

## Time to Talk

### READING 6

As opposition to apartheid expanded, many South Africans feared a long, violent civil war. Among them was Nelson Mandela. In his autobiography, he describes a conclusion he reached in 1986:

We had been fighting against white minority rule for three-quarters of a century. We had been engaged in armed struggle for more than two decades. Many people on both sides had already died. The enemy was strong and resolute. Yet even with all their bombers and tanks, they must have sensed that they were on the wrong side of history.

It was clear to me that a military victory was a distant if not impossible dream. It simply did not make sense for both sides to lose thousands if not millions of lives in a conflict that was unnecessary. It was time to talk.

A few Afrikaners had reached similar conclusions. For example, in 1987, two National Intelligence Service (INS) officials asked Willie Esterhuysen, a philosophy professor, to spy for his country by reporting on the internal workings of the ANC. President P. W. Botha chose the professor for the mission, because he was a favorite teacher of one of Botha's daughters.

In December 1987, with the help of intermediaries, Esterhuysen met in England with Thabo Mbeki, an ANC leader living in exile. One meeting led to another and yet another. Early in their talks, the Afrikaner confessed that he was reporting their conversations to the INS. To his surprise, Mbeki was delighted. He was looking for a reliable way to send messages to the government. Gradually the two men developed a friendship. Esterhuysen later recalled their discussions:

If you ask me when my real political liberation started, it was when I realized that South Africa's future is not dependent on Afrikaners alone. At school and even university, we were made to believe that the only real leaders of the country were white, and preferably Afrikaners. Interacting with people like Mbeki made me realize that this country has a pool of leadership which is not defined by a color, the color white or the language Afrikaans.

A number of other black and white South Africans were holding similar meetings. For both sides, contact could be dangerous. In 1986, when the news leaked out that an adviser to the Cooperation and Development Ministry had met with members of the ANC, he lost his security clearance and eventually his job. Matthew Goniwe, a leader of the United Democratic Front (UDF), was murdered after meeting with a deputy minister of education.

Even as secret talks progressed, the violence continued. So did protests and demonstrations. Leaders of the UDF, including Archbishop Tutu, organized a loose coalition of groups called the Mass Democratic Movement. In August of 1989, they launched a campaign of defiance that came to a climax on the 30th, when the police arrested 170 women, including Leah Tutu, the archbishop's wife, as they marched to the British Embassy to deliver a letter to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. The growing violence culminated with the murder of 20 protestors on election day.

When Tutu learned of the deaths, he wept and then prayed. The next day, he called for yet another march. The date was set for September 13th. To ensure a peaceful demonstration, Tutu asked diplomats from twelve countries, including ambassadors from Britain, the United States, and France, to monitor the protest. Until the last minute, no one was sure how the government would respond. In the end, President F. W. de Klerk gave permission for it to take place. It was the first legal protest in a generation.

On the morning of the 13th, over 30,000 men, women, and children marched down the streets of Cape Town to show their opposition to apartheid. At the head of the procession was Archbishop Tutu, the city's newly elected white mayor and the managing director of Shell South Africa (one of Cape Town's largest companies).



On October 15th, de Klerk released from prison every ANC leader except Mandela. On February 2, 1990, the president lifted the ban on the ANC, the PAC, the South African Communist Party, and a number of other organizations. Then on February 11th, he freed Nelson Mandela. In the weeks and months that followed Mandela's release, he and other anti-apartheid leaders would bring about what Albie Sachs, a white activist, has called a "negotiated revolution."

Many South Africans, including Archbishop Tutu, were astonished at the idea of having "Mr. Nelson Mandela and his team on one side of the table and on the other side Mr. F. W. de Klerk, the State President of South Africa, and his team actually sitting across from each other and talking as if they were human beings . . . and ending up discovering that, yes, they are human beings, that even if you looked hard as you liked, none of those in the room—so Thabo Mbeki of the ANC said—none in the room had horns. And try as hard as you did to see, none of them was sitting uncomfortably because they were sitting on a tail. . . ."

In November of 1993, the two sides agreed on an interim constitution. In April of 1994, South Africans of all races went to the polls, many for the first time, to elect a new government. Nelson Mandela and the ANC won the election.

Soon after Mandela became president, the new parliament established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to investigate and record gross violations of human rights committed in South Africa and beyond its borders between 1960 and 1994. The task was to reconcile a country deeply divided by apartheid. To achieve that task the truth had to be told. Some South Africans wanted trials like the ones the Allies held in Nuremberg, Germany, after World War II. Others argued for blanket amnesty. They compromised by creating the TRC. Perpetrators who agreed to testify could receive amnesty.

Dullah Omar, South Africa's new minister of justice, emphasized that in his view the aim of the TRC was not forgiveness. "Forgiveness is a personal matter. However, bitterness can only exacerbate tensions in society. By providing victims a platform to tell their stories and know the destiny of their loved ones, one can help to achieve a nation reconciled with its past and at peace with itself."

Others involved with the TRC focused on an African concept known as *ubuntu*. Tutu has defined it as "our humaneness, caring, hospitality, our sense of connectedness, our sense that my humanity is bound up in your humanity." An American reporter, skeptical of the idea, asked Siphso Maduna, a young ANC leader in a township racked by violence, about revenge. She writes of their conversation:

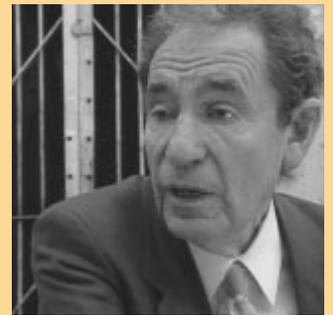
He told me quietly that God had exacted revenge on his behalf. Why, I asked, were his tormentors dead already? He laughed. The “revenge” he spoke of was the ANC’s victory in the elections. . . . And that for Siphso, was the sweetest revenge of all. It was a matter of ubuntu, he said; in giving up power the white government had implicitly admitted that it was wrong. Free and fair elections were their apology for apartheid. “And if people apologize, we Africans must accept their apology,” he carefully explained, aware that this philosophy was alien to my culture. “That is ubuntu.”

Siphso knew better than anyone that whites and blacks were not the only ones in need of reconciliation. For the bitterest battles of his life had not involved white police, but black members of Inkatha [a Zulu-dominated party]. And for his role in that fighting—in which he estimates that his self-defense unit killed hundreds of Zulu hostel dwellers—Siphso himself may be expected to appear before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, or face prosecution. The commission is charged with reconciling not just apartheid belligerents, but all belligerents.

As plans for the TRC took shape, Albie Sachs, who spent 23 years in exile for his opposition to apartheid, participated in an international conference on healing and reconciliation. He told participants that shortly after his return from exile, he visited a memorial to the 26,370 women and children who died during the Anglo-Boer War.

The first thing I saw was a memorial to ballingskap, to exile, and it was meaningful to me because of my recent return to South Africa. In the pavilions there were relics of the concentration camps in which Boer women and children were detained and details about their deaths. From the prisoner of war camps in Ceylon and Bermuda there were photographs and letters written by barely literate prisoners to their families. All this brought to mind the suffering of our generation in South Africa—and it was clear to me that suffering knows no boundaries: all South African communities have known it at different times. But on one wall of the monument there was a proclamation in High Dutch, which, according to my hosts, meant something to the effect of “We won’t forgive; we won’t forget.” To them the two words were synonymous. It troubled me to find such a sentiment among this authentic collection of the suffering of a generation, and it made me wonder how much that slogan had informed South African history and how much subsequent suffering had resulted from the lack of recognition and acknowledgement of that original suffering.

We now have a chance to speak for the first time in the name of the whole South African nation and to end this cycle of suffering and revenge in which the identities of those involved alternate.



## CONNECTIONS

When a TV interviewer asked newly elected President Mandela to name one of his heroes, he spoke of Kobie Coetsee, a former minister of justice and Mandela’s official jailer for nearly a decade. Why was he a hero? Mandela explained that at a time when the uprisings in the townships and government repression were at their height, “hardly any leader of the National Party was prepared to associate himself with a move that would entail the government sitting down with the ANC—a terrorist organization—to discuss any question, including that of peace.” Coetsee was among the few, Mandela told the interviewer, with “the courage, the honesty and the vision to realize that this was the only solution.” What kind of courage does it take to talk? What do those talks suggest about the way former enemies came to see one another as human?

Some people have called the transfer of power in South Africa “a miracle.” Sachs calls it a “negotiated revolution.” In his forthcoming autobiography, he explains that it was “based on meetings and yet more meetings, endless, endless meetings, above-ground, underground, in prison, on Robben Island, in exile, meetings, some boring, some interesting, all with their ‘agendas,’ and ‘matters arising’ and ‘any other business,’ meetings, meetings.” He goes on to note:

We had willed it all, worked for it, never given up, never let go of the basic ideas. Yes, we had believed—belief had been fundamental—but we had backed it up with endless hard work, and learned how to do things together, and to accommodate the fears and interests of others, and to survive the sarcasm and disbelief of those who regarded themselves as more knowledgeable than ourselves about what they called the real world, and we had just kept going on and on until at last the impossible became feasible, then real, and finally inevitable.

How would you characterize the transfer of power in South Africa? Do you think it was a revolution? What are the characteristics of a revolution? Can revolutions be negotiated at business meetings?

Define *ubuntu*. How important is it to democracy? To a society that values all of its citizens?

In reflecting on truth and reconciliation, Albie Sachs noted:

There is a vast amount of human reconstruction and reconciliation to be done that goes beyond the old “us” and “them,” the freedom fighters and the [government]. I think of those in our own ranks— . . . the betrayers and counter-betrayers—terrified, threatening, still murderous. What will happen to them? . . . Who can speak about reconciliation and reintegration where whole communities have been involved in bitter feuds and killings passed down for almost a generation now?

What happens to the collaborators working in the [homelands] some of them corrupt and wealthy? How do we relate to them as neighbors and South Africans?

There has to be a comprehensive approach to all these questions. No one is left out of truth or of the broad South African reconciliation. We should not hope to make everybody who has been a killer, an assassin, into a wonderful new human being. As far as I am concerned, it is enough to simply stop them from killing.

What is Sachs suggesting about the challenges that lie ahead for South Africans? How does he seem to define the word *reconciliation*? Is it synonymous with forgiveness? What does he see confronting the nation’s history as an alternative to revenge?

How does a nation break the cycle that Sachs describes? Write your views in your journal. After watching the documentary, reread what you wrote. What would you change? What would you add? How does what you learned apply to your community? Your country? What new questions do you have?