

Oration at the Funeral of Walter Sisulu

17 May 2003

Mama Albertina Sisulu and the Sisulu family,
Heads of State and Government and other leaders of the peoples of Africa,
Other international guests,
Ambassadors, High Commissioners and Heads of Mission,
Former President Nelson Mandela,
Deputy President Jacob Zuma, and other leaders and representatives of our people,
Leaders of our executive and administrative authorities, our legislatures, our judiciary and other organs of state,
Leaders and representatives of popular movements at home and abroad, including the women, the youth, people with disabilities and children,
Leaders of business and the trade unions,
Religious leaders,
Your Majesties, traditional leaders and traditional healers,
Leaders in sport, culture, the arts, the sciences, engineering and technology, education and creative literature,
Officers, men and women of the National Defence Force and the South African Police Service and the Johannesburg Metropolitan Police,
The medical services,
Members of the press,
Fellow mourners,
People of South Africa, Africa and the world:

Our country, and nature herself, have been in mourning since that fateful day, the 5th of May, when Walter Sisulu ceased to breathe.

While he lived, there were many in our country who knew nothing about him, except perhaps what they had been told or not told by those who had been his jailers.

While he lived, there were many who did not understand the unwavering humanism of the cause to which he dedicated his whole life, who were blind to what he did to ensure that his movement and his people remained forever loyal to their humanist calling.

When these came to know that there had been such a gentle giant in their midst, hidden from them as though he did not exist, they asked themselves the question - why did we not know!

But there were many others who knew of the place he occupied among the great galaxy of leaders of our people who had given their all, to ensure that all our people and all Africa were liberated from oppression, from poverty and underdevelopment and the intolerable pain of contempt and humiliation.

These knew that Walter Sisulu belonged among those through the generations, who are the best representatives of the unheralded nobility of the masses of our people, the representatives who decided that their lives were worth nothing, unless they dedicated those lives to the service of all our people.

As they embarked on the long march at the head of the combat columns of liberators, having conquered the fear of what might happen to them at the hands of the oppressors of their people, ready to pay any price for the recovery of the dignity of the wretched of the earth, of them it could be said, as the poet did:

"Asinithenganga ngazo izicengo;
Asinithenganga ngayo imibengo;

Bekungenganzuzo zimakhwezi-khwezi,
Bekungenganzuzo zingangeenkwenkwezi."

It was not our persuasion that turned you into patriots. No material offerings induced you to choose to serve the people. It was not for dazzling wealth that you chose to sacrifice your lives for the people, nor for riches as fabulous as the stars without number.

Were these heroes and heroines to perish as they fought for our emancipation, we would sing songs of praise and say:

"Kwaf' amakhalipha, amafa-nankosi,
Agazi lithetha kwiNkosi yeeNkosi.
Ukufa kwawo kunomvuzo nomvuka.
Ndinga ndingema nawo ngomhla wovuko,
Ndingqambe njengomnye osebenzileyo,
Ndikhanye njengomso oqaqambileyo."

We would say the braves, who would perish rather than surrender, have died. We would say their sacrifice constitutes a command even to the King of Kings. Their death gives birth to a new life and a new awakening.

Oh, that I may be counted among them on the day of their resurrection, dancing the victory dance side-by-side with them, sparkling as bright as the new dawn!

Our country, and nature herself, have been in mourning since that fateful day, the 5th of May, when Walter Sisulu ceased to breathe.

We mourned because Walter Sisulu occupied the first rank of those about whom the poet Krune Mqhayi spoke, as though he foresaw what we would have to say when Walter Sisulu died.

The poet sang his song of praise as though to give us the words we would otherwise never find, when the moment came for us to talk about Walter Sisulu, a patriot who could never be bought or corrupted or forced by fear or fashion or love of material things, to auction his soul.

I speak for our government and people when I convey our collective gratitude to the inestimable numbers at home and abroad that stood up to pay tribute to a great son of our people, Walter Sisulu, and to his immediate neighbours in his mature age, who accepted Walter and Albertina Sisulu as their own.

I thank you that you have come from far and wide to join our leader and mother, Albertina Sisulu, and all her family, as we lay the mortal remains of Walter Sisulu to rest, and for the flood of messages of comfort and condolence.

We are honoured and moved that so many leaders of the peoples of Africa, and the esteemed representatives of the governments and popular movements of our common world, have chosen to be with us at this moment, to say to MaSisulu and to our nation:

"Thuthuzelekani ngoko, zinkedama!
Ngokwenjenje kwethu sithi, yakhekani.
Lithatheni eli qhalo labadala,
Kuba bathi: 'Akuhlanga lungehlanga!'"

Therefore be comforted, you who are in grief. We have come among you to ask you to respond to calamity with the strength of the courageous. Hear the advice of the ancestors - that what has happened is what had to be.

Since the poets have permitted that we speak as they have spoken, I will tell of the truths that the poets told.

"Ewe, le nto kakade yinto yaloo nto.
Thina, nto zaziyo, asothukanga nto;
Sibona kamhlophe sithi bekumelwe;
Sitheth' engqondweni sithi kufanelwe;
Xa bekungenjalo bekungayi kulunga."

Therefore, and boldly, we say:

"Death be not proud, thy hand gave not this blow...
The executioner of wrath thou art,
But to destroy the just is not thy part..."

Glory not thou thy self in these hot tears
Which our face...wears:

The mourning livery given by Grace, not thee,
Which wills our souls in these streams washed should be,
And on our hearts, (his) memories best tomb,
In this (his) Epitaph doth write thy doom..."

Death be not proud!

We challenge death's pride because we know that even as it visits its wrath on all who live, it can never destroy a human being as just as Walter Sisulu was just.

We challenge death's vengeful pride because we know that whatever it might do, it can never remove from our hearts the memories of Walter Sisulu, which, deeply entombed in these living hearts, are his epitaph, that shall pass on from generation to generation, alive, living, immortal.

We stand up to tell death that our black mourning clothes are not a tribute to its vengeance, but a signal of salute to him who was our conscience of courage, as we struggled to extricate ourselves from a long night of despair.

We challenge death's certainty that it laid low such an African colossus, because:

We, who have the gift of knowledge, know that the mortal frame of Walter Sisulu has departed our midst, because had it not, it would not have been faithful to the natural order of things.

We, who have the gift of knowledge, were not surprised when he left the land of the living, because we knew that our world would have been troubled, if a human being as human as Walter Sisulu was human, had been condemned to live on, a mere shadow of he that had lived among us for many decades, everyday breathing into all of us the liberating spirit of freedom.

Our thinking brains have etched on our human minds the truth that what is, including death, is what is, is what has to be, and what could not but come to be.

All mortal life that is without end turns into a curse.

Se sa feleng seya tlhola!

Sibona kamhlophe sithi bekumelwe. Xa bekungenjalo bekungayi kulunga.

Le nto kakade yinto yaloo nto!

Death be not proud! To destroy the just is not within your power!

The African colossus that lies in front of us might have fallen, but he has not died.

The flowers of the desert wither and pass beyond the vision of the human eye. And yet they live, a defining part of the uninterrupted sands of the Sahara and the Kgalagadi.

Like these living plants that clothe the African earth and her deserts when the time comes, Walter Sisulu's life had meaning not because he lived, but because his life gave new life to the millions who are proud to call themselves African.

Even when he has passed beyond the vision of the human eye, Walter Sisulu will continue to do what he did while he lived.

He will continue, still, to breathe into all of us the liberating spirit of freedom, and give us the human courage to remain steadfast in defence of our humanity, despite the insistence of a daily world of seemingly incontrovertible truths, that instruct us that we are not quite human, being destined to beg and to bow at another's feet, in abject and imposed humility.

While he lived, Walter Sisulu was a proud African who refused ever to beg, because his very being told him that the beggar and the benefactor would both be demeaned by the exchange. In his death, he remains an African.

While he lived, Walter Sisulu carried on his shoulders, his mind and his soul, the burdens of the poor, the oppressed and the despised of the world, forever haunted by the cries of angry despair of these teeming, toiling masses.

His living memory and the material constructions our country will build in his honour, will, for all time, tell the people he loved, the South Africans, the Africans of Africa and the African provinces elsewhere, that were carved by slavery, and the citizens of the world, that all who would rule and exercise power, must open their ears, to hear the anguished cries of the lowly folk of our world.

Though he is dead, his voice will continue to speak for the ordinary people who reside in the common global neighbourhood. His voice will continue to speak of the seeds of life that lie beneath the sands of the deserts of human poverty, to tell those who have nothing, that in time, their lives will be characterised by much, much more than a creeping accumulation of small and periodic blessings.

He will continue to talk to those who occupy the tiny spaces that provide the material circumstances for decent human existence, that are scattered in a thin belt across the face of our common globe, about the fate of those who live in the marshlands of poverty that everywhere surround the islands of prosperity.

Yesterday, our people walked bending low and low because they bore the heavy yoke of tyranny. Today they walk the land of their birth with a joyful spring in their step, as free as the birds that take to the infinite highways of the air. Today, we talk of freedom, as though yesterday never was.

Yesterday, there was fear and foreboding throughout the land. Those who had oppressed and posed as the lords of all they survey, lived in dreadful fear and trembling, seemingly protected by the same barricades of barbed wire and killer dogs and guns, that imprisoned both them and those they sought to enslave.

Today that fear of what one might do to the other, because of the varied pigmentation of our skins, has been banished from our land, never to return. Today, we speak of a common belonging, as though yesterday never was.

Yesterday, the poor of our country knew that they were but surplus people, condemned to wither away and perish in the dehumanising squalor of conscious neglect, imposed on them by a society that had decided that to thrive, it had to feed on the blood of those it had made powerless, like a vampire.

Today, the poor of our country know that what they did to liberate themselves from the icy grip of the tyrants has turned theirs into a country of hope, dedicated to the eradication of the poverty that has been the fate of our people for generations. Today, we speak of a better life for all, as though yesterday never was.

The dreaded memory of what yesterday was, is fleeing the conscious mind as the shadows flee the rays of the sun. It has taken to flight because of what Walter Sisulu and his comrades did. Because they embedded the humanist spirit into the very soul of their struggle, their movement and their people, they defined liberty as the right of all our people to happiness and human fulfilment, though they were denounced as terrorists.

For many decades Walter Sisulu taught the mass army of liberators to hate oppression, to hate racism, to oppose the social conditions that resulted in untold violence against other human beings, to overthrow the social order that, because of deliberate policy, precise and immaculate in its design and its execution, subjected the majority to pain, indignity and humiliation and death by starvation.

But he never said that we should hate other human beings, including those that oppressed, did great harm to others, and dehumanised millions, because of the colour of their skin and because of boundless and selfish greed.

He told us that were we ever to hate other human beings, we would sacrifice our own humanity, transforming ourselves into the cannibal beasts of the wild, that do not hesitate to feed on their own kind.

He instructed us that were we ever to hate other human beings, we would corrupt a movement for human liberation, and turn it into a predatory animal whose pillars of a blind ideology would be fear and hatred that would consume us, as well.

The new South Africa that has just begun its tenth year of existence has tried to live up to these teachings, to nurture and promote the interests of all our citizens as its offspring, with none cast out as orphans.

It is because of what it has striven to do, to honour the teachings and the example set by Walter Sisulu, that today we speak of our freedom, of a common belonging, of a better life for all, as though yesterday never was.

The memory of the past flees like the frightened shadows of the night, not because we want to forget the past. It flees because we are swept along by a high tide that carries us towards the light of the rising sun.

Voices of amazement and surprise have spoken of a miracle that many things they thought impossible, have been done. They have endowed the outcomes with the attributes of a miraculous wonder.

But we who have the gift of knowledge, the people of whom the poet Krune Mqhayi spoke, know that the miracle is not in the creation, but in the creators. It is not in the outcomes, but in the blessings unbound, that gave us a Walter Sisulu, whose quiet voice and quiet ways and gentle touch, gave our people the knowledge and conscience and conviction to do what is right, the impulse to create the outcomes that evoke pride and joy in all of us, and give us cause to dance in celebration of our humanity.

A great beauty of our land and continent has passed on, a mere twenty days before we gather to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the formation of the Organisation of African Unity, the bearer of Africa's and Walter Sisulu's hopes during its time.

One that was as mighty as the baobab has fallen. But because he planted mighty seeds, he has risen again, and will rise again in the tomorrows and the new births that the African sun will bring. That sun will supply, as well, the living energy that will bring to their noble maturity, the little and tender and delicate plants that Walter Sisulu nurtured with such devotion and care, and love.

As we say farewell to this colossus that lies so peacefully in front of us, awaiting his stately transport to his final place of rest, we say to him that we know that:

"The grave cannot praise thee, death can not celebrate thee."

"Elabafileyo alinakukuncoma,
Ukufa akunakukudumisa."

Dearest father and honoured son of Africa, to speed your journey to your place of pride among the ancestors who guard our fortunes, we, the living, repeat after the poet, John Donne:

"But by all souls not by corruption choked
Let in high raised notes that power be invoked,
Calm the rough seas, by which (he) sails to rest,
From sorrows here, to a kingdom ever blest.
And teach this hymn...with joy, and sing,
The grave no conquest gets; Death hath no sting!"

Death hath no sting!

The living monuments to what Walter Sisulu and his comrades did, will say everything else that needs to be said.

Akuhlanga lungehlanga!