

Timeless Wisdom from the Late Nelson Mandela by Maria Popova

“The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.”

We have lost Nelson Mandela, unequalled patron saint of equality, peace, and human rights. But while the body might be gone, the spirit remains forever with us — a spirit that not only changed political history, but also tirelessly elevated humanity into a higher version of itself.

In his inauguration speech, delivered on May 10, 1994, and available below in its entirety, Madiba addresses the end of apartheid in words at once timeless and timely, ringing with soul-stirring resonance today in the wake of the end of DOMA and the dawn of marriage equality, which has been called “the civil rights issue of our day.”

Out of the experience of an extraordinary human disaster that lasted too long, must be born a society of which all humanity will be proud.

[...]

The time for the healing of the wounds has come.
The moment to bridge the chasms that divide us has come.
The time to build is upon us.

In his 1995 autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* (public library), Mandela speaks to the conditioning that produces both love and hate:

No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.

He echoes Bertrand Russell’s timeless philosophy of education as the foundation of the good life and writes:

Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mineworker can become

the head of the mine, that a child of farmworkers can become the president of a great nation. It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another.

Mandela, like many of history's greatest luminaries, sees mistakes and failure as an iterative tool of success rather than an indignity to be avoided:

The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.

But perhaps most poignant of all is Mandela's remark on the never-ending journey of freedom and human rights:

I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended.

Though Madiba's own bodily walk may have ended, the path paved by his spectacular spirit and enduring legacy reaches further and further into the horizon as we turn the page on yet another victory of freedom and equality.