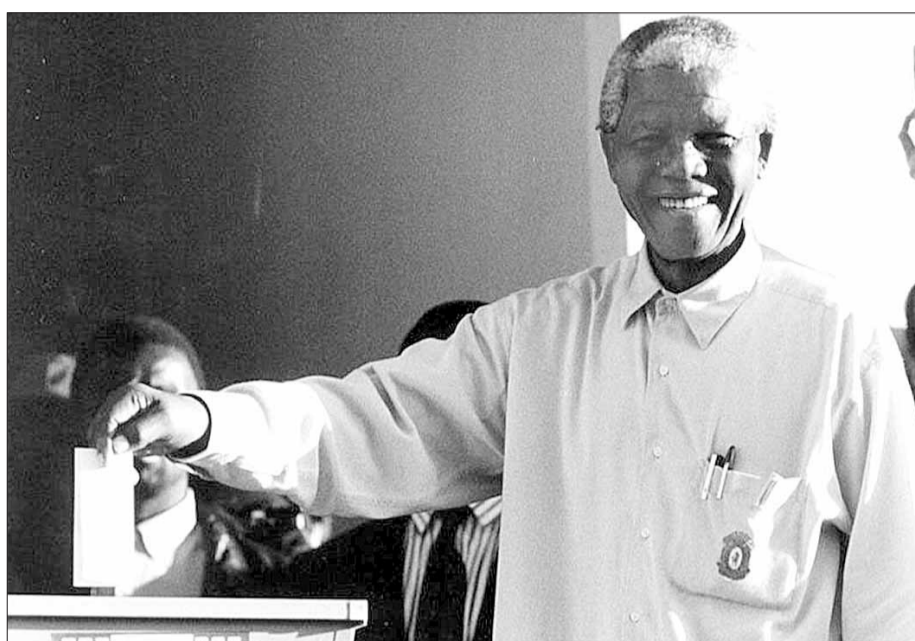


HAPPY 89TH

BIRTHDAY, MADIBA!

Co-ordinated by: Special Projects, Independent Newspapers Cape – 021 488 4175

Coming through with flying colours



NELSON MANDELA voting in South Africa's first democratic elections in April 1994.

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there were welcome diversions to buoy morale and relieve the monotony of the deadening routine, and Mandela and the other prisoners made the best of these occasions, deriving as much enjoyment as they could from every opportunity, as one would by sucking marrow from a bone.

Throughout his ordeal, Mandela never stopped making representations to the prison authorities to improve prisoners' conditions whether this was to improve their diet, to gain the right to wear long khaki pants in place of shorts, which they considered demeaning, or to have doors put into the ablution block to provide privacy. And every victory that was gained, no matter how small, was celebrated.

As his own special project, he established a small garden in a corner of the prison courtyard, asking colleagues to hammer bones left over from their meat meals into powder so that he could use the bone meal as a fertiliser to grow plants, such as chillies, lettuce and tomatoes. His garden gave him many happy moments of relaxation in the outdoors, bringing him close to nature and giving him a sense of freedom and creativity. He also came to see the growing of plants as a metaphor for politics "as a leader too sows seeds, and then watches, cultivates and harvests the result".

Mandela and the other prisoners enjoyed watching old movies in an improvised cinema in Section B with Mandela particularly delighting in watching *Mary Queen of*

Scots with Vanessa Redgrave and Glenda Jackson. They staged their own plays and were allowed to buy and play musical instruments, singing songs against apartheid. The prisoners also enjoyed visits from a Muslim priest on special days "because he came not only with the Qur'an, but with biryani, samoosas and other lovely delicacies".

Far from destroying him, Mandela's imprisonment on Robben Island became a test of resilience that he came through with flying colours. With the prisoners' sense of community and comradeship providing solace, he was able to resist the temptation to become bitter or self-pitying. Instead, he became "steeled and hardened", although he never lost his capacity for seeing the best in people, his belief in the dignity of man and his unqualified aptitude for forgiveness.

Mandela is proof positive that the mark of character is not so much about what happens to us in life, as about how we choose to handle the slings and arrows that inevitably come our way and that every situation, no matter how dark it seems, provides us with some compensation.

Thank you for these valuable lessons, Madiba. Thank you for being "our nearest and brightest star". And may you have a truly wonderful 89th birthday.

References:

- *Anthony Sampson*, *Mandela: The Authorised Biography*, Jonathan Ball Publishers
- *John Allen*, *Rabble-Rouser for Peace*, Random House

HAPPY BIRTHDAY

With Nelson Mandela, every day commemorates the celebration of a unique and venerable person

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