

# WATCHING THE WIND

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# INTRODUCTION

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## *The Reinvention of South Africa*

**M**y story, like many others, begins with Nelson Mandela. I spent Sunday, February 11, 1990, on the Parade, Cape Town's central square, squatting in the thin shade of a date palm, waiting for Nelson Mandela, silent and unseen for twenty-seven years, imprisoned by the Nationalist government for fighting against its minority rule. Eighty thousand of us waited there for him to be released from prison. Our heads swam in the midday heat. Evening approached; the air cooled.

Around seven o'clock, Mandela finally strode onto the balcony of the City Hall, magnetic, smiling, waving, real. This lone black man and this great black crowd speckled with white looked at each other for the first time. He heard us roar our approval and acclaim. We cried, laughed, danced, waved, and shouted our welcome. He laughed and waved back. Parents picked up their small children and held them high above their heads so that they, too, could one day say, "I was there the day Mandela was released."



Nelson Mandela's release was a momentous event in our country. Afterward, when President de Klerk and Mandela began their difficult dance toward multiparty democracy, when violence threatened to tear the guts out of our hopes for the future, then we understood how easy it had been to cheer Mandela and how hard it would be to remake a nation. To save the day, our leaders approved a National Peace Accord. Hundreds of us rolled up our sleeves and pitched in to make it work.

My country has produced beautiful writers, and in writing this book I do not attempt to stand alongside them. I want only to give an account of the remarkable peace process that underpinned South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy. It is a good news story from a country that for decades gave the world only bad news. It is also a story that didn't make the

headlines, perhaps because peacemaking is not usually recognized as the heroic undertaking it is.

For South Africans, those years of 1990 to 1994 were not only heroic but also dramatic and revolutionary. The international community had expected bloody revolution, accepting it as the only way out of apartheid. Instead, we stunned the world with a “negotiated revolution”<sup>1</sup> that cost thousands of lives, each of them precious, but did not even begin to look like the bloodbath that had been predicted. The world saw it as a miracle, and like most miracles it was rooted in visionary thinking, a leap of faith, and hard work.

The bedrock for that miracle was the political will generated by two men, F. W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela—one the president of the country, the other recently released from jail. Their joint decision to negotiate a collective future supplied the leadership necessary to create a climate in which the National Peace Accord could be born and could thrive by means of a network of peace committees across the country. The purpose of this Peace Accord was to stem the bloody flow of violence that threatened to overwhelm the negotiations. Violence had erupted when the lid of oppression was lifted, and the struggle for power at every level began.

Along with hundreds of others, I worked in the front line of the Peace Accord, meeting violence every day, finding ways to use the methodology of conflict resolution to transform it. Without the Peace Accord, it is doubtful South Africa would have made it to the election. The story I want to tell is about how a growing band of peacemakers from all sides of the political and color spectrum took the skeleton of an idea, the National Peace Accord, and made it work.



Nine days before Mandela’s release from prison, de Klerk opened Parliament with a speech that electrified the nation. Sentence by sentence, he committed his government to negotiations for a democratic future. He said, “It is time for us to break out of the cycle of violence and to break through to peace and reconciliation. The overall aims to which we are aspiring,” he continued, “include a new democratic constitution, universal franchise . . . and equality before an independent judiciary.” He announced the unbanning of the African National Congress (ANC), Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), South African Communist Party (SACP), and other banned organizations;

the release of political prisoners; the lifting of restrictions on thirty-three organizations; and the imminent release of Nelson Mandela. (Sketches of the major political parties and groups, as well as of key individuals, organizations, and terms, are provided in the glossary on pages 205–214.)

Around the country, South Africans looked at each other incredulously. De Klerk's speech meant the beginning of the end of apartheid. The majority of South Africans celebrated this lifting of the heavy yoke of oppression. The minority white government and its supporters felt uncertainty, fear, and a deep sense of impending doom. For all of us, in the time it takes to make a speech, the future was irrevocably transformed.

It hadn't been an easy decision for de Klerk—or a quick one. P. W. Botha, prime minister from 1978 to 1984 and then president from 1984 to 1989, had tried to reform the system earlier in the decade, but it had been too little too late, and his halfhearted measures served only to inflame black opposition groups. De Klerk would not repeat this mistake. It had to be all or nothing. He knew it was time. South Africa had hit rock bottom—internally, and in the eyes of the international community.

He also knew what few of his fellow South Africans knew. As Allister Sparks describes it in his wonderfully written book *Tomorrow Is Another Country*,<sup>2</sup> the government had been meeting secretly with Mandela for a number of years, the Broederbond had come to the painful conclusion that apartheid couldn't work, and Afrikaners at the highest level had been meeting quietly with the ANC at safe venues outside South Africa since the 1980s. De Klerk knew that he had to act, and act decisively. He chose the opening of Parliament as his venue, and he chose his words with care.

In the months that followed "the speech," everything in South Africa changed, yet everything stayed the same. The majority of black South Africans still lived in conditions of poverty and deprivation, the white minority government was still in power, and the security forces continued to act with an oppressive, heavy hand. Yet every day the media presented images of the ANC and government conferring, images that before February had been unthinkable. Together, de Klerk and Mandela began to lead their constituencies on the long march toward . . . what? The people of South Africa stepped with their leaders into the void. Like them, we didn't know what was waiting over the horizon, and no one was sure how to get there.

There were few sources to tell us how to make this transition from an authoritarian state to democracy. One book did say that political transitions

are by their nature conflictual,<sup>3</sup> but we were discovering that truth for ourselves. There were those, mostly whites, who wanted to hold on to the old order, fearing loss of life, property, lifestyle, nationhood, power. They desperately wanted to stop the overwhelming progressive momentum forward to an unknown destiny. At the same time, long suppressed and deeply felt black needs, frustrations, resentment, anger, and pain were erupting, often violently. The shape and form of the incoming power structure were also hotly disputed within the progressive ranks, adding to the conflict. The struggle for power dominated the discourse as leadership at every level tried to negotiate slice by slice what they perceived to be a finite cake.

By the middle of 1990, the storm clouds had gathered, throwing shadows of violence across our land. The centuries of oppression, discrimination, and deprivation erupted in a burning rage. Political opportunism found violence useful, and new images of opposing political factions rampaging and killing filled the media. The crime rate skyrocketed, the political death count rose, gangs proliferated, and marginalized youth went on the march. Euphoric release from the cruel past gave way to endless crises. Everything was stark, extreme, sharp edged.

Violence permeated South African life. In the black townships it was an inescapable daily trauma. Political and criminal violence intermingled. A man was killed, some said in a fight between the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), some said over a woman. The truth slid into the earth with his blood. Hostel dwellers lived in terror, holed up in the midst of inhospitable townships. Township residents lived in terror, barricaded in their houses in the shadow of brooding hostels. Others lived in terror in the bush, preferring primitive discomfort to the townships and hostels and gangs.

In the white suburbs, white people terrified one another with stories of increasingly violent robberies, murders, and rapes that the media headlined day after day. Security became a growth industry. Burglar bars and alarms, electronic garage doors and automatic lights, high walls, vicious dogs, and security guards provided an illusion of safety. All this violence and fear devastated our country.

The institutions of apartheid were crumbling and apartheid legislation was being wiped from the statute books, creating uncertainty and confusion in the absence of any new institutions or legislation to take their place. But the clamor for structural justice could not be resolved until a new government and a new constitution were installed.

## NATIONAL PEACE ACCORD

In 1991, the South African Council of Churches (SACC) tried to take the lead in dealing with the escalating violence. At an upbeat conference in the town of Rustenburg in the Transvaal the previous November, under the leadership of the Reverend Frank Chikane, the SACC general secretary, and Louw Alberts, a highly respected Afrikaner layperson, the SACC had issued what came to be known as the Rustenburg Declaration, which “denounced apartheid, called for a democratic constitution and a more equitable distribution of wealth, and urged churches to condemn all forms of violence.”<sup>4</sup> It also made provision for a peace conference to be held in March 1991.

The conference planning was already well under way when IFP leader Mangosuthu Buthelezi launched a broadside attack on the “busybody” churchmen, singling out Chikane for particular venom. Buthelezi was convinced that the SACC supported his archrival, the ANC, but the impact of his statement went much further than personal affront. Chikane and Alberts realized that if one of the major parties did not trust the church, then it would not be able to act as a facilitator. They abandoned the conference, as it was clear that the IFP would not attend. Who, they wondered, had the clout and credibility to pull everyone together to address the issue of political violence?

At the same time, the Consultative Business Movement (CBM), an alliance of progressive business leaders, was exploring its own response to the violence. Under the directorship of Theuns Eloff, a progressive former minister of religion, it convened a number of low-key meetings with a spectrum of political leaders. The meetings were inconclusive, and the CBM was pondering next steps, when in April President de Klerk called a summit on the violence to take place on May 24 and 25. Some sectors welcomed his initiative; others, primarily the ANC, rejected it. They felt strongly that an independent party, not one of the players, should convene any conference on the violence.

The president was unmoved and began to plan his peace summit anyway. The government and the ANC were set on a collision course. Something had to be done. Everyone knew that if the violence was allowed to shatter the dream, the country would fragment too, breaking up into small, bleak pieces of what could have been that would take decades to mend.

The church and business representatives decided to join forces, and over the next six weeks they worked out a plan that hinged on positioning the conference as a part of a broader process to respond to the violence. This would allow the ANC and others to view the conference as a starting point and to participate from then on. The government and the ANC agreed to this formula, and the summit went ahead. Its most important outcome was the creation of a committee, balanced for race, gender, and political leaning, and including all the major players. Groups on the far right and left of the political spectrum declined to participate, and although it would have been preferable if they had, the consensus was that the process could proceed without them.

In addition, the summit appointed church and business leaders to facilitate the process that would follow. The facilitators worked quickly, and on June 22, calling itself a “think tank for peace,” the committee met and hammered out the skeleton for what was to become the National Peace Accord.<sup>5</sup> Over the next three months, this core group brainstormed with the broad political and community leadership in every sector, searching for mechanisms that could redirect the violent energy into constructive channels.

They drew on their personal experience. Jay Naidoo, secretary general of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), played a key role, as did Theuns Eloff. Both had cut their conflict resolution teeth in the business sector, from trade union and management perspectives, respectively. Neither was a theoretician; both were schooled in practical experience on the street and through training courses and seminars. And since the mid-1980s, they had also been involved in trying to prevent violence as their workforces exercised new political muscle, organizing marches and demonstrations and clashing head-on with the police.

“While the committee made no attempt to operationalize theoretical models of conflict resolution, key individuals involved in drafting the National Peace Accord brought their direct and personal experience to bear. We had people who not only benefited from training courses, but had experience in the practical side,” says Peter Gastrow.<sup>6</sup> Their study of the literature was reflected in the original naming of the peace committees as Regional and Local Dispute Resolution Committees.

Gradually a plan began to emerge from sketchy notes on the backs of envelopes and more formal deliberations. It was a daring idea; nothing like it had ever been tried before anywhere in the world. Could it work? The

consensus was that it had to be tried, and on September 14, 1991, the plan for a National Peace Accord was unveiled at a National Peace Convention. It was an extraordinary moment for South Africa, one that would in hindsight be recognized as a major turning point.

The National Peace Accord was a pact between South Africa's major players to try to stop the violence. The twenty-six signatories included the principal political parties and organizations, the government and security forces, the leadership of the independent and self-governing states (so-called homelands under apartheid), and business, trade union, traditional, and church leaders. They committed themselves to a multiparty democracy and promised to support and abide by the mechanisms laid out in the Peace Accord.

The Peace Accord didn't replace the rule of law; it added to it. It was an alternative forum for resolving political and community conflicts that would have fallen through the ever-widening cracks in existing legislation. It was built around conflict resolution methodology as we knew it in South Africa at the time, and it applied to South African society as a whole.<sup>7</sup>

The Peace Accord drew to itself just about all the peacemaking efforts that were bubbling around the country. It was a grand attempt to address the violence, and we had to give it a try.

Conflict resolution is a relatively new field of practice and research that handles conflict in a collaborative way. Violence is such an automatic response to conflict in most of the world that we forget that violence is merely one response to conflict among many. Using conflict resolution methodology, we can replace this violent, adversarial tradition with nonviolent, nonadversarial approaches. The Peace Accord proposed an amazing and unprecedented experiment to transform South Africa's culture of violence into a culture of conflict resolution. It was the first time that conflict resolution had been tried on this scale anywhere in the world.

Unlike most peace accords, ours was not only an agreement on paper. It also mandated a countrywide structure with peace committees operating at national, regional, and local levels. In the interests of defusing the violence, people from nearly every sector were willing to work together with adversaries on peace committees. Soon there were hundreds of peace workers from all sides, working with, rather than against, one another.

The adversarial stance had been necessary. Apartheid had to be opposed by all means that could be mustered. South Africans of color and

conscience had bravely fought against it to bring an era of tyranny to an end. Their stories stretch back in the history of a country built from the start on the flawed foundation of racial discrimination.

Now it was time to build a new society, and as the peace process got under way, something extraordinary happened. The forces of democratization adopted and adapted the conflict resolution tools, the problem-solving techniques, and the facilitating skills that form the essence of the peacemaking process. Conflict resolution spread as an agent of change on a mass scale at multiple levels.

The peace process set in motion by the launch of the Peace Accord provided a rickety way across the divide between apartheid and democracy.<sup>8</sup> Yet little is known about this process, without which South Africa would probably have never made it to the April 1994 election. This book tells how a band of peace workers made the Peace Accord work on a daily basis in one of South Africa's eleven regions (as demarcated at the time—see page 21), the Western Cape province, whose capital is Cape Town, from February 2, 1990, to April 27, 1994.

### ***Some Lessons about Peacemaking***

We learned a number of things as we went along:

- If peacemakers exist in a community they are likely to be used.
- Often, conflicts cannot be resolved without a third party.
- Crisis can provide the opportunity for peacemaking.
- Peace structures are in themselves mechanisms for conflict resolution.
- When people discover humanity in their enemies, they usually find it more difficult to remain enemies.
- You cannot change others; you can only support them if they want to change, and safe places like the peace committees provide the space for not just change, but transformation.
- Forgiveness carries awesome power.
- Each of us has his or her own truth (including my truth in this book).

Later, when I was able to think about it all, I sifted out four principles of peacemaking.

1. *Top-down and bottom-up mechanisms need to be incorporated into a peace process.* The South African transition depended on the political will

generated by both F. W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela, on the one hand, and the active involvement of a vibrant civil society, on the other.

Even in established democracies in the West, there is always a gap between the bottom and the top, between the people and their leaders. The question is how to bridge it. In the upheaval of transition, who and what constitute the top and the bottom change, and the gap becomes a place for dialogue, creativity, and experimentation. Arrows of expectation can be shot up from the grass roots and find receptivity among decision makers. The roots of ideas can be extended downward to be tested. The transition is a fleeting moment that needs capturing before new arrangements become entrenched.

Conflict resolution and collaborative, participatory processes can play a key role initially as agents of change. Subsequently, they provide the techniques that keep alive ongoing communication between the top and the bottom, left and right, traditional and progressive, hawks and doves.

2. *All the stakeholders must be invited to join.* In South Africa, the stakeholders included the political organizations and parties, civic organizations, minority groups, security forces, businesses, trade unions, churches, and the government. Anyone left out would be unlikely to support the process and might well sabotage it. The peace committees of the Peace Accord served a convening function and became the key venues for stakeholder meetings. Forums played a similar role.

Inclusivity also needs to extend to the peace workers themselves. In the South African context, people working through the peace committees, peace desk officers of political and civic organizations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), community organizations, church groups, police-community liaison officers, academics, and others actively involved in day-to-day peace work had to find ways of cooperating for peace.

3. *Relationship building and healing mechanisms must be included.* Conflicts tear people apart, and when the divisions are as entrenched and sharply defined as in South Africa, they require active healing. In South Africa, we were so successfully divided by apartheid that we found ourselves strangers in our shared land, living parallel lives in which we rarely met as human beings.

The Peace Accord structures provided a place for people to build relationships, and the tools of mediation, facilitation, monitoring, and

training provided the means to extend that healing into the greater community. Reconciliation must take place not just at the negotiating table, but in the hearts of the people.

4. *Socioeconomic and political development must accompany any peace process aimed at institution and nation building.* This is tricky, a catch-22 rule, because development requires peace, peace requires development, and development is inherently conflictual as communities compete for resources and the concomitant power. The peace process can help create the conditions in which development can flourish and can provide conflict resolution mechanisms to ease the conflict. However, more is needed. In South Africa, during the transition period, officials and citizens actively engaged in a series of forums to design alternative economic, educational, and health systems appropriate to the new democratic order. These forums acted as participatory think tanks for the future and generated an optimism that we, the people, could shape the rainbow nation to come.

These four principles—top-down and bottom-up, inclusivity, relationship building and healing, and socioeconomic development—form the basis for a transformative peace process. Collectively, they represent an approach that offers distinct advantages. The outcome is sustainable because it is participatory and legitimate; unlike wars, the peace process is constructive rather than destructive; real healing can take place within this kind of framework; real needs can be met because they are able to be articulated; and the process provides the basis for nation building.

## CRITICISM OF THE PEACE ACCORD

At the end of 1994, the newly installed Government of National Unity closed down the Peace Accord nationwide. Members of the government saw it as competing for power and funds and, most of all, control. They were intent on focusing on the new democratic structures embodied in the constitution. But instead of drawing on the wisdom and experience of the Peace Accord, they abandoned it, and the people who had made it work, with little explanation.

Even during its short life, the Peace Accord had come in for a lot of criticism. Expectations of what it could and would deliver were unrealistic.

It could not resolve structural injustice. It could not change apartheid legislation. It could not remodel the apartheid institutions that had lost their legitimacy. It could not defend itself against sabotage by the forces that were trying to stop the peace process. It could not reach every community in the country. It could do little or nothing about many of the causes of the escalating violence, even though it had to keep trying to cope with the symptoms. In many cases, it could provide only a Band-Aid, not a cure, and it was blamed for this deficiency.

Some criticized the Peace Accord as a top-down structure. This was true in some regions, although it was more a flaw in execution than in design. Each signatory organization was responsible for keeping its constituency informed and involved, and in many cases these organizations neglected to do so. Either they did not have the means to do so, or their own internal information systems failed.

Some said the peace structures were too white. In the beginning, whites dominated the peace process. Whites had cars, access, and resources. They had time and guilt. And, in the best (old) South African tradition, whites were initially appointed to practically all the key posts within the peace structures.

It was also male dominated. The signatory organizations consistently selected a preponderance of men to represent them on the peace committees at the national, regional, and local levels. At the national meeting of police, political, and civil society leadership convened by the National Peace Secretariat at Johannesburg airport in June 1993 (see chapter 7), of the 150 delegates, only 10 were women. I stood up and addressed this issue. Although to my discredit my voice was strident, an ANC leader apologized from the floor and urged his fellow delegates to find ways to redress this balance when they went back home.

Despite its flaws, the Peace Accord changed South Africa and South Africans. It provided a place where former enemies got to know one another and found the humanity behind the stereotypes that for decades, if not centuries, had kept South Africans apart. It provided a buffer against violence that allowed the 1994 elections to proceed and catapult us into democracy. It formed a bridge between the old world we were breaking down and the new world that had not yet been born. It introduced conflict resolution methodology into the fabric of South African society. For many of the thousands that it touched, it was the most transformative experience

of our lives. It was a means by which thousands of South Africans found our voices as champions of community and political peacemaking, voices we did not even know we had.