a lot. He spoke about the strength of her and the fact that she was the person that held the family together while he was away. Despite the many difficulties, she was able to keep a semblance of a family ...

When he speaks about why the separation took place, it was in the context that he recognized that they had grown apart, to such an extent as individuals, that living together was just impossible. Whether that had anything to do with the influences that people might have tried to exert on him by saying things to him about her ... he never agreed that that was so. I think what Madiba said was eventually they had begun to have too many differences between them. I respected that. We respected his right to make that choice. Indeed Winnie had grown into a very different person, very independent in her own right, extraordinarily beautiful woman, also very adored by people, ordinary South African people, and people internationally. I think that it was going to be very difficult for them to continue a relationship that hadn't been there for 27 years. He had very fond memories of their early marriage together ... one does get the sense that Madiba and Winnie were friends when they married each other, there was a great deal of loyalty and love. That continued through his incarceration. Because she did visit him. She was his only reference point physically with the rest of the world for a long time. But I think when they finally lived together again, there was just too much of a difference between them.

The inauguration ... there was a lot of musical chairs and general confusion going on. Can you tell us anything about what ...

It was very difficult because the formal way in which inaugurations are planned is that you have to have the president and a first lady, and the deputy president and Mrs. de Klerk, and Mr. Mbeki and Mrs. Mbeki. Now in our instance, we obviously didn't have a Mrs. Mandela, so what we then did was

we had to convince him that Zenani had to sit in the place. He had no difficulty with that at all. He dealt with it as a family. He called Zinzi and Zenani together, and Makgatho, his son, and they discussed this matter, and there was agreement that Zenani would sit next to him during the ceremony.

I must tell you that my heart went out to Winnie on that day. For me, just as a person, it was extremely emotional to sit there, and you have been part of all these elaborate arrangements, and you imagine that this person must have waited her whole life for this moment, and it wasn't there for her. And I did feel for her that day. She was at the inauguration and she was away from the central party ... but it was very sad. I must tell that I know with Barbara, we talked about it very often. We even discussed behind the scenes how we could possibly try and arrange at least that Mrs. Mandela be part of the main party, but he wouldn't have it. He was clear.

So Mandela himself vetoed that?

Ja. It was his decision. It was after the separation and ... I think he was right. You don't create a false impression of a situation that does not exist. One thing Madiba never did was to create false impressions. It's the one thing he can't do. Very clear about that, and it flowed out even in his relationship with Graca. When there was a relationship, he made it public. Ja ...

Were you around at the first flutterings of love with Graca?

No ... but I was at his house when the Nobel Peace Prize was announced. Graca came, and you could see that Madiba was absolutely taken by Graca. He was in love. He said to me that she's got such a beautiful smile. And I thought, "Wow, my boss is in love." And he was in love with her, and it was beautiful, because it wasn't just a make up thing. It was real, and she too ... I don't know if you have ever seen them together, but there is no one else around in the same room as the two of them when they're together, and I think that's good.

... You mentioned before foreign leaders. I am intrigued as to maybe any relationship with any foreign leader, any particular meetings that stood out ...

I [never attended] a meeting with him and Mrs. Thatcher, but when he met her in London, we were waiting anxiously out in the outskirts to find out what had gone on. The one comment he made was that this was an incredibly powerfully strong woman. He mentioned a story she told him about how she visited the switchboard operators at No. 10 Downing Street, and got to know them quite well, and that it was probably the first time in the history of No. 10 that anybody had gotten to know the people that worked for them as she did. He was very impressed by that. He obviously did not like Mrs. Thatcher's politics. I don't think anyone in the ANC could ... but he admired her. He admired her guts, her resilience, and he admired her strength. He was very polite to her ...

... the image of John Major that I had was a very conservative man, in a very difficult job. At the time that we met him, he was really seriously being challenged on the whole beneficiation question, when the European Union was being discussed. And what Madiba was able to do was to understand the politics that John Major had to present at the time. But he also talked with him about his family, asked him about his wife and his children. And understood that there was a real human being running this office. That's one example.

The other example would be when he interacted with Gaddafi ... that touched me a great deal because Gaddafi's daughter had been killed by a bomb that the Americans had exploded in Tripoli ... We were present with Madiba in a conversation where they discussed how Gaddafi felt about his daughter's death. When I listened to that, it was not a world leader speaking. This was a father whose daughter had been killed. There was real pain and there was a gentle conversation between two men--one whose daughter had been killed, and the other one who was understanding how much pain this person felt. I believe that they made such an incredible connection in that conversation as friends, whatever else they may disagree about, there was that connection. Madiba was able to pick up the one thing in Gaddafi's life that really hurt was the loss of his child ...

Talking about a terrible loss ... there was the death of Chris Hani ...

Madiba really loved Chris Hani. Chris was one of the people who saw him at least once a week ... was able to talk to Madiba about a great deal of things. They had a vision about youth cadet colleges ... Chris' politics fascinated Madiba. Chris, as a man, fascinated him, and he often described Chris as one of the valuable jewels that the ANC had in its fold ... On the morning that Chris was killed, he was at this house in the Transkei, and I phoned him ... When I spoke to him, he was shocked. He was very worried, and decided that he would go to see Chris' family immediately. That was his reaction. That he would drive from where he was to see Chris' family. It was who he is ... The first concerns were what are we doing to make sure that the immediate family is okay. He was very saddened by it. It was a loss that he knew could not be replaced ...

Then he had to deal immediately with a potential major crisis ... There was that extraordinary live TV address he made to the nation ...

Yes. Immediately after, when everybody knew that Chris was dead and Madiba came back to Johannesburg ... and the assessment he made himself was the potential for violence around Chris' death was immense, and as difficult a time as this was for everybody, the responsibility that he carried and that the ANC carried was to calm people down. And immediately to push for ... well, Chris' killers were found almost immediately, but to put it all out. That was the decision that he took. Tell people what had happened, tell people who had been arrested, give them all the information that could be found and do it publicly. That was a very wise choice, because any mystique around Chris' death, at that time, would have sparked violence second to none. It was incredible that he had the strength to do that, because I saw him the same afternoon when he arrived, and he really had been dramatically affected by Chris' death ...

That TV address, do you remember ...

... The TV address was ... done very quickly because he understood the urgency of keeping people calm, and he understood that it had to be himself who told people to be calm, and to allow the processes to take its course ... he was very emotional, it was not an unemotional TV interview. It was a father talking about a son that he had just lost, and asking people to be calm. That was what also helped a great deal to get the country to be ... I mean, for Madiba the loss was much, much more pertinent.

Let's leap ahead, the World Cup rugby ...

I watched the game. It did mean a lot to me ... if you consider someone like myself ... I am radical. I am sort of very left. When the ANC was unbanned, people like myself were the hard core, rough, tough. We weren't going to take any kind of concessioning for white people who had given us a hard time. Madiba saw symbols as an important issue, and sport is such a symbol ... Madiba understood that if you were going to get people to build a nation, you didn't leave any element of that nation unattended. And rugby was important to white people, to Afrikaners, in particular. Not to the educated white Afrikaner, but to that working class Afrikaner person. This was where they enjoyed themselves ... I watched the game and ... the one time I did feel emotional is when I saw him in that T-shirt. I thought wow, this is what patriotic symbolism is about. It's giving people that sense of ... you can have a difference politically, but we come together as a nation when we win things. We don't win it as a single individual. We win it as a group, as a collective. Again Madiba was able to symbolize what that meant. I don't even think he intended to put on that T-shirt. I don't think it was stage managed. Madiba did that on the spur of the moment...

Did you ever talk to him about it, on that subject of the jersey ...

When I saw him once, I said I thought that you looked very nice in the rugby jersey. And he said it was one of the happiest moments of his life. He was very happy that South Africa had won something so important. I didn't ask him if the jersey was planned. I don't think it was. I think that was Madiba doing something very spontaneous...

It's interesting that winning the World Cup was one of the happiest days of his life ... any recollection of him expanding on that a bit more?

What made him happy was that we won something as a nation. This wasn't a moment that could divide us in any way. It wasn't a particular person's moment in history--it was the country's moment in history. For Madiba that would be the context ... is moments in history that would unite every South African and indeed every South African was united on that day. I know I felt euphoric, as radical and difficult as I can be about the achievements of white people, I felt extremely euphoric that we had won this thing together ...

You talked about how Mandela was impressed by Thatcher meeting the telephone operators. Mandela always paid attention to the little people ...

Yes. Well, he always made his own bed, no matter where we traveled. I remember we were in Shanghai, in a very fancy hotel, and the Chinese hospitality requires that the person who cleans your room, and provides you with your food, does exactly that. If you do it for yourself, it could even be regarded as an insult ... so in Shanghai I tried to say to him please don't make your own bed, because there's this custom here and he said, "Call them, bring them to me."

So I did. I asked the hotel manager to bring the ladies who would be cleaning the room, so that he could explain why he himself has to make his own bed, and that they would not feel insulted ... he didn't ever want to hurt people's feelings. He was always concerned. He never really cared about what great big people think of him, but he did care about what small people thought of him. That used to amaze me. He didn't mind if he insulted a very important person, or said something to them that was unkind, because he said they could fend and fight for themselves. But he would never insult

someone who did not have power, who did not have an ability to defend themselves. He was a great champion of the underdogs. And that's Madiba in a nutshell ...

Reference:

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