

# The Lesson of Nelson Mandela

*Stan Sarwicki*

An essay contribution to  
*Conversation 2014*

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## GHC Conversations

Annually, Gary Hubbell Consulting convenes and hosts a small hand-picked group of social sector professionals for three days of intense dialogue and critical thinking. We strive to create a thought-provoking, mind-opening, and stimulating conversation about the social sector, philanthropy, and leadership. This deep exploration of the nature and challenges of the environment is intended to engage, inform, and inspire senior leaders to be catalysts for change in their own organizations and communities of influence. With each GHC Conversation, we seek to establish the seeds of a continuing and enriching network that nourishes us as individuals and helps each of us change how we converse, inspire, and seek new dimensions of impact.



## Participant Bio

### **Stan Sawicki**

Chief Development Officer, Trillium Family Services

Stan Sawicki is responsible for leadership and oversight of fundraising, communications and marketing programs for Trillium Family Services, the largest provider of mental and behavioral health services in Oregon. He and his Development team, both in the Portland Metropolitan and Mid-Willamette Valley regions, manage Trillium's special events, corporate relations, foundation grants, major gifts, volunteer programs, donor records, prospect research, media relations, advocacy, marketing materials, website content, annual reports, newsletters and special appeals. Mr. Sawicki is also directly responsible for major capital campaigns, planned giving and board development.

Stan studied, trained and worked as a journalist and public relations professional in Calgary, Canada prior to relocating in 1993 to Portland, where he joined the advertising agency, Chan Clarkson & Associates, as a copywriter and account manager. His work with a particular client – the inner Portland nonprofit agency, HOST Development – inspired his interest in fundraising, and he was hired by the United Way of the Columbia Willamette in 1995 to develop and expand charitable giving in the Portland area's burgeoning technology sector.

In 1999 he moved to the Christie School, an organization which at the time provided psychiatric residential services to children, first as a grant writer and then development director. In 2006 he guided its transition and re-branding to ChristieCare. He has been with Trillium since 2009.

Stan possesses a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration from Warner Pacific College. His volunteer activities include serving on the Board of Directors of the Duniway Educational Foundation.

This is Stan's first GHC *Conversation*.

## The Lesson of Nelson Mandela

*Stan Sawicki*

**Polarization** (po.lar.i.za.tion):

a) division into two opposites b) concentration about opposing extremes of groups or interests formerly ranged on a continuum

*Merriam-Webster*

During the heart of Oregon's 2010 gubernatorial campaign, nearly 1,000 guests gathered at the Portland Hilton for the Oregon Community Foundation's annual luncheon. The keynote speaker was David Frohnmayer, the universally respected former president of the University of Oregon.

Frohnmayer's message that afternoon was mildly shocking to many in attendance. He spoke of a "disease" that had infiltrated our political system and was now spreading into our communities. He named the disease partisanship, and warned of its crippling and polarizing effects in the meaningful progress of our state and nation.

Really? In Oregon? To be sure, Oregon was, and is, sharply divided along political lines, with the wildly liberal metropolitan centers of Portland, Salem and Eugene on one end (does anyone watch *Portlandia*?), and the staunchly conservative rural communities of pretty much everywhere else in the state on the other. Even so, the two sides have for the most part peacefully co-existed and effectively co-governed for decades. Wasn't it just a few years ago when Oregon's senators – Democrat Ron Wyden, a Portland attorney, and Republican Gordon Smith, a millionaire businessman and devout Mormon from eastern Oregon – famously pledged to work together in Washington, with transparency and steadfast bipartisanship, to benefit all Oregonians – and then did?

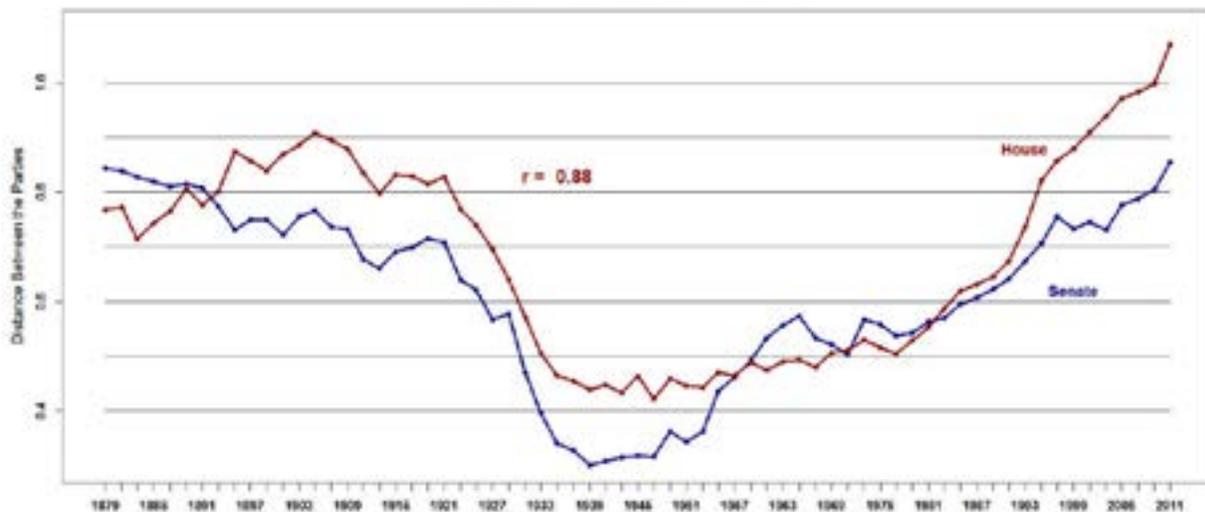
On a national level, the euphoria that swept through much of the country with Barack Obama's 2008 election was waning somewhat, but the forces were not yet substantively aligned against him, the economy was slowly recovering, and there remained much to be optimistic and hopeful about. Surely Frohnmayer's warning was nothing to get worked up over, was it?

Turns out it was. Frohnmayer's portent has come to pass with Shakespearean dread, particularly at the national level. Quite simply, the nation's political engine has practically ground to halt as the result of ever widening partisanship and polarization. In his July 2012 Washington Post blog,<sup>1</sup> Ezra Klein listed 14 reasons why the 112th Congress was the worst

<sup>1</sup>Klein, Ezra (2012). 14 reasons why this is the worst Congress ever. Washington Post. Retrieved February 1, 2014 from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2012/07/13/13-reasons-why-this-is-the-worst-congress-ever/>.

in the nation's history, at least since Reconstruction (see below graph, based on roll call votes). Reason #3 was "They're incredibly polarized," and one could make the further case that #3 was a direct cause for many of the other 13, which included "They're not passing laws" (#1), "They're hideously unpopular" (#2), "They lost our credit rating" (#5), "They can't get appropriations done on time" (#9) and "There are actually problems they need to solve" (#14).

About that last one, there lie the casualties of polarization: the problems that need to be addressed now – poverty, student debt, gun violence, mental health stigma, income disparity, crumbling public education, hunger, to name just a few – go unaddressed, let alone unsolved. At least by the government sector.



**"Nelson Mandela set me free."**

*Koos Botha, former leader of the Republic of South Africa's Conservative Party, in the film "The 16th Man" (2010)*

After decades of unthinkably repressive rule, the South African government finally relented to intense international pressure and growing internal unrest, and released Nelson Mandela from prison on February 11, 1990, following 27 years of captivity. Many white South Africans – Afrikaners – feared the worst. They believed that Mandela's release signaled the beginning of the end of apartheid, an ideology they felt was their birthright, and perhaps more to the point, one that ensured their safety and prosperity. The most fervent among them – known as the familiar-sounding "far right" – took up arms and vowed to fight rather than cede to the country's black majority.

Four years later, as South Africa's first ever democratic elections approached, along with the foregone conclusion that Mandela would become president, the far right lashed out with violence and bombings. Nothing, however, could stop the will of the newly liberated South African blacks who were voting for the first time in their lives, and Nelson Mandela was elected president on April 27, 1994.

As president, and with apartheid now abolished, Mandela could be easily forgiven for pursuing an agenda that marginalized the Afrikaners, as many in his African National Congress Party desired. After all, they had been his brutal oppressors throughout his

entire life, including those 27 years in prison, and his people's brutal oppressors for many generations.

Instead, Mandela used his five-year presidency – his only term – primarily to achieve national reconciliation for all South Africans, and populated his cabinet with a racial coalition, representative of all South African people, ideologies and political parties, including white conservatives.

Perhaps the most unifying of Mandela's actions occurred at the 1995 Rugby World Cup, hosted by South Africa and immortalized in the films, *Invictus* and *The 16th Man*. South Africa's whites-only national team, the Springboks, had become global pariahs, forbidden to participate in previous World Cups and other international tournaments because of apartheid. Now, South Africa prepared to re-enter the world rugby stage.

Inside the country, blacks were skeptical. The Springboks had come to represent white oppression among blacks, so when Mandela appeared at a public rally wearing a team jersey, with the Springbok logo squarely over his heart, it shocked blacks and whites alike. It did, however, unify the country behind the Springboks, who obliged by winning the World Cup against much stronger competition.

It was Mandela's strength, humility and humanity in the face of intense polarization that brought his country's factions to a middle ground. His approach had a profound effect on Koos Botha, former leader of the Conservative Party and true believer in apartheid, prompting a man who had lived in privilege and freedom his whole life to declare that the former prisoner had set him free.

**"There can be no liberation without reconciliation."**

*From the film "The 16th Man" (2010), written by John Carlin*

This is the lesson of Nelson Mandela. For true progress, true change to occur, there must be acceptance by all, or at least almost all. Acceptance cannot be achieved by force or in isolation. It is gained through inclusion, by respecting the voices of others and creating a forum for all to be heard. It requires the traits of Mandela noted above – strength, humility, humanity – but also kindness, compassion, tolerance, persistence, mercy and justice.

How can we in the nonprofit sector bring about progress and change in the face of the paralyzing partisanship and polarization that grips our nation? We lack the power and influence of the government sector. We lack the economic might and resources of the business sector. We lack a charismatic figure like Mandela.

We must lead by example. Many of us work for missions or causes that are nonpartisan in nature. As such, all people, regardless of their political or ideological stripes, have a stake in solving the problems that plague us today. We must engage all of them. For others in our sector who work for cause-related missions and practice advocacy that positions us squarely at one end of the ideological continuum or another, we must steel ourselves to respect opposing voices, no matter how wrong or misguided we believe them to be. Through acceptance and reconciliation we open minds to the possibility of working and achieving something together. A mind opened to possibility is then fertile to be influenced by fact, research and data. A closed mind is blind to these things.

This is not to say our sector has been immune to the "zero-sum mindset" referenced in the GHC Conversation 2014 Essay Preparation Guide, which often gets in the way of

partnerships, collaborations and collective will. We've been encouraged by government, business and philanthropic interests to collaborate with like organizations to achieve efficiency and reduce redundancy, but we've been generally reluctant to share our trade secrets with our competitors.

While achieving efficiencies and reducing redundancies are noble pursuits, I see the emerging movement of cross-sector, or horizontal collaborative efforts as having much greater impact for our constituents and communities than partnerships with same-field organizations. At my organization, Trillium Family Services, we have with all good intentions sought out collaborations and partnerships with like organizations, but with modest success. The possibilities to effect change are endless, however, with the broad collaborations we now seek with partners in areas such as primary healthcare, education, social impact, economic empowerment and even government.

Through these relationships, true progress is measured by outcomes such as transforming systems that don't work, or changing lives rather than simply stabilizing them. Perhaps most importantly, it delivers the message to everyone, particularly our leaders, that polarized self-interest will get us nowhere.

**“Having resentment against someone is like drinking poison  
and thinking it will kill your enemy.”**

*Nelson Mandela*



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