

The Spiritual Side of Photographing Mandela, Tutu, and the Dalai Lama by Valerie Schloredt

"It's a weird time to be a photographer. I love being a photojournalist. But I don't love that everybody with an iPhone thinks it's OK to photograph and post anything, anytime, anywhere," says Feldman. "There are boundaries. It's a recording device. When young people ask me 'How did you get to photograph these people?' I say it's partly earned trust. Knowing when not to shoot is important. Sensitivity with a camera is essential."

"I may not have the most wonderful bank account, but my spiritual bank account is overflowing," says Jane Feldman of her career as a social justice photojournalist and author. Working for the Peace and Justice Ministry of New York's Riverside Church led her to photograph Nelson Mandela. She's traveled with the Desmond Tutu Peace Foundation and met the Dalai Lama.

Feldman arrived early on the day of Mandela's 2005 visit to Riverside. "A Secret Service man took me aside and said 'You're not using a flash, right?'" That's when Feldman learned that Mandela's vision was damaged by years of breaking glaring white rock in the limestone quarry while he was imprisoned on Robben Island. A camera flash would further damage his eyesight. When Mandela arrived, she was distressed to see that he appeared to be physically very frail. She didn't want to create misleading images, she says, but "I just could not depict him as frail. To me, he is a lion."

The magical moment photojournalists wait for came as Mandela listened to a performance by the Harlem Boys' Choir. "He was seated under the podium where Dr. King gave his 'Beyond Vietnam' speech. And when the boys came out, he sat up in his chair and just sort of puffed up, and glowed. That's when I took that amazing shot that I was so grateful for. It showed his vision and strength and love."

Getting to know Archbishop Desmond Tutu—"Arch" as he is known to his friends—has been a spiritual experience for Feldman. "I'm not a particularly religious person, I'm more a spiritual seeker looking at all faiths. One thing I appreciate from my Jewish background is the lesson from the Passover table that if anyone is enslaved, no one is free. So many people are currently enslaved in so many countries, including our own. There's a lot of work to do."

"Tutu has always said 'We are all God's children.' That is who Tutu is. He thinks of us as a family."

That message is enlivened by Tutu's sense of humor, says Feldman. "I worked with him in

Seattle at the Seeds of Compassion conference in 2008, when I had the opportunity to see him with the Dalai Lama—they're best friends. These guys are so serious, and they do amazing work, but I've never met two funnier humans. Once the Archbishop was talking about His Holiness, and he referred to him as 'a naughty schoolboy.' I said, 'Arch, seriously, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, the exiled spiritual leader of Tibet, is a naughty schoolboy? He's so quick-witted, he just looked at me and said 'Oh yes Jane, have you ever known anyone homeless that long with such a great sense of humor?' The truth is they're naughty schoolboys together."

For Feldman, a highlight of the conference was when a teenager asked Tutu how his friendship with the Dalai Lama works despite the differences in their religions. Tutu replied: "Yes, our religions are different, but our faith is the same. We believe in kindness. And besides, we just wear different costumes."

Tutu at the Global Healing Conference in Bali, 2004. "I can hear him laugh in the shot with the fan," says Feldman.

Tutu interviewed for The Shift, Bali 2004.

All photos by Jane Feldman.