*Kevin Lam on Nelson Mandela*

*An anti-apartheid revolutionary and politician, Nelson Mandela served as President of South Africa from 1994 to 1999 and liberated his country from a system of violent prejudice, helping to unite white and black, oppressor and oppressed, in a way that had never been done before. He is held in deep respect within South Africa as the "Father of the Nation" and has received international acclaim for his anti-colonial and anti-apartheid stance, including the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize, the U.S. Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Soviet Order of Lenin.*

*Born to the Thembu royal family in 1918, Mandela was groomed for becoming chief of his local tribe. However, he became increasingly aware of the unjust nature of South African Society while at university, and became involved in anti-colonial politics, joining the ANC and later becoming a founding member of its Youth League. Although initially committed to non-violent protest, Mandela advocated armed struggle through the Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) as peaceful effort failed. In 1962, he was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment in the notorious Robben Island prison. It was 27 years later before an international campaign was successful in lobbying for his release and that he was subsequently inaugurated as the first democratically elected State President of South Africa in 1994. As president, Mandela presided over the transition from minority rule and apartheid. Since retiring in 1999, he continued to be an international figure of great stature and focused his effort on charitable work in combating poverty and HIV/AIDS through the Nelson Mandela Foundation.*

*While the public persona of Nelson Mandela as an activist, president, political icon is internationally known, his personal life – a man who endured isolation in prison, heart-breaking divorces, and personal loss while balancing the demands of loving both his family and his political work – shed light on those qualities and values that made his leadership vision possible.*

*Mandela’s imprisonment was one critical touch point that transformed him. Confined to a small cell, the floor his bed, a bucket for a toilet, he was forced to do hard labor in a quarry. Most would crumble under pressure and hardship like this. However, Mandela revealed hints as to how self-introspection during those prison years changed him: “Before I went to jail, I was active in politics as a member of South Africa's leading organization—and I was generally busy from 7 A.M. until midnight. I never had time to sit and think. As I worked, physical and mental fatigue set in and I was unable to operate to the maximum of my intellectual ability. But in a single cell in prison, I had time to think. I had a clear view of my past and present, and I found that my past left much to be desired, both in regard to my relations with other humans and in developing personal worth.”*

*For the next three decades, Mandela equipped himself with the powers of thinking and discipline by reading literature, especially classic novels such as The Grapes of Wrath. He began to understand that education was a way to give people the most powerful weapon for freedom. He also cultivated a place apart, a pocket of calm amid harsh realities by keeping vegetable gardens on prison grounds. His first plot was a rocky patch measuring just one yard wide; lacking tools, he had to dig with his hands. He advises, "You must find your own garden." Reading and gardening has since then become his life-long hobbies, and they act as important spiritual and mental support in his self-domain.*

*Meanwhile, Mandela’s achievements came at great personal cost to his family. Mandela has been married three times and has fathered six children. His first marriage with Evelyn Mase ended up in a break up in 1957 after 13 years, given the multiple strains of his constant absences, devotion to revolutionary agitation, and the fact she was a Jehovah's Witness, a religion that requires political neutrality. Mandela and his second wife, Winnie Madikizela, spent most of their time apart as he was sentenced to life imprisonment when their first daughter was only 18 months old. Fueled by political estrangement yet again, this marriage ended in separation and divorce in 1996. In addition, Mandela’s oldest son, Thembi, was killed in a car crash in 1969 at the age of 23, while Mandela was in prison and was not permitted to attend his child's funeral. Mandela does not like expressing regrets, but is certainly disappointed for not having the opportunity to bring up his own children and be there for his family. His family domain might not have been the most perfect as he failed to juggle both being a father to his family and a father to the world, but Mandela remarried on his 80th birthday in 1998 to Graça Machel and spent his retirement time with his family as much as possible, in certain cases, making up for the fatherly duties he did not get to fulfill, such as finding a lawyer and purchasing a property for his daughter, Maki, when her first marriage broke down.*

*Finally, Mandela’s love for children – partly due to that fact that he missed seeing them for 27 years, especially his own – and his vision to help the poor out of poverty sparked his many philanthropic initiatives after retirement. One of Mandela's primary commitments has been to the fight against AIDS. He founded the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund (NMCF), with the mission to help individuals from birth to age 22, particularly orphans, of the AIDS crisis. This commitment to giving back to the community aligns with his vision for his country, his beliefs and his family values.*

*I will never get to experience what Nelson Mandela did during those days in prison, and with a mindset that is ready to die for ideal of a democratic and free society, but what I can relate to is the value of self-introspection and how this helps to prepare for a solid foundation to building an alignment of the domains for the rest of our lives, just like how Mandela leveraged those years in prison to reflect on what was important for him, and how he would like to align his self, family and community domain with his vision.*