



al mariam

“We Shall Persevere, Ethiopia!”



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“How important it is for us to recognize and celebrate our heroes and she-roes!”, decreed Maya Angelou, the great African American author, poet, dancer, actress and singer.

“I shall persevere!” wrote Eskinder Nega, the imprisoned and preeminent defender and hero of press freedom in Ethiopia, in a letter smuggled out of the infamous Meles Zenawi Prison in Kality, a few kilometers outside the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa.

Eskinder was not merely writing about himself when he declared, “I shall persevere!”. He was also writing on behalf of his fellow imprisoned journalists,

bloggers, human rights advocates and other political prisoners. After all, no prisoner of conscience, no political prisoner, can persevere alone. I would venture to say Eskinder was indeed writing about the quiet perseverance of ninety million of his fellow Ethiopians held captive in an open air prison that Ethiopia has become under the thumbs of a malignant thugtatorship called the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Ethiopia shall persevere and prevail!

I want to ring out 2014 by celebrating my personal hero Eskinder Nega and she-ro Reeyot Alemu, and through them all of the other Ethiopian heroes and she-roes -- the prisoners of conscience in the war on press freedom in Ethiopia and the political prisoners held captive in defending freedom, the cause of free and fair elections, democratic governance and human rights advocates. In celebrating them, I proudly declare, "You have persevered as political prisoners! We have persevered!

Ethiopia has persevered as one nation under the Almighty. We shall persevere until those who have coerced us into persevering can no longer persevere. Victory is guaranteed to those who persevere!"

Shakespeare wrote, "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon 'em." I think the same can be said of heroes and she-roes. Citizens like Eskinder and Reeyot (symbolically representing all of the other prisoners of conscience in Ethiopia) have become heroes and she-roes because heroism was thrust upon them by extreme circumstances. When they met the defining moment of their lives, unlike most of us, they did not flinch or cringe. They did not grovel or beg. They did not offer to sell their souls for a few pieces of silver. They did not cut and run; they did not back down. They stood their ground. They chose to live free in prison than live in an open air prison under the rule of bush thugs.

Eskinder and Reeyot were offered their freedom if they got down on their knees, bowed down their heads, apologized and admitted their "crimes", licked the boots of their captors and begged to be "pardoned". It was the same "pardon" offered to so many others before them by the late Meles Zenawi and his disciples. It is the same "pardon" offered to Swedish journalists Johan Persson and Martin Schibbye who were sentenced to eleven years on bogus charges of "terrorism".

A public confession of false guilt was the ultimate humiliation Meles exacted on his

victims. He did it with the dozens of opposition leaders he jailed following the 2005 election. He did it twice to Birtukan Midekssa, the first woman political party leader in Ethiopian history. He had a cadre of pardon peddlers who went around prisons convincing innocent victims into admitting crimes they did not commit and beg Meles' pardon. Public humiliation of his adversaries gave Meles the ultimate high; it nurtured his sadistic soul wallowed in it. The offer of "pardon" for Eskinder and Reeyot still stands today. But they don't want it. In turning down the "pardon" offer, they sent a clear message: "You can't pardon an innocent man or woman... Take your pardon and shove it...!"

Christopher Reeve, Hollywood's "Superman" who became a quadriplegic in an accident said, "A hero is an ordinary individual who finds the strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles." Eskinder, Reeyot and the others were ordinary citizens who found the strength to persevere and endure despite overwhelming obstacles. That's why Eskinder, Reeyot and all Ethiopian political prisoners and prisoners of conscience are heroes and she-roes to me. They have all persevered and endured.

Courage is the stuff of which heroes and she-roes are made. Robert F. Kennedy once said, "moral courage is... the one essential, vital quality for those who seek to change a world that yields most painfully to change. Each time a person stands up for an idea, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, (s)he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

Eskinder Nega, Reeyot Alemu and all of the other hero and she-ro political prisoners had true moral courage. They stood up for ideas of press freedom and free expression; for democracy and human rights. They stood up for the principle of the rule of law. They stood up to TPLF thugs. They persevered and in the process sent tiny ripples of hope to 90 million of their compatriots.

As we ring out 2014 and usher in 2015, I want all my readers to join me in celebrating, honoring and thanking Eskinder Nega, Reeyot Alemu, Woubshet Taye, Andualem Aragie, Bekele Gerba, Abubekar Ahmed, the "Zone Nine Bloggers" including Atnaf Berahane, Zelalem Kibret, Befeqadu Hailu, Abel Wabela,

Mahlet Fantahun, Natnael Feleke, Asmamaw Hailegeorgis, Tesfalem Waldyes and Edom Kassaye. Let it be known that these heroes and she-roes are only the public faces of the tens of thousands of unnamed, unknown, unsung and unbowed heroes and she-roes of the Ethiopian struggle for equality, justice and dignity languishing in prisons [ranked as among the absolute worst in the world](#). I salute them all as they persevere in the infamous Meles Zenawi Prison in Kality and other branch locations throughout Ethiopia.



I celebrate and salute Reeyot Alemu, the 36 year-old undisputed she-ro of Ethiopian press freedom condemned to 14 years in prison by the late Meles Zenawi. Reeyot has been internationally recognized as [“Ethiopia’s Jailed Truth Teller.”](#) The [Committee to Protect Journalists](#) reported Reeyot was jailed for telling the truth, for writing a “scathing critique of the ruling political party’s fundraising methods for a national dam project, and for drawing “parallels between the late Libyan despot Muammar Gaddafi and Meles Zenawi.”

I celebrate my hero Woubshet Taye, a journalist and editor, who is condemned to 14 years in prison for standing his ground and using his newspaper as a watchdog over the TPLF’s abuses of power and empire of corruption. The innocent words of Woubshet’s five year-old son Fiteh (meaning “justice”) keep ringing in my mind, “When I grow up will I go to jail like my dad?”

I celebrate and salute Andualem Aragie, who prior to his imprisonment, was rising opposition leader. Andualem is among a new breed of young Ethiopian political leaders, journalists and civil society advocates who are widely respected and accepted. In the months leading up to the May 2010 “election” in which Meles Zenawi claimed a 99.6 percent victory, Andualem demonstrated his unflinching commitment to democracy and the rule of law. With breathtaking clarity of thought, razor-sharp intellect, incredible courage, mesmerizing eloquence, piercing logic, stinging wit, masterful command of the facts and steadfast adherence to the truth, Andualem made mincemeat out of Meles Zenawi’s vacuous lackeys in several televised pre-“election” debates. [It was truly a sight to behold!](#)

I celebrate and salute Abraha Desta, the young, fearless and extraordinary Ethiopian blogger. In [his very last Facebook post on July 7, 2014](#), before being jailed

by the TPLF, Abraha vigorously defended the freedom of expression of the TPLF itself on his own Facebook page! “The reason I do not unfriend or block TPLF cadres on my Facebook is because I believe it is important for us to know the intellectual depravity and bankruptcy of the TPLF. We assess a person’s capacity to think and reason by listening to what they have to say. By reading what they write. Therefore, let the cadres write. Let them reveal who and what they are. Let us also read. Let us know them well. To defeat them, it is necessary for us to know them. It is valuable to know your adversary. It is so!” Abraha is in prison with little to eat, but has he left us a harvest of food for thought?!

I celebrate my young heroes and she-roes, the “Zone Nine Bloggers”. These young Ethiopians armed with computer keyboards and inspired by ideas of freedom have struck terror in the very heart of darkness, the Tigrean Peoples Liberation Front. “Hiding behind an abusive anti-terrorism law to prosecute bloggers and journalists doing their job is an affront to the constitution and international protection for free expression,” declared Human Rights Watch in its demand for the “immediate” dismissal of charges against the young bloggers. I celebrate and salute Atnaf Berahane, Zelalem Kibret, Befeqadu Hailu, Abel Wabela, Mahlet Fantahun, Natnael Feleke, Asmamaw Hailegeorgis, Tesfalem Waldyes and Edom Kassaye.

I celebrate and salute my heroes Bekele Gerba, Abubekar Ahmed and so many others who are suffering the slings and arrows of the vicious TPLF because they stood up to defend the liberty of religion and conscience, the right to assembly and association and the right to free expression.

Bekele Gerba is deputy chairman of the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement and taught English at Addis Ababa University. He was arrested for belonging to a “terrorist” organization and sentenced to 8 years in prison. Bekele criticized the TPLF as a retrograde regime without the capacity to govern. He argued there are four classes of citizens under the TPLF regime: “the first-class citizens are those who are in power to give away land; the second-class citizens are those who receive land; the third-class are those who are reduced to observer-roles of such illicit transactions; the fourth-class are those whose land is taken away from them by force.” The day before his arrest, Bekele told Amnesty International representatives that he was being framed by the TPLF on bogus terrorism charges.

Abubaker Ahmed is a strong advocate of religious freedom. In articulating his demands, Abubaker proved his adherence to the rule of law: “We are not opposed to any administration. All we are asking for is that the Constitution be respected. All we are saying is those bodies that say they respect the Constitution actually respect the Constitution.”

Above all, I celebrate and salute all of the tens of thousands Ethiopian political prisoners – the unnamed, the unknown, the unaccounted for and the unsung heroes and she-roes – for standing up for the cause of freedom, democracy and human rights in Ethiopia.

They shall all persevere and endure!

“I shall persevere!”, declared Eskinder Nega defiantly

In May 2013, my brother and esteemed friend Eskinder Nega wrote a letter entitled, “[I shall persevere!](#)”. That letter was smuggled out the infamous Meles Zenawi Prison in Kality.

“I Shall Persevere!” is only 7 simple paragraphs long, but its message could last for seven, and even seventy, long years. “I Shall Persevere!” is a defiant letter. It is a hopeful letter. It is an inspiring letter. It is a prophetic letter. It is a letter written from the heart. It is a letter written with cerebral power. It is a letter addressed to his family, his wife and son. It is a letter addressed to the people of Ethiopia. It is a letter addressed to the Diaspora Ethiopians. It is a letter addressed and time-capsuled for delivery to future generations of Ethiopians. It is a plea for freedom and human dignity. It is a letter about one man’s yearning for freedom, the right to be free to raise his child, to be free with his wife and family. It is a letter about individual freedom and the individual’s right to practice one’s chosen profession. Ultimately, “I shall persevere!” can be reduced to one thing: The truth. To persevere is to stand up for the Truth for the Truth shall make one free.

Allow me to digress for a moment and be personal. I have read “I shall persevere!” many times over. I have read it when I felt creeping doubts gnawing my mind. My doubts vanished; I persevered. I have read it when I was on the verge of losing heart over the thought that the road to freedom is too long, too winding and too tiresome. I persevered in my absolute conviction that no walk for freedom is too long. I have read Eskinder’s Letter when I was at a loss for words, “I am fresh out of

topics for Monday Commentaries. I have nothing to say.” Instantly, I am overwhelmed and overflowing with ideas till my cup runneth over. Every time I feel down for the count, I read Eskinder’s letter and I am up and about. Eskinder’s voice may be the sound of silence to those who have ears but have willfully become deaf-mutes. To me his silenced voice resonates with me everyday, “I shall persevere! I Shall Persevere! I SHALL PERSEVERE!”

What did Eskinder mean when he proclaimed, “I shall persevere!”? Did he mean he will simply persevere -- just survive day to day -- chained in the dungeons of Meles Zenawi Prison in Kality? What does it mean to “persevere” for someone like Eskinder, Reeyot and the others?

I don’t think I need to speak to Eskinder to figure what he meant when he wrote, “I shall persevere!”. His words speak to me loud and clear. He meant exactly what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. meant by “persevere”. Over one-half century ago, people used to ask Dr. King, “How long can we persevere? How long must we wait to be free?” (Of course, the people had a more earthy way of asking that question: “How much longer do we have to put up with this bullcrap?”) Dr. King told them, “not long”:

I know you are asking today, “How long will it take?”....

I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth crushed to earth will rise again.

How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever.

How long? Not long, because you shall reap what you sow....

How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

How long must Eskinder, Reeyot and the rest persevere? How long must Ethiopia persevere? Not long, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long because the TPLF shall reap what it sowed. Victory is guaranteed to those who persevere.

Eskinder wrote in his Letter, “Individuals can be penalized, made to suffer (Oh, how I miss my child) and even killed. But democracy is a destiny of humanity which cannot be averted. It can be delayed but not defeated.”

Justice can be delayed, but not defeated. Criminals against humanity may sneer, thumb their noses and flip their middle fingers at Lady Justice, but they should beware what Lady Justice has in the hand not holding the scales. The end point of human history, the destiny of humanity, is freedom and democracy: freedom from oppression, freedom from the tyranny of ignorant thugs, freedom to enjoy one's divinely ordained human rights, freedom to think, to create, to be free.

Eskinder pines for his son. "Oh, how I miss my child" he agonized. His son's name is Nafkot, which means "to miss someone by separation". How ironic and prophetic! Nafkot was born in Meles Zenawi Prison in Kality in 2005 when his parents were jailed there without cause and acquitted of all charges sixteen months later. The cruel and wicked Meles Zenawi personally ordered Nafkot be denied medical care as a "premie" (premature baby). The evidence of Meles' involvement is incontrovertible. Meles was hell-bent on exacting revenge on Eskinder and Serkalem by causing the death of their days-old infant son. Meles wanted to see Eskinder and Serkalem totally crushed by witnessing the death of their child in prison. Meles was a sadist who enjoyed not only publicly humiliating his adversaries in public but also in inflicting extreme pain and suffering on them out of sight of the public. Those who knew him closely will testify to that. Eskinder and Sekalem later wrote their son Nafkot's survival could only be explained as a divine miracle.

When the late Meles Zenawi was scheduled to speak at Columbia University in New York City in September 2010, [Eskinder and his wife Serkalem \(a renowned journalist in her own right and recipient of Women's Media Foundation 2012 Courage in Journalism Award\)](#) sent a letter to the university president in protest.

They explained their opposition:

Severely underweight at birth because Serkalem's physical and psychological privation in one of Africa's worst prisons, an incubator was deemed life-saving to the new-born child by prison doctors; which was, in an act of incomprehensible vindictiveness, denied by the authorities. (The child nevertheless survived miraculously. Thanks to God.)

Shakespeare wrote, "The evil that men do lives after them..." One of innumerable evil deeds done by Meles lives to this day over two years after his death in the

depraved inhumanity he showed to Eskinder, Serkalem and Nafkot. In his death, Meles remains the apotheosis of EVIL, a man who would stoop lower than a snake's belly to destroy his opponents and get his personal revenge.

Eskinder and his family persevered by the grace of God. Meles did not escape the wrath of God. I am sure Eskinder would say, "Never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'" It is written the wrath of God will be visited on the decaying and crumbling Meles empire. I have no doubts Eskinder will reunite with his family, God willing. Eskinder wrote in his Letter, "No less significant, absent trials and tribulations, democracy would be devoid of the soul that endows it with character and vitality. I accept my fate, even embrace it as serendipitous. I sleep in peace, even if only in the company of lice, behind bars. The same could not be said of my incarcerator though they sleep in warm beds, next to their wives, in their home."

That was exactly how Nelson Mandela accepted his fate and persevered for 27 years in apartheid prisons. Like Mandela, Eskinder felt in free and at peace in prison. Eskinder, like Mandela, showed he has an unconquerable soul. Like Mandela, Eskinder's head has been bloodied but is still unbowed. Eskinder is unafraid. Eskinder is the master of his own fate. Eskinder perseveres, as did Mandela, inspired by William Ernest Henley poem, "Invictus":

Out of the night that covers me, /Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be/ For my unconquerable soul.
In the fell clutch of circumstance / I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance / My head is bloody, but unbowed.
Beyond this place of wrath and tears / Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years / Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.
It matters not how strait the gate, / How charged with punishments the scroll.
I am the master of my fate: / I am the captain of my soul.

Vivat, ESKINDER, INVICTUS!

Eskinder wrote in his Letter, "The government has been able to lie in a court of law effortlessly as a function of the moral paucity of our politics. All the great crimes of history, lest we forget, have their genesis in the moral wilderness of their times." I know exactly what Eskinder is writing about. In my very first critique of the TPLF

kangaroo justice system in 2006, I wrote a 32-page analysis titled, “[Keystone Cops, Prosecutors and Judges in a Police State](#).” That piece was intended to be a critical analysis of the trial of the so-called Kality Defendants consisting of some 130 or so major opposition leaders, human rights advocates, civic society activists, journalists and others in the aftermath of the 2005 election. That TPLF show-trial was little more than a third-rate theatrical production staged to dupe the international community. That “court” was an elaborate hoax, a make-believe tribunal complete with hand-picked judges, trumped up charges, witless prosecutors, no procedures and predetermined outcomes set up to produce only one thing: a monumental miscarriage of justice.” The TPLF’s kangaroo/monkey court has not changed to this day.

That was what Eskinder meant when he wrote, “The government has been able to lie in a court of law...” A government of lies on the bench in kangaroo/monkey courts stringing Truth on the scaffold and human rights trashed by a government of wrongs, that is the present crisis in Ethiopia. In James Russell Lowell’s poem “The Present Crisis”, the Lie sits on the bench and Wrong on the throne:

When a deed is done for Freedom, through the broad earth's aching breast
Runs a thrill of joy prophetic, trembling on from east to west,

...

Careless seems the great Avenger; history's pages but record
One death-grapple in the darkness 'twixt old systems and the Word;
Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne,—
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own.

Thugs on the throne forever? Never!

Eskinder wrote in his Letter, “The mundane details of the case offer nothing substantive but what Christopher Hitchens once described as ‘a vortex of irrationality and nastiness.’ Suffice to say, that this is Ethiopia’s Dreyfus Affair. Only this time, the despondency of withering tyranny, not smutty bigotry, is at play.” Eskinder was referring to Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a French Army General Staff officer who was falsely accused and found guilty of treason in a secret military court-martial in 1894. Émile Zola, the famed French author penned his famous

open letter “J’accuse”, accusing the President of France and the French government of falsely convicting Dreyfus motivated by anti-Semitism. Dreyfus persevered and in the end was fully exonerated.

In time, ESKINDER, like Captain Dreyfus, will also be exonerated. It will be shown that ESKINDER was falsely convicted of treason by a “withering tyranny” choking on its own crimes against humanity.

ESKINDER perseveres! J’accuse!

ESKINDER wrote in his Letter, “... Stalinism in the [19]30s tortured you not to force you to reveal a secret, but to collude you in a fiction. This is also the basic rationale of the unfolding human rights crisis in Ethiopia. And the same 30s bravado that show-trials can somehow vindicate banal injustice pervades official thinking—wont to unlearn from history, we aptly repeat even its most brazen mistakes.”

Stalin once said the death of one man is a tragedy; the death of millions, a statistic. But Stalin did not kill millions of his people just by himself. Evil cannot occur without millions in silent or active collusion. Those who face Evil and say, “It’s none of my business”, are in collusion with Evil. Those who say business and the politics of justice don’t mix are in collusion with Evil. Those who are in denial of Evil are in collusion with Evil. Those who apologize for and justify evil are in collusion with Evil. Those who are willfully ignorant of Evil are in collusion with Evil. Those who live by the principle, “See no Evil, Hear no Evil, Speak no Evil” are in collusion with EVIL.

ESKINDER wrote in his Letter, “Why should the rest of the world care? Horace said it best: mutare nomine detefabula narrator. ‘Change only the name and this story is also about you.’ Whenever justice suffers our common humanity suffers, too.”

ESKINDER quotes Horace [Quintus Horatius Flaccus], one of the greatest Roman poets known for the audacity of his words. ESKINDER echoes Pastor Martin Niemöller who expressed his outrage over the silence of German intellectuals following the Nazi rise to power. Niemöller asked the same question. Why should anyone care? Because YOU are next!

First they came for the communists,
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a communist.

Then they came for the socialists,
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a trade unionist.
Then they came for me,
and there was no one left to speak for me.

Eskinder asks, "Why should the rest of the world care?" I ask, "Why should Ethiopians care about Eskinder, Reeyot and all of the other political prisoners?" Is there anyone left to speak for Eskinder, Reeyot and all of the political prisoners in the Meles Zenawi Prison Complex system?

I point my index finger at Ethiopian intellectuals for their silence, and some for their complicity and collusion, in the TPLF's rise to power. J'accuse!

The heroes and she-roes long walk to freedom

Eskinder wrote in his Letter, "I will live to see the light at the end of the tunnel. It may or may not be a long wait. Whichever way events may go, I shall persevere!" Prof. Joseph Campbell, the famed author of "The Power of Myth" and other original works, described the hero's journey from light into darkness and back to light. It is an arduous journey of perseverance and endurance. The hero inhabits the ordinary world until he is beckoned to undertake a challenge, an adventure in an alien and uncharted world of mysterious powers and events. If the hero accepts the call, he is set to face trials and tribulations alone or with others in the mysterious world. He will face extreme challenges in his journey that tests his inner core. If the hero survives the challenge, he is rewarded with a great gift, a "boon", of enlightenment and self-knowledge. The hero must then decide whether to return with this "boon" to the ordinary world. He will face many more challenges on the return journey. If the hero succeeds, he will have the opportunity to use the "boon" gifted to him to improve the world. Thus, Campbell wrote, "We're not on our journey to save the world but to save ourselves. But in doing that you save the world. The influence of a vital person vitalizes."

Such is the journey, the adventure, that Eskinder, Reeyot and the others are taking in the underworld of Meles Zenawi Prison. They will persevere and return to the world of light from the world of darkness with their bountiful "boon" to share with the rest of us. Perseverance is one of the "boons" they have sent to us ahead of their arrival from inside the belly of the beast known as Meles Zenawi Prison.

"I will live to see the light at the end of the tunnel," Eskinder declared. Eskinder and his fellow prisoners of conscience will complete their long and arduous journey out of the world of darkness into a world of light. That is the foreordained destiny of all heroes and she-roes.

The TPLF's war on Ethiopian journalists and bloggers is a war on truth itself. For the past 23 years, the TPLF has been the victor in all of the battles and skirmishes. But there will be a final decisive war between thugs who swing swords and brandish AK47s and enlightened journalists and bloggers who wield pens and computer keyboards. That war is and will continue to be waged in the hearts and minds of the Ethiopian people. I have no doubts whatsoever that the outcome of that war is foreordained. In fact, I believe that war has already been won. For as Edward Bulwer-Lytton penned in his verse, in the war between sword holders and pen holders, final victory always goes to the pen holders:

'True, This! –

Beneath the rule of men entirely great,

The pen is mightier than the sword. Behold

The arch-enchanters wand! – itself a nothing! –

But taking sorcery from the master-hand

To paralyze the Caesars, and to strike

The loud earth breathless! – Take away the sword –

States can be saved without it!

What perseverance means to me

I know many of my Ethiopian brothers and sisters are asking themselves, "How long must we struggle before we see the fruits of our labor?" I have asked myself, "How long...?" Others have asked me, "How long will you continue to write and speak truth to power and those who abuse power? Don't you ever get tired?"

There may be some in the Ethiopian human rights struggle who are ready to throw in the towel. They feel they are spinning their wheels. But I tell them, "Hold on! Hold on just a little while longer." I tell them the struggle for freedom and democracy and against tyranny is a 26-mile marathon run, not a 100-meter sprint. In May 2011, I wrote a commentary entitled, "[The Great Ethiopian Run to Freedom](#)". In that commentary, I tried to argue that Ethiopian human rights advocates and activists,

opposition elements and others should develop the perseverance and endurance of our invincible long distance and marathon runners:

... The 10-kilometer run is just a down payment for a long and difficult Marathon for Freedom. That is why each one of us must develop the defining quality of the marathon runner: Endurance. As she pounds the pavement for miles, the distance runner knows the route to the finish line is long, grueling and hard. But she is prepared to give it her best and endure for the long haul. The marathon runner does not say, 'It is too long, too difficult... I could never do it.' He maintains a winner's state of mind and never gives into self-pity and defeatism. He does not use his energy in bursts of speed, but in sustained steps and calculated spurts. The marathon runner has a plan to win and paces his every step along the way to achieve his goal. The distance runner does not allow herself to be overwhelmed by the miles she has yet to cover. She is committed and focused on the next milestone, the next hill and the next bend in the road until she reaches the finish line. Some of us would much prefer the race to be a quick sprint to the 10-kilometer finish line. We are discouraged and dispirited by the very thought of a long distance run. We are tired and ready to give up before taking the first step. But the Marathon to Freedom does not have a finish line. As Mandela said, "After climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb."

That is what perseverance means to me, running the marathon and climbing one great hill only to find there are many more great hills to climb! We must keep on climbing until there are no more hills, no more mountains left to climb!

We won't back down and WE WILL PERSEVERE! WE SHALL PREVAIL. WE SHALL OVERCOME!

My heart aches and breaks for my heroes and she-roes languishing in Meles Zenawi Prison. It breaks my heart thinking that Eskinder will face the menace of 18 years in prison in Meles Zenawi Prison. But I am heartened because Eskinder is unafraid; his head is unbowed. My heart aches at the thought of Reeyot spending her days and nights in place of wrath and tears known as the Meles Zenawi Prison. But I am uplifted by the thought that she would rather face whatever punishment her captors can dish out than surrender her dignity.

I celebrate and salute all the hero and she-ro political prisoners in Ethiopia. I celebrate them and thank them for their sacrifices; for inspiring me to persevere. They have strengthened my resolve; and they have and continue to revitalize me as I persevere to imitate their sacrifices. I can only imitate their courage, audacity, endurance, grit and fortitude. I can only aspire to their perseverance. I celebrate and salute them from the bottom of my aching and broken heart.

Eskinder wrote, "I shall persevere!" in deep philosophical tone. When I break it down into everyday language, I believe Eskinder meant exactly what Tom Petty and The Heartbreakers sang in their defiant lyrics in "I won't back down":

Well, I won't back down/ No, I won't back down

You can stand me up at the gates of hell/But I won't back down

No, I'll stand my ground, won't be turned around

And I'll keep this world from draggin' me down

Gonna stand my ground and I won't back down...

We won't back down! We Will Stand Our Ground! WE SHALL PERSEVERE! WE SHALL PREVAIL! WE SHALL OVERCOME!

Wishing all of my readers throughout the world a Happy and Prosperous New Year... May the Force be with you in 2015!

MAY THE FORCE BE WITH ETHIOPIAN POLITICAL PRISONERS!