

turning to one another

simple conversations to restore hope to the future

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For Lionel Davis,

For all of us

May we not be separated

In 1999, you told me the story
that appears on page 74.

Thank you for the life you have led.

May you feel blessed by the
gratitude of so many,

With respect & love,

D. Wheatley 3/06

One of my favorite stories was told to a group of us touring Robben Island, the South African island prison where Nelson Mandela and many others were imprisoned for more than twenty-five years because of their struggle to end apartheid. Their history as prisoners on Robben Island contains many stories of the triumph of the human spirit over torture and severe oppression. My favorite story stands out because it is so unusual.

We were standing in a long narrow room that had been used as a prison cell for dozens of freedom fighters. They lived in close quarters in this barren room—no cots or furniture, just cement walls and floors with narrow windows near the ceiling. We stood there listening to our guide's narration. He had been a prisoner in this very room. The cold came up through the floor into our feet as we gazed around the lifeless cell. We stared through the bars of the door as he described the constant threats and capricious brutality they had suffered. Then he paused and gazed down the length of the room. Speaking very quietly, he said: "Sometimes, to pass the time here, we taught each other ballroom dancing."

I have never forgotten that image, of demoralized and weary men teaching each other to dance in the cold silence of a long prison cell. Only the human spirit is capable of such dancing.

Asking us to notice if we believe in human goodness is not a philosophical question. We will either retreat or move closer together, depending on what we believe about each other. Courageous acts aren't done by people who believe in human badness. Why risk anything if we don't believe in each other? Why stand up for anyone if we don't believe they're worth saving? Who I think you are will determine what I'm willing to do on your behalf. If I believe you're not as good or important as me, I won't even notice you.