

## **GREATNESS, INSIDE-OUT**

**from the book "GAME CHANGERS AT THE CIRCUS"  
by Jean-François Cousin**

"This is the Island. This is where you will die"... were a warder's first words to prisoner 46664 when he arrived at Robben Island prison. The convict was confined in a seven foot square cell, with a slop bucket and the floor as his bed. At the beginning, his daily activity was crushing stones with a hammer to make gravel. He was allowed one visitor a year for just half an hour. He could write and receive one letter every six months. News from the outside world were not reaching him.

Yet that man endured prison for 27 years.

Prisoner 46664 believed that "Man's goodness is a flame that can be hidden but never be extinguished". It certainly guided his choices of behaviours, which had ripple-effects on those around, as his lawyer George Bizos recalls:

"On my first visit to Robben Island, he was brought to the consulting room by no less than eight warders, two in front, two on each side and two at the back... in shorts and without socks. And the thing that was odd about it is that, unlike any other prisoner I have ever seen, he was setting the pace at which this group was coming towards the consulting room. And then with all gravitas he said 'You know, George, this place really has made me forget my manners. I haven't introduced you to my guard of honour'. And then he proceeded to introduce each one of the warders by name. Now, the warders were absolutely amazed (...) and they actually behaved like a guard of honour. They respectfully shook my hand."

Prisoner 46664 also believed that "as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same." And another moment Bizos remembers is: "The most inhuman prison official was Colonel Aucamp. The Colonel would at times pace up and down outside the room in which we were consulting, locked in with our clients (there was a grilled door so that the warders could see us). (My client) went up to Aucamp, and said, 'You know these lawyers give me homework ... and the table that I have in my cell is a rickety one. Could I please have another table because I am under pressure to do this?' He spoke politely, and the response of Aucamp was bombastic: 'You are no longer a lawyer in your office to give orders. You are a prisoner. And we will do what we have to. You can't order us about.' (My client) looked at him and he said, 'Have you finished, Colonel?' The Colonel said, 'Yes.' (My client) turned round, looked at the man with a key, who opened the grilled door, and then came back, sat down, said nothing. He just continued the consultation with me as if nothing had happened. (After) lunch-break, he came back with a little smile that you often see [and] said,

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<http://www.greatness.coach/book/>

'Guess what, there's a brand new table in my cell.' His superiority as a human being had its effect even on the most inhuman of the people that he had to deal with."

Later, prisoner 46664 was granted his request to study. He then taught political economy to his fellow prisoners, to the extent that Robben Island became known as a "university behind bars". He shared: "There is no passion to be found playing small - in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living."

Eventually the ripples from his greatness were just too powerful for others to keep him in his South African prison. Nelson Mandela was freed in 1990. And those ripples then propagated across our World, as he lived his mantra: *"to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."*

*Former anti-apartheid leader and Labour Cabinet Minister Peter Hain witnessed: "It was not just his courage and capacity to inspire that endeared Nelson Mandela to so many. Despite being one of the world's most prominent statesmen – perhaps the most revered of his age – he retained his extraordinary humanity. When he was with you, you had all his attention, whether you were a President, a mere child, a hotel porter, a cleaner, a waiter or a junior staff member. And he never forgot a friend.*

His greatness came from the humanity that he radiated, his common touch, humbleness, self-deprecation, sense of mischief and dignity. Prison could have embittered, adulation could have gone to his head, and egotism could have triumphed. But none of this happened."



Nelson Mandela never strove for perfection, popularity or public applause. He showed us what authentic greatness looks like. He appeared true to himself and his values, and clear on his purpose. The ripples from his greatness were flowing from the very fabric of his being. People were 'instinctively' inclined to follow him for who he was as a person, before who he was as a leader.