

HEROES - WHO ARE THEY?

Heroes and heroines are those people who put others before themselves, often overcoming obstacles that would have intimidated many. But those obstacles did not intimidate them. Heroism is not about natural talent, and certainly not privilege, but it is about a determination to overcome adversity, making a statement when social convention or a lack of opportunity would have seemed to be insurmountable obstacles. Heroes and heroines are driven by an inner determination and heartfelt values.

Sometimes our heroes come from our tribe and sometimes they do not.

My hero from my own football tribe is Peter Reid, not the most talented of footballers, but a local Liverpool boy who worked hard, gave of his best and encouraged others to do the same. The notion of collapsing in a heap as soon as he entered the opposition penalty area, as a result of encountering the exhalation of breath (pre-Covid) by an opposing defender was not part of Reid's repertoire. Unfortunately, that cannot be said of all footballers, some of whom have perfected the tripartite manoeuvre of collapse, feigned pain and appeal, either dancing, open-mouthed, in front of the referee themselves, or delegating this to others to act as surrogate complainants, incensed by the injustice inflicted by the offending defender's poorly aimed exhalation of breath.

True heroes and heroines go far beyond this concept of tribalism. They represent the human spirit and those values that raise us all beyond the tribal, beyond the self, and make us reflect on any opportunities we may have been given, often not afforded to them. Nelson Mandela is such a person. He was incarcerated for 27 years for refusing to accept a political system which divided people, not because of their hard work or their talent, but by the colour of their skin. Despite this, when he was eventually released, Mandela still maintained an ability for self-mockery and respect for those around him.

In acting in the way that he did, Mandela spoke not only about himself and the heinous system of apartheid in South Africa, but about humanity. Of his many quotes, a personal favourite is this:

'No one is born hating another person because of the colour 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.'

Mandela, despite all that he had gone through, refused to bow to those impulses which could have led him towards hatred and pessimism. Instead, Nelson Mandela chose love before hate, giving himself a freedom, a freedom of the mind, to live his later years in happiness and hope.

Mandela had understood that hatred not only impacts on the person towards whom the hatred is directed, but also on the person who hates, because that person is trapped in the prison built by that hatred.

You are an example to us all, Nelson Mandela.