

*The Dalton  
Camp Award*

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I've Looked at Life from Both Sides Now:  
The Media in Democracies and Dictatorships

WINNING ESSAY BY Joe Goodwill

# I've Looked at Life from Both Sides Now: The Media in Democracies and Dictatorships

BY JOE GOODWILL

THE ALARM CLOCK RADIO SHOCKS ME INTO CONSCIOUSNESS FROM A DEEP DREAM OF FLIGHT. I LIE THERE FOR A MOMENT, TREMBLING. ONE GIANT QUESTION BEGINS TO POUND INSISTENTLY IN MY GROGGY BRAIN: "WHAT COUNTRY AM I IN?" FROM THE RADIO, CARLY SIMON CROONS: "I'VE LOOKED AT LIFE FROM BOTH SIDES NOW ..." SHE STOPS SINGING AND I STEEL MYSELF FOR THE NEWSCAST. IF IT'S CBC, I'M IN CANADA. IF IT'S SABC, I'M STILL IN SOUTH AFRICA. THERE IS A REASSURING, FAMILIAR CHORD OF MUSIC, AND A CANADIAN-ACCENTED VOICE INTONES: "GOOD MORNING, THIS IS THE CBC." HIS MELLOW VOICE SENDS A SLOW SHUDDER OF RELIEF DOWN THROUGH MY BODY, AND I CALM DOWN. I REALIZE I HAVE BEEN DREAMING THAT I WAS STILL BACK IN SOUTH AFRICA, BUT IT WAS JUST A NIGHTMARE – ALL IS WELL. IT HASN'T ALWAYS BEEN THIS WAY...

Canada is one of the most democratic nations in the world, and this is due in no small part to the role that the media plays in keeping people informed about what is really going on. This is perhaps most evident to those who have experienced living in countries that are not democratic, and so are able to fully appreciate what we have here in Canada.

I was born in South Africa in 1960, and grew up in the halcyon days of apartheid. My father told me many times that I had the good fortune to have been born in "God's own country." As a white child, it certainly felt like it. I grew up barefoot and care-free in my sunny, segregated neighbourhood, blissfully unaware of the hullabaloo of censure coming from foreign lands – including Canada. How could I have known? There was no such thing as a free press: we were told only what the authorities wanted us to know. Radio and press content was heavily censored. Television was banned altogether until 1975, contemptuously dismissed by our leaders as the "Devil's Box." Most foreign magazines and newspapers were banned, and on one memorable occasion, Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* was banned by an official who didn't realize that *Black Beauty* was a horse.

Many people who have been part of an oppressive group claim afterwards that they "didn't know." In the absence of a free press, this is quite often true. In our complex, modern world, we depend upon an unbiased media to inform us of what is really going on. Without this, democracy is simply not possible. We cannot do the right thing if we do not know the truth. Of course, there is no guarantee that we will do the right thing, even if we are informed – but at least we have a fighting chance.

I had just turned four when Nelson Mandela was convicted of treason and sentenced to life imprisonment. I was too young to understand the issues, but even if I had been old enough, I would not have had access to the requisite information. Because the radio was censored, no one in South Africa was able to hear the stirring words Mandela spoke with quiet, dignified conviction at his trial:

**"I HAVE FOUGHT AGAINST WHITE DOMINATION, AND I HAVE FOUGHT AGAINST BLACK DOMINATION. I HAVE CHERISHED THE IDEAL OF A DEMOCRATIC AND FREE SOCIETY IN WHICH ALL PERSONS LIVE TOGETHER IN HARMONY AND WITH EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES. IT IS AN IDEAL WHICH I HOPE TO LIVE FOR AND TO ACHIEVE. BUT IF NEEDS BE, IT IS AN IDEAL FOR WHICH I AM PREPARED TO DIE."**<sup>1</sup>

Stirring words indeed. If only we could have heard them! But his words, and even his photograph, were banned. If we could have seen his photograph, we would have seen a handsome, caring, kind man, an athlete and a scholar, a man of peace moved to extreme means by extreme circumstances. For 26 years, people all over the world were able to recognize the quality of this truly extraordinary man, because they had access to unfettered media that told them all about him. They could read his speeches. They could see photographs of him. But where it mattered most, in South Africa, he was a *tabula rasa* on which whites could paint their fears and their hatred. Pretty much all we were told was that he was a terrorist. Oh, and there were a lot of jokes in the media about the fact that his Xhosa name was "Rolihlahla," which means "stirring up trouble." That was the sum total of our knowledge.

When Mandela was finally freed, in 1990, I watched the event on television. Together with millions of other white South Africans, I experienced profound shock as a dignified, kindly old man shuffled slowly from the gates of the Victor Verster Prison, leaning on the arm of his imposing wife, Winnie. Where was the monster we had imagined? The monster we were *able* to imagine, because we were never allowed to know the truth? The camera zoomed onto Mandela's face. I saw a sun-weathered face, wrinkled in lines of kindness and forgiveness – even though the sun had weathered that face as he stoically performed hard labour on a barren rock for years. I felt the hairs rise on the back of my neck as I realized I was looking not at a monster, but at one of the greatest men who has ever graced our green earth. After 26 years of imprisonment, this man had emerged with a heart filled with love, ready to forgive and rebuild.

The great man made a short, simple speech, and concluded by repeating the words I had never had the privilege to hear before:

“IN CONCLUSION, I WISH TO GO TO MY OWN WORDS DURING MY TRIAL IN 1964 – THEY ARE AS TRUE TODAY AS THEY WERE THEN: I HAVE FOUGHT AGAINST WHITE DOMINATION, AND I HAVE FOUGHT AGAINST BLACK DOMINATION. I HAVE CHERISHED THE IDEAL OF A DEMOCRATIC AND FREE SOCIETY IN WHICH ALL PERSONS LIVE TOGETHER IN HARMONY AND WITH EQUAL OPPORTUNITY. IT IS AN IDEAL WHICH I HOPE TO LIVE FOR AND TO ACHIEVE. BUT, IF NEED BE, IT IS AN IDEAL FOR WHICH I AM PREPARED TO DIE.”<sup>2</sup>

I watched that event with my own daughter, Kasey. Like Mandela, she is Xhosa, from the breathtakingly beautiful, rugged Transkei. I adopted her just three months after the Group Areas Act was lifted – just one in a pantheon of racist laws that fell during those amazing times. That law would have prevented us from living in the same house. As the two of us watched, my daughter was too young to realize how privileged she was to witness this extraordinary event. I thought back to when I was her age, and the truth was utterly hidden from me. What a difference a free press makes! I was overwhelmed by the liberating power of it.

Two years later, having won the first ever democratic election in South Africa by an overwhelming majority, Mandela was still staunchly committed to his vision of peace and justice. When he was inaugurated as the first black president of South Africa, he said:

“WE PLACE OUR VISION OF A NEW CONSTITUTIONAL ORDER FOR SOUTH AFRICA ON THE TABLE NOT AS CONQUERORS, PRESCRIBING TO THE CONQUERED. WE SPEAK AS FELLOW CITIZENS TO HEAL THE WOUNDS OF THE PAST WITH THE INTENT OF CONSTRUCTING A NEW ORDER BASED ON JUSTICE FOR ALL.”<sup>3</sup>

Everyone in the world heard these words. But more importantly, everyone in South Africa heard them, and was filled with hope. And so most South Africans were on board as Mandela pursued his agenda. Under his leadership, revenge was not on the table. Instead, he led South Africa in an attempt to achieve forgiveness and reconstruction. The path has been hard and rocky, given the devastated country that he inherited, and there remain many problems to be solved. But he never wavered in his commitment to forgiveness, peace, and love for all people, regardless of colour or past transgressions.

Sadly, it was too late for my family. People who are shut off from the rest of the world for so long can develop closed minds and rigid prejudices. Some of my white compatriots could not accept the multiracial family I created by adopting two black daughters. On a few occasions we were physically threatened by white men who refused to let go of the white supremacist lies they had been fed for so long. On the day I had to flee from an enraged white man in a take-out, clutching my terrified toddler under my arm, I realized that we would all have to leave the land of our birth. I was afraid that I could not protect my daughters from so much hatred. And so we came to Canada, to find a place where we could be safe.

And that is precisely what we found. In the eight years we have been here, we have never experienced hostility for being a multiracial family. To a very large extent, that must be attributed to the educative effects of a free press. I have never ceased to marvel at the wonders of a society in which people are truly able to know what is going on. I am grateful that my daughters can walk side by side with me in the streets, without fear. I am grateful that we can go to restaurants and movies without fear. But most of all, I am grateful that throughout their lives, my daughters will be able to know what is really going on, and will be free to make the right choices, based on this knowledge.

But I still have nightmares. South Africa now has democracy, and a free press. But our minds were imprisoned in ignorance for so many years, and I remember how that ignorance fostered intense racism and hatred in so many people, and how that threatened my daughters. And I am so deeply grateful that we are here, where a free press has helped to create so many liberated, tolerant people.



*Notes:*

- 1 African National Congress. "Profile of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela." Retrieved Feb. 28th, 2006 from web site: <http://www.anc.org.za/people/mandela.html>
- 2 Modern History Sourcebook. "Nelson Mandela: Speech on Release from Prison, 1990." Retrieved Feb. 28th, 2006 from web site: <http://www.fordham.edu/HALSALL/MOD/1990MANDELA.htm>
- 3 <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mandela/1994/inaugct.html>

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