

MESSAGE FROM ARIEL DORFMAN TO FELLOW FRIENDS OF THE EARTH

Presented at the opening reception for
Leading with Landscape IV: Transforming North Carolina's Research Triangle, April 12, 2018



I regret that circumstances beyond my control have made it impossible for me to deliver the opening remarks today. My wife Angélica and I are sorry we could not join you, but the organizers have been kind enough to suggest that I make some brief comment, along the lines of what I had intended to say.

When I met Nelson Mandela in 2010 in Johannesburg on the occasion of my delivering the annual lecture honoring his birthday, one of the questions I had for him referred to the small garden he had cultivated on Robben Island, the prison where he spent eighteen years of his life as punishment for having rebelled against apartheid. Planting anything in that hard, dry-scrabble earth—built on top of a garbage dump—was not easy, but as the seasons passed, he managed to extricate vegetables from his patch, giving the best tomatoes and chilis to the wardens, perhaps

foretelling his strategy of forgiving his enemies rather than dehumanizing them. I asked him why he had badgered his jailers so insistently to allow him to engage in this sort of unusual labor, and he grew thoughtful. He answered, finally, with several words: Defiance. Hope. Beauty. They are words that we should heed today, as we face the perils that our species has created by our disregard and degradation of Nature, our threat to the existence of so many living creatures on this planet. If Mandela could landscape his tiny plot of arid land, turn it into a source of nourishment and greenery, story-telling, and culture, if he could achieve this when all the odds were against him, beaten and humiliated and deprived of dignity and liberty, how can those of us who are free to do as we will with our environment ignore the need to surround ourselves with the most splendid trees and flowers and fountains, fill our cities with grounds that defy death, and offer a heritage of hope and beauty to future generations.

If I had been present today, that is what I would have said to you, having conveyed a message from Mandela, a message from the seeds he planted, a message from the Earth that was his friend: We do not have the luxury of being prisoners of despair but rather should strive to be the landscape architects of our communal destiny.