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John F. Kennedy, the last president in my memory to truly inspire Americans, said at Amherst College in 1963 that he “look(ed) forward to a great future for America, a future in which our country will match its military strength with our moral strength, its wealth with our wisdom, its power with our purpose.”

He looked forward to an America “not afraid of grace and beauty”

And he looked forward “to an America which commands respect throughout the world, not only for its strength but for its civilization as well.”

So? What happened? Who have we become? Have we reached the peak of our potential as a nation? Do we embody the hopes and dreams of our founders, or are we just the lucky inheritors of a great experiment who lack the ability to carry it forward? Given deceitful leaders, an illegal war, the waste of life, the manipulation of a confused and frightened people, the emasculation of our Constitution, the embrace of torture, one wonders. I don't accept that this is the best we can do, but if it's not, the question is what do we do to rekindle and revitalize the dream? It can't all rest on the shoulders, no matter how capable, of the new administration.

So let me offer some thoughts.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., saying silence is betrayal, spoke out against an unjust war 40 years ago, quoting the poet Langston Hughes, whom he called “The Black Bard Of Harlem:”

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!

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There's a challenge for us all.

How do we make America what it should be? First, here's some advice from a friend. 28 years ago he was sentenced to death for a crime he didn't commit and was saved from the electric chair 12 years later by a campaign in which I was involved. He remains in prison today despite

our efforts on his behalf because of an institutional imperative wherein states refuse to admit their mistakes - they deny reality for fear of losing authority – or money, which today is too often the same thing; better to lie and hope to get away with it than admit fault and face the consequences.

Seven years ago my friend wrote, “As I reflect I come to recognize that we human beings possess something which is at once more terrible and wonderful than all else: the ability to make ourselves and our world better or worse. I sense that humanity as a whole may not have progressed, nor will it meaningfully advance, if not for human beings who resolutely and passionately champion a cause they believe in. So many I’ve been fortunate enough to encounter during the course of my odyssey epitomize for me the fundamental fact that only by communicating one’s realization with passion can the truth, one way or another, break through the fog of complacency that lays thick upon our consciousness as a species. I suppose that is one of our chief duties - to speak out to the best of our ability – maybe quietly and gently, maybe with angry wisdom, maybe with slow and careful analysis, maybe by unshakable public example; but speak out we must if humanity is to remain alive and awake. To abstain in stoical or ironical detachment or to stay dithered in the middle ground is to atrophy.” The words of Joe Giarratano, an innocent man still behind bars in Wallens Ridge State Prison in Big Stone Gap, VA.

Just imagine for a minute that you lived in a country that provided an example of human possibility for the rest of the world; a country that praised the inherent beauty, value and dignity of every human being; a country that inspired women and men to reach for something higher and better than anything they had ever known.

Imagine what this land could mean to hopeful human beings.

But then imagine this shining star shunted onto a siding, vision fogging, hope diminishing, dreams dying because of the rot of smugness, arrogance, greed, weakness, because of an absence of empowering spirit. Imagine the cancer of leaders without inspiration, of power-mad, self-satisfied, possibility denying rulers who, lost in the excrement of their own frustrations, lack the power of curiosity and the courage of love, choosing instead to bludgeon hope with the mace of fear.

Imagine the sense of loss, the frustration, the pit of despair that would encompass those who had once known possibility. Imagine the hopelessness that would appear – the cynicism that would follow – and the negligence that would result.

I ask you to imagine this because it’s the worm’s-eye view, held by some who don’t enjoy the security in their lives that so many of us take for granted. And it seems to me they represent the

bottom line, where a principled life separates itself from a constipated, fear-driven world view; it's the line one steps across when choosing to expose the lie that says some human beings are immaterial, inconsequential, invisible.

There's a great truth told quite simply in a novel where the primary character, a cop, says, "Everybody counts or nobody counts." Everybody counts or nobody counts...

Another writer observed: "In cynical times right and wrong can be hard to sort out. Goodness and truth can seem beyond our reach. But we have the option, the obligation, to put cynicism aside and exercise the public virtues: to find truth, oppose wrong, protect innocence, promote good and do right."

In support of that obligation, let me offer a few thoughts.

Four black men in Illinois, the "Ford Heights Four," spent 18 years in prison for a rape and murder they did not commit. After release, one testified in Washington, about ways "to help restore justice to our criminal justice system." Asked what was at the root of systemic injustice, he observed, "I think it's fear. There's fear of crime, fear of different skin color, fear of admitting mistakes. You got people here in the government who're so scared, that they build more and more prisons while doing away with the safeguards that prevent them from being filled with innocent people. We can't go on being so scared of each other."

He said, "I've been afraid, and I guess you could say I used to be a racist, too. But it was mostly white folks who stepped up to help us. So there's one thing I learned for sure in eighteen years: If we can conquer our fears, there's nothing we can't do."

Those are the words of Dennis Williams, freed and completely exonerated in 1996 after 18 years on death row in Illinois only to drop dead of heart failure four years later, still a young man.

Now compare Dennis' thought, "If we can conquer our fears, there's nothing we can't do," to this one - "I have learned many things in prison, but the most important thing is that for a human being, there is no difficulty that cannot be overcome. You just have to rely on yourself and you can get through anything." The words of Wei Jingsheng, the Chinese Pro-Democracy dissident who was freed due to pressure from the human rights community after 18 years in a Chinese prison.

In spite of their bitter experience, these two men, from very different lives, came to the same conclusion: that by facing and conquering our fears and learning to rely on our strengths, we can do anything.

I was once at an event for a group of attorneys in LA who help people living in the inner city. A quote from one of the children they had helped was emblazoned on a banner across the back of the room. "Mommy," it said, "does this mean we don't have to live in the rat house any more?" That's a fairly simple message. No one - least of all a child - should have to live among rats. But I asked them to consider another child, as well. Not this one who tugs at our hearts, but a child from the same kind of place who feels the need for what he perceives as justice and says, instead, "Mommy, I'm going to find the people who made you live like this and make them sorry."

What happens to that child? Maybe one leaves her rat-infested home and finds her way to a place of hope. But the other, if already in a place that promises hope but has been robbed of it, may step across the line and become an outlaw, striking out at those in society who, in his mind, have done him – and his mother - harm.

There is plenty of evidence around us – the remaining devastation from Katrina one bleeding example - to demonstrate that we are failing many in our society by deeming them invisible. We compound the failure by forcing them into a system – a school system, legal system, medical system, welfare system, criminal justice system, where invisible people suffer invisibly and then, if they misbehave, we destroy them. Unless someone cares enough to pierce the shield of invisibility, the children from rat-infested places, the invisible people whose hearts yearn for justice, explode and do harm – or implode and do harm in another way. And when decent, principled, sometimes angry people speak out against injustice and do their best to make our society what it should be, make the reality match the rhetoric, they are too often derided as bleeding hearts or bomb-throwers rather than honored for the courage they demonstrate and the principles they articulate.

Why does that sort of thing happen? Well, to understand our society and what's happening in it, it sometimes helps to look away and then back. Sometimes a new perspective can move us to reconsider things one hears about less and less today, values like inclusiveness, mercy, justice and hope, and realize that they are not outmoded, naïve, weak or inconvenient luxuries, but instead are urgent necessities for the successful growth of the society we claim to be building.

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"We are all 'Hibakusha'." The word Hibakusha means "downwinders" and refers to those who were not caught in the initial atomic blasts at Hiroshima and Nagasaki but, because of having

been downwind, were nevertheless victims of the radioactive fallout. The phrase, "We are all Hibakusha," opens the definition in a metaphysical way to include all of us. One way or another, through direct complicity, sympathetic understanding or as a function of an ineffable human interconnection, we are all at the effect of that horrific act - and of every horrific, anti-human act.

This idea that we are all Hibakusha seems peculiar to some, emblematic of the sad fact that we too often allow ourselves to believe we are not connected - until an event or set of circumstances slaps us back to the awareness of the delicacy of our situation here, the impermanence, the mutability of life.

Clarence Darrow, an iconoclastic, path-breaking lawyer, once observed, "There is in every man that divine spark that makes him reach upward for something higher and better than anything he has ever known." That is a potent description of the presence and irrepressibility of the human spirit - interesting from a self-professed atheist - one worth considering in difficult times.

I have done some work on behalf of refugees and in support of human rights in the world. A couple of snapshots:

- El Salvador - (In Mariona Prison in 1983 I interviewed a man who took off his shirt to show the scars where acid had been poured on his chest to force him to name his co-conspirators. Captured by heavily armed men in civilian clothes, he had been tortured in a secret place and then brought to the prison where we met. His crime was that he was the head of the teacher's union in El Salvador, and the co-conspirators sought were colleagues who believed in the value of education for their impoverished fellow citizens. If he survived, he celebrated the end of that slaughter with the UN-brokered peace that exposed the anti-human crimes of that U.S.-supported government.)

- Chile - (In 1986 I met in a darkened room in Santiago with a woman whose husband had been "disappeared" —["disappeared" is a term of art in the world of terror, meaning those left behind never have even the minimal satisfaction of knowing that their lost loved one is living or dead — until recently it was thought to be a practice used only by others, not the U.S.]- this woman's husband had been disappeared for writing words unacceptable to the Pinochet regime. Not knowing his fate, she displayed incredible courage by taking up the pen on his behalf and exhorting her countrymen and women to stand up for their beliefs. If she survived, the return of civilian government in Chile and legal steps set in motion by a Spanish judge who had the audacity to assert international law against General Pinochet are monuments to her courage and integrity.)

- VA - (In the death house in Richmond in 1991 I sat with Joe Giarratano, the condemned man I quoted earlier, and his defense team at a table a few feet from the electric chair discussing a last-minute appeal. As we ended the meeting one of the attorneys asked Joe to tell me about the table around which we had been sitting. "Oh, this," Joe said. "This is the Cooling Table." He said that after he was electrocuted, his body would be too hot to touch, so two guards with asbestos gloves would quickly carry it out and lay it on this table around which we had been sitting until it could be safely disposed of. Gov. Wilder did intervene in that case, but because he didn't grant a new trial, Joe remains locked up today.)

- the Former Yugoslavia - (In a UNHCR transition center for refugees in Croatia in 1992 I met a Bosnian man doctor who had been in one of the Serb concentration camps. He told us, among other horrors, of seeing a group of his fellow inmates forced to stand in a circle, tethered together by a wire passed through each of their tongues. Willing to tell us of horrors suffered by others, his advocacy for others had made him the object of treatment he could not bring himself to discuss.)

What these people have in common, I believe, is a fundamental understanding of the value and dignity inherent in their existence, in the commonality of their simple humanity, in the beauty, energy and possibility that comes with life on this earth. And from it they derive a power that is indomitable, that inspires them to stand in the face of overwhelming opposition. They learned, through incredibly difficult personal experience, that by putting themselves out in the service of others they became more than they had once been. Their contribution to the Great Ledger, as John Steinbeck dubbed it, is their measure of themselves as humans. In "Sweet Thursday," Steinbeck said the big question is, "What has my life meant so far and what can it mean in the time left to me?" "What have I contributed to the Great Ledger?"

To consider the debit side of that ledger, I was in Rwanda, in Central Africa, a short time after the genocide in 1994. Just as is the case in Darfur today, the civilized world averted its eyes as people were killed by the thousands in a bloodletting the ferocity and scope of which are incomprehensible to most of us. In Rwanda, 500,000 to 1,000,000 human beings, mostly of the minority Tutsi tribe, were killed in a period of three months. Mass slaughters took place all over the country in a carefully planned and well executed campaign to assert control over the majority Hutu population by entangling them in an horrific act of cruelty from which there could be no turning back.

70,000 women were raped during that terrible time. 350,000 of the surviving children watched as family members were murdered.

An arena carefully chosen for the slaughters was the church. The chief means of mass communication in Rwanda is the radio and through a diabolically clever propaganda campaign, as the murderers were inspired to kill, the intended victims were deceived into gathering in the churches by the promise that they would there be granted asylum. Once gathered, they were slaughtered by the thousands.

The new Rwandan Government, left with the job of cleaning up the awful mess in the countryside, left a couple of the churches as they had been found so that those who came after could see for themselves what had happened. After visiting one, the Church at Ntarama, I sat in my room in the middle of the night, unable to sleep, and wrote the following:

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Rwanda - The Church at Ntarama

Everything I believe was challenged by the infernal tableau displayed in this place. Though the three buildings and the yard between them were all so full of remains that one had to tread carefully, the chapel somehow presented the most soul-bruising image, probably because one clings to the hope that it does represent on some level the salvation, the deliverance from evil that these poor slaughtered wretches were seeking.

Piles of bones, the outline of the body they once supported still defined by the ragged remnants of their clothing, lay where they came to rest, tossed, strewn about by the force of the blast, the bullet, the thrust of the spear, blow of the club, swipe of the machete. Again and again and again the machete.

Books, canes, toys, purses, thermos bottles, shreds of the last things they held - those which their murderers left behind - punctuate the sentences of death written by these heaps of what were once vital beings.

The air, suffused with a thick, hideously sweet, cloying, web-like quality, is almost impossible to breathe. It is as if, having stepped into a charnel house, a human abattoir, I am caught between here and somewhere else, between this dimension and another, and to bring this horror into my nose, mouth, lungs, is to invite in corruption.

This holy place, and it clearly was that to those who sought refuge here, is now mute testimony to the unholy. What moves here, what this intruder can see and hear, are the roaches, lizards and

others that find their sustenance in the leavings. But what exists here, what insists that it be heard, is the faint echo of the shrieks and moans of the dying as they compete with the grunts and exclamations of those who did this terrible work; the delicate puff of air from a hand reaching out, fingers curling in despair; the hiss of the blade on its downward path; the final sigh of release from those who expected more.

If there is in man that divine spark, it has here been crushed, spat upon, reviled, denied. Has it been extinguished? Can it be? Will we allow it to be?

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As I'm sure you understand, it was awful. Not something anyone should have to experience, or see – or, you might think, hear about. But, like rat houses or death row, rape in prisons or torture at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, Bagram or the CIA's black sites, because it's a reality of our lives I believe we need to hear about it, to know about it. And, more important, understand it so we can do something about it. You see, the perpetrators of the Rwanda massacres were in large part members of a youth organization - the "interahamwe." Males and females ranging in age from 10 or 12 to their early 20s, without work and with little education, the interahamwe was the tool of an extremist faction of Hutus that controlled the government and offered a special education, an on-going campaign of virulent anti-Tutsi propaganda, for years.

H.G. Welles once defined civilization as a race between education and catastrophe. Several decades ago, Mohandas K. Ghandi articulated what he called the seven social sins, one of which was "education without character." Clearly, education is important and necessary, but as we learned from Nazi Germany and the Jim Crow American South, it can be used for many purposes. "Education without character," the careful feeding in of selective information, can result in people being manipulated for purposes of evil, whether active or passive. Think Fox News. There is a responsibility implicit in the exchange of information, the process of education, and the responsibility belongs to those of us who choose to be awake, alert, alive. We are all Hibakusha.

You see, unless we believe in something, be it Steinbeck's Great Ledger or something else, unless we have a place upon which to stand, the purveyors of information, the controllers of the dialogue, can seem to be the embodiment of truth.

So, the lesson that must be learned from Rwanda, or today Darfur, is not that Africans are primitive savages of some lower order capable of bestial behavior, but rather that any human being with limited life experience and even more limited education is capable of being directed by accepted authority into behaviors that, on reflection, are stunningly, shockingly inhumane. As

Simone Weil reminds us, "Evil when we are in its power is not felt as evil but as a necessity, or even a duty."

If you remove the cultural trappings around what happened in Rwanda and substitute more familiar ones you have a scenario where lynching a black man is cause for celebration. Or in more modern times where someone believes detonating a bomb at the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, is a necessary, appropriate, and in some twisted way productive, act.

The horror of Sept. 11th testifies that people can be victimized from without as well as within -- as Iraqis and Afghans would unhappily testify today. But if we're to preserve our core values we can't allow them to collapse because we're under attack -- just as we can't forget them when we're not.

So, when we hear fear-mongers in this country denouncing and demonizing the target of the moment - yesterday a vile killer who eats children for breakfast, today a 'suspicious' someone from a different culture, tomorrow a doctor whose oath requires that she offer a service others deem unacceptable, or a Christian minister who is defrocked because of her sexuality - we have to remind ourselves that the purpose of demonization is to stop us from thinking, to manipulate us at our most base level, to make us followers. I listen to the lunacy of political demagogues intoxicated with their own power - people shouting "Go back where you came from!" -- or those outside a prison in a drunken revelry screaming "Fry the Nigger!" - and wonder if we aren't developing our own version of the interahamwe. The unthinking mob. Worse, the anti-thinking mob.

How does it happen? It happens because people without a belief in their own value, without a place to stand, are subject to the ravages of fear. The same fear Dennis Williams and Wei Jingsheng recognized, of which they were the victims.

And, given the ethical collapse around us today, who can blame people for being fearful? A culture raised on legends suffers from a collaboration of celebrity and media that creates heroes without substance: smirking stick figure idols; swaggering 'gods' who condemn "girly men" and mouth slogans rather than live principles. Professional athletes at the peak of their abilities, wealthy beyond their dreams, behave like unthinking brutes; enormously successful businesspeople -- Halliburton, Blackwater, - trampling others in pursuit of the almighty dollar; television commentators, bloviators and pundits who cannot speak without subtracting from the sum of human knowledge; policemen and women losing their way in a whirlpool of power, money, dope and corruption; religious leaders wallowing in self-righteous condemnation of others;

political appointees who lie, conspire and attack those who expose their corruption; elected leaders – one leading our state who, in the unforgettable words of the late Red Buttons, doesn't know if "harass" is one word or two – and others who hide behind the curtain hoping not to be exposed while condoning the evil of torture with a wink - and it's no wonder people feel adrift and the young search in vain for models of appropriate behavior.

And as they search, add the stealthy phenomenon of media exploitation, not only of violence and all human frailty, but of the flag and the worst sorts of jingoistic babble, just to win the race for ratings and you've built the perfect trap for those who want to believe that the information they're getting is right, good, important and appropriate.

The climate of fear that's created, and its cynical manipulation by pretenders to power, gives rise to monstrosities like "three-strikes-you're-out" - a death row only reluctantly closed to juveniles and those with mental retardation, still filled with the mentally damaged, minorities, victims of abuse, the innocent and those who can't afford a defense - it gives us the horrors of torture and brutalization at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere, the cronyism at Homeland Security - a re-segregated society - inner city hopelessness - anger toward the homeless and impoverished - nativist and other anti-immigrant manifestations – homophobia – attempts to bully and stifle dissent – and all the many separatist, elitist policies that flourish today.

In such a time, when people are frightened and easily manipulated, confusion abounds. And in the midst of this confusion voices arise; voices in the media, in popular organizations, in some of our churches, in business and in positions of political power. These voices are often articulate, persuasive and highly seductive, and they are, in very clever ways, giving people permission to hate.

Dr. King told us many years ago, "We can no longer afford to worship the god of hate..." yet the haters thrive. They no longer burn crosses; they sit in Congress, the White House, on some of our courts and they wear uniforms of authority; they blare their hatred on AM radio, beat their breasts on Fox News and sully the name of Jesus as they ignite the fires of bigotry. It is, though far more sophisticated, the very dynamic that taught those frightened, ignorant kids in the Interahamwe to kill their neighbors.

And because of these clever, manipulative power-mongers with honeyed voices, many lose their balance and grasp at easy-appearing, quick-fix solutions. Torture. Kill. Elect tough talkers to calm your fears while you 'shop 'til you drop.' Losing a sense of their own value, people forget the value of others and then they forfeit what I believe is the most important thing one can possess, the courage to love. Without which, the Interahamwe.

What, then, can caring people do? First, know that we have a choice. Franz Kafka said: "You can hold back from the suffering of the world, you have free permission to do so and it is in accordance with your nature, but perhaps this very holding back is the one suffering that you could have avoided."

I believe we must deal with it – by loving instead of fearing. By truth-telling. With Dr. King I believe that "unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word." It is there within us if we'll look inside and ask ourselves tough questions: Who am I? What am I? What is my purpose in this life and what am I doing about it? "The most urgent question," Dr. King said, "is what have you done for others?" As John Steinbeck had it, "What have I contributed to the Great Ledger?"

I believe we must answer these questions for ourselves. But first we must ask them. For me, the answer lies in knowing that we are on a journey from the caves to the stars. There will always be those authoritarians who live on fear, who preach fear, for whom fear is the motivating sacrament. (Think Dick Cheney, for example.) They'll find every reason imaginable to go back to the caves and drag as many as they can with them. But the stars are where we belong and it only requires the willingness to reach for them, the courage to step toward them, even if breaking new ground on a path not clearly visible, to move us ever onward, ever upward.

It requires the willingness to stand up to their slander, to listen carefully and denounce lies wherever and whenever they appear. And it helps to know we're not alone. Though it sometimes feels that way, we can always look for guidance to principles we trust and anchor ourselves in them: "find truth, oppose wrong, protect innocence, promote good and do right."

We can stand for what is higher and better; we can know the answer isn't fear, but love, not exclusivity, but inclusivity. And we can remember that we're all Hibakusha.

As Americans we must know that we are people of privilege and, as the Irish poet and philosopher John O'Donohue reminds us, "The duty of privilege is absolute integrity."

So when cynics deride us, as they will, we can look to those who've gone before... Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist who survived Auschwitz, in his book, "Man's Search for Meaning," says "...human life, under any circumstances, never ceases to have a meaning." In that damnable place he learned that "...love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man(kind) can aspire. ...the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: the salvation of man(kind) is through love and in love."

Saint Augustine told us that the fundamental struggle in history is between “the love of power and the power of love.”

Susan Griffin, in “A Chorus of Stones,” writes of coming to grips with her own history of childhood abuse and the discoveries she has made: “It is said that the close study of stone will reveal traces from fires suffered thousands of years ago... I am beginning to believe” she says, “that we know everything, that all history, including the history of each family, is part of us, such that, when we hear any secret revealed, a secret about a grandfather, or an uncle, or a secret about the battle of Dresden in 1945, our lives are made suddenly clearer to us, as the unnatural heaviness of unspoken truth is dispersed. For perhaps we are like stones; our own history and the history of the world embedded in us, we hold a sorrow deep within and cannot weep until that history is sung.”

Jim Wallis, of the Sojourner Community, says “Hope is the very dynamic of history. Hope is the engine of change... the energy of transformation... the door from one reality to another.”

“Hope unbelieved,” Wallis says, “is always considered nonsense. But hope believed is history in the process of being changed... The nonsense of slave songs in... Mississippi became the hope that let the oppressed go free. The nonsense of a bus boycott in Montgomery... became the hope that transformed a nation. The nonsense of women’s meetings became the hope that brought suffrage and a mighty movement that demands gender equality. The nonsense of the uneducated, the unsophisticated, ‘the rabble,’ became the hope that creates industrial unions, farmworker cooperatives, campesino collectives..”

To extrapolate from his premise, the nonsense of those in a death camp believing they could survive became the hope of the human rights movement. The nonsense of people believing that we can bring the killing machine to a halt becomes the movement that abolishes the death penalty.

The nonsense of singing the histories of the abused, the neglected, the misshapen, the dysfunctional, the special, becomes the hope that rescues, resuscitates and resurrects pure human energy that has been trapped, ignored or discarded.

As Wallis says, “Hope is believing in spite of the evidence and watching the evidence change.”

So it’s up to us. It’s you and me to whom Joe Giarratano and Dennis Williams look - to whom the children look - to whom the world looks - to speak the unspoken truth - to sing the histories - to

remember we are all Hibakusha - to find the courage to love – to make this land live up to its promise and to make safe the way for hope. Thank you.