

OPINION

Five things I learned from Nelson Mandela—his legacy to me

By Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS

There is a deafening silence today. The world has stopped to catch its breath and to wipe away tears.

For how can we bear to lose such a man?

Founding father of a democratic South Africa

Modern Africa's greatest statesman

Beloved hero of a global generation

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela meant so many things to so many people—he was the rare human being who actually lived up to the myth—and challenged all of us to do the same.

Here are five things I learned from Madiba—his legacy to me.

1. Dignity

“For to be free, is not merely to cast off one's chain, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.”

We all come into the world with the right to dignity. We enter with equal worth and unimaginable potential. Yet life immediately starts to shape us, to put us in categories and place limits around us. Nelson Mandela reminded us that the inherent dignity of each of us can only thrive if we embrace the freedom of all of us.

2. Activism

“There is no passion to be found playing small—in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living.”

We have a responsibility to act for what is fair and just. In our ever connected world, it just takes a spark to start a movement. But real courage, he showed us, is having the commitment to see change through.

3. Partnership

“If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner.”

If we want lasting change we have to forgive. The Nobel Peace Prize winner lived by this example. It would be so much easier to only work with people who agree with you. Through an appreciation for diversity, he knew instinctively how powerful partnerships can be.

4. Roots

“I am the product of Africa and her long-cherished view of rebirth that can now be realized so that all of her children may play in the sun.”

It’s not enough to learn from history but to share it too. As a young boy growing up in Timbuktu, it took the dedication of people like my parents and teachers and the vision of leaders like Madiba to show me that I could be whatever I wanted to be. History repeats and now it is our turn to show the next generation all the hope and possibilities ahead.

5. Optimism

“Part of being optimistic is keeping one’s head pointed toward the sun, one’s feet moving forward.”

There are few people who have shared such optimism with the world. When Madiba held a baby born HIV free in Soweto from a mother living with HIV—I knew in my heart that an AIDS free generation was possible. And when we reach this goal, it will be part of his legacy living on.

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The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) leads and inspires the world to achieve its shared vision of zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related deaths. UNAIDS unites the efforts of 11 UN organizations—UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, UN Women, ILO, UNESCO, WHO and the World Bank—and works closely with global and national partners to maximize results for the AIDS response. Learn more at unaids.org and connect with us on Facebook and Twitter.