

Vancouver Human Rights Lecture

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Beyond Human Rights: Building a World on Empathy

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I am honoured to deliver this year's Vancouver Human Rights Lecture. I am most grateful for the invitation extended to me by the Laurier Institution, CBC Radio One, UBC Continuing Studies, and Alumni UBC. I also recognize that we are gathered today on the ancestral lands of the Musqueam First Nation. May their spirit grant us greater wisdom. What I hope to share with you tonight are a series of reflections based on twenty-five years of human rights work, and the challenges of reconciling lofty ideals with grim realities. I apologize in advance if in reflecting those grim realities, some of what I will say will be disturbing to you.

Formative experiences: Looking back from exile

“I have lost my child. Can you help me?” As the weight of those words started to sink in, my mind escaped to another world. I imagined a

fashionable shopping mall, with muzak drifting effortlessly in the background. Somewhere between Toys “R” Us, and the Apple Store, a mischievous toddler has wandered away, and now his frantic mother is asking: “I have lost my child. Can you help me?” But that innocent image was far from the reality of the question posed to me on that day. Before me stood a mourning mother, broken by grief. Some months earlier, before escaping to Canada, she had recovered the lifeless body of her twenty-four year old son from a prison in Tehran, the capital of Iran. He had a badly bruised body, a fractured skull, and missing fingernails. His supposed “crime” was participating in the peaceful protests following the disputed Iranian elections of 2009; the so-called “Green Movement” that first introduced “people power” to the contemporary Middle-East. Exhausted by grief, desperate for justice, she had turned to me as her saviour. But at that moment, all my professional accomplishments failed me. I was overcome by a sense of futility. How could I possibly help a mother that had lost her child to such cruel violence?

That feeling of helplessness brought me back to my childhood memories, when I first arrived in Canada, at the age of nine. In those days, Iranians were still exotic. I was the subject of considerable curiosity at school.

They had no idea where I came from, or why we had to leave our country. Some were disappointed to discover that we had neither camels in our garage nor a harem in our basement. Others held me personally responsible for suicide bombing and hostage-taking; a cause of frequent schoolyard fights. My halting English was also a source of endless teasing; I had once answered in English class that a “thesaurus” was a dinosaur – a pre-historic creature with an extensive vocabulary. Those were difficult days.

I quickly learned the art of adaptation. I remember being surprised that nobody understood *taarof*, the Iranian ritual of excessive politeness. Why I asked myself don't Canadians understand that “no” means “yes”? The Persian rules of courtesy were logical and simple: when a host offers refreshments at a social gathering, the guest must at first act coy and say “no”. Upon the second asking, he must still firmly say “no”. But when the host insists a third time, as she must, the guest should reluctantly say yes, after which generous quantities of food could be consumed with impunity. When playing at my friend's home, his mother once offered me a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for lunch. I immediately responded “no, thank you”, mindful of the virtue of social grace over the vice of instant gratification. But what followed my “no, thank you” was a long,

unexpected, and painful silence. No second or third offering of that delicious sandwich as required by protocol, just the empty stomach of a polite but hungry immigrant child; a reminder that I had to adapt to new rules in my new home.

The experience of exile, the painful separation of self from home, is a seemingly irredeemable anguish. The yearning to belong once again; to reclaim lost innocence; these are the fragments of an identity shaped by a perpetual longing to return to a stolen past, an emotional space confused with a geographic place. But the helplessness that I felt most before that mourning mother was because of those that were left behind; loved ones whose lives were extinguished as we watched from a safe distance in Canada, unable to do anything. The Islamic revolution of 1979, like most seductive utopias, brought in its wake a tale of unimaginable horrors. In their frenzied violence, the revolutionaries sacrificed tens of thousands of innocent lives at the altar of their fanatical ideology. In the summer of 1988 alone, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, issued a fatwa for the mass-execution of some 5,000 political prisoners. But statistics are mere abstractions. They fail to convey the enormity of the suffering. Behind each victim, there is a name, and behind every name there is a mother and father,

a brother and sister, a spouse and a child, a work colleague and a best friend. Behind each victim, there is a universe of relations and emotions, forever destroyed.

My uncle Firuz Naimi was a physician and malaria specialist, from the city of Hamadan. He was a friend of the poor that often paid for the medicine of patients out of his own pocket. He was admired for his compassion, warmth, and humour. My parents shared many fond memories with him. In the eyes of the Islamic Republic, his fatal crime was that he belonged to the Baha'i religious minority, stigmatized by Iran's extremist rulers as a "wayward sect" that must be destroyed. A campaign of virulent hate propaganda portrayed the entire community as American spies, Zionist agents, infidels, usurpers, in short, an all-purpose scapegoat responsible for every conceivable evil. In those days, the Iranian government pursued a policy of systematic execution against prominent Baha'is. In 1985, the UN human rights expert Benjamin Whitaker characterized this persecution as "genocide". After several days of imprisonment, on or about 14 June 1981, Dr. Naimi succumbed to brutal torture. When his body was recovered, his bones were shattered and his thighs had been ripped open. Photographs showed the word "infidel" inscribed in large letters on his body. For my

family, these were images from hell, a turning point that would forever change our lives.

The gloom encircled us more and more as news emerged of yet other abominations. For me, the execution of Mona Mahmudnizhad, on 18 June 1983, in the city of Shiraz, particularly touched my life. She was my contemporary, my youthful inspiration. She was arrested at only sixteen years of age. Her “crime” was teaching classes at her home for Baha’i children that had been expelled from elementary school because of their religion. She endured countless hours of interrogation and vicious beatings. Her father was executed while she was in prison. When her time had come, she comforted her grieving mother as they said their last farewell. Her mother wrote: “I felt so small before the greatness of her soul, as if she were the mother and I the child.” Such was her character that some among the prison staff wept as she was taken to be hanged. Knowing that imminent death awaited her, in an extraordinary act of defiance, she stared at her executioners and smiled. With all their power, they had failed to break her will, to rob her of her humanity. Her last wish was that “the youth of the world would arise” and “join hands in service to humanity”. Just last month, the Iranian Government desecrated the Baha’i cemetery where Mona and

others were buried, throwing their remains in a nearby ditch, to erase every trace of this cowardly crime. The mighty revolutionary guards are even afraid of her grave. It was never lost on me that the only thing separating me from Mona was the arbitrariness of fate: she was in Iran, and I was in Canada. I felt ashamed that I could not do anything for her. Living in a world of ease and comfort, I felt a responsibility to my own conscience, to redeem her sacrifice. I made a promise in my youth, true to her last wish, that I would arise in service to humanity.

A career in human rights: Reconciling ideals and realities

I began this talk with glimpses of my personal experiences because the struggle for human rights cannot be reduced to sanctimonious platitudes and superficial sentimentality. What moves us to serve humanity, to achieve meaningful change, is genuine empathy; the capacity to feel the pain of others, to experience an intimate shared humanity, to accept discomfort and sacrifice in the path of a greater cause. In entering an authentic communion with others, we also discover a profound expression of our own dignity.

Human rights for me, was not a glamorous career choice; it was a matter of spiritual survival. These profound formative experiences were the beginning

of a journey, an odyssey into yet unknown realms of being. It would teach me that without embracing the oneness of humankind, we hide behind the illusion of progress, because we don't really care. Having felt pain, I became mindful of the distance between the self-absorbed world of élites and the reality of those they claimed to be helping.

I learned many things at Harvard Law School. Humility was not one of them. There were many wonderful people, but the prevailing attitude was one of self-importance; an attitude replicated in other institutions that I would encounter in the years that followed. On the very first day, the Dean's welcome casually reminded us that we were the best of the best, future leaders destined to rule the world. It was an elixir for an inflated ego. There was an expectation that the student next to you may well be the next American president, even if he was a skinny radical activist with an exotic name; I believe his name was Barack Obama! There was a sense that every theory, every debate, every footnote, emanating from the professorial oracles of wisdom could potentially change the course of human history. "How many Harvard students does it take to change a light bulb? Just one; he holds the light bulb and the world revolves around him." By contrast, at McGill where I teach, it takes one hundred and one students to change a light bulb:

one to screw it in, fifty to protest the light bulb's right not to change, and another fifty to organize a counter-protest. At Oxford where I will be going shortly, it takes only eleven: one to screw in the light bulb, and ten to criticize the methodology. All this to say that a young man graduating from a place like Harvard develops a professional hubris, an inordinate reliance on intellectual capabilities rather than spiritual qualities. I had written my thesis on the failure of the UN to punish the crime of genocide. Little did I know that soon I would be making history by helping establish the first international criminal court since the Nuremberg Tribunal. But nothing that I had learned in academia could have prepared me for what I was about to witness.

“Ethnic cleansing” in Bosnia: a rude awakening

Shortly after my graduation, I was sent by the UN to investigate war crimes in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Francis Fukayama had triumphantly declared in *The End of History and the Last Man* that we were witnessing “not just the end of the Cold War ... but the end of history as such ... the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.” The violent disintegration of Yugoslavia into

“ethnic cleansing” came as a rude awakening. Striking a different tone, Samuel Huntington wrote that in the post-Cold War world: “The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.”

I learned much witnessing these conflicts on the ground, comparing how they looked to theorists a world away. Just as Professor Huntington spoke of primordial hatreds between Bosnian Muslims, Orthodox Serbians, and Catholic Croats, every other person that I met in the cosmopolitan Bosnian capital Sarajevo came from a mixed marriage. The problem was not the multiethnic fabric of Bosnia but rather how it was torn apart by political opportunists that gained power through hate-mongering during Yugoslavia’s the delicate post-communist transition. We referred to them as “ethnic entrepreneurs”. Perhaps the best description of the origins of this catastrophe was that of American diplomat, Warren Zimmerman. He astutely observed that while history “provided plenty of tinder for ethnic hatred in Yugoslavia” it took demagogical leaders “to supply the torch”. In other words, “the conflagrations did not break out through spontaneous combustion ... pyromaniacs were required”.

I learned the anatomy of “ethnic cleansing” during my first days of serving with the UN in Bosnia. I had been dispatched to the village of Ahmići in April 1993 where there had been reports that some two hundred Muslim civilians had been massacred. As we entered the village, we were surrounded by devastation: a demolished mosque, smoldering homes, scattered bodies in the streets, and the stench of death. A particularly horrible scene was a father that had been killed at the front door of his home trying to defend his family. His wife and children were hiding in the basement. They had been burned alive, their contorted arms stretched upwards in a seeming plea for mercy. I watched such scenes again and again. I wondered how people could do such things? I wondered how the world could just stand by and watch.

As we went about our investigation, we suddenly heard shots. We were the targets of a sniper attack. Someone did not want us to expose these crimes. The survival instinct is powerful. None of us quite understood how we managed to escape the bullets in those moments which seemed to last an eternity. I somehow made it safely to the UN armoured vehicle. I was filled with rage at what I had seen. I demanded to see the commander that I assumed was responsible. We arrived at his military base. In a fit of

recklessness, I burst into his office in pursuit of an open confrontation. He was sitting behind his desk, surrounded with menacing militia brandishing machine-guns; perhaps some of the same men that were responsible for the massacre. He was caught unprepared by the unwise impudence of a young man that obviously did not know his own limits. He didn't quite know how to respond. I took off my UN blue helmet, put it on his table, and stared him in the eyes with feelings of disgust. I described to him in graphic detail the images of the murdered women and children. He could have had me shot. But he listened, with a troubled conscience, in self-denial that his soldiers were responsible. Having exhausted my angry words, I said "shame on you", got up, and quietly walked out the door, not sure what else I could have done. I was overwhelmed and confused. Later that day, I realized how dangerous my lapse in judgment had been. Some years later, I testified against him at The Hague where he was convicted of crimes against humanity by the UN war crimes tribunal.

My surreal experiences were not limited to the war zone. The world of diplomats, and bureaucrats, and experts, seemed just as bizarre. I had naïvely assumed that the horrors of "ethnic cleansing" would move world leaders to act. On 5 February 1994, during a momentary respite in fighting

when people were out shopping for food, an artillery projectile was fired at the Sarajevo market, killing 64 civilians and injuring 200. The scenes of carnage were captured on film and broadcast to the world. We hoped this would finally result in action. Instead, a month later, a UN resolution adopted in Geneva merely noted that the international community was “moved by the horrible massacre” at the Sarajevo market, and that it “strongly condemns the policy of genocide and ‘ethnic cleansing’”. The absurdity of the situation, the delusional, empty words, was unbearable. Ultimately, in July 1995, this policy of inaction encouraged the Bosnian Serb forces to execute some 7,000 Muslims in the Srebrenica enclave, right under the nose of UN peacekeepers. As a young man still in his 20s, my faith in the UN and human rights had been shaken to the core.

Genocide in Rwanda: the consequences of indifference

Things would get far worse. In the months that followed, the Rwandan genocide would take horror to an entirely different dimension. During a three-month period between April and June 1994, almost a million Rwandans belonging to the Tutsi minority, were exterminated by Hutu extremists. For several months prior, the notorious radio station – Radio-Télévision Libre des Milles Collines (RTLM) or Free Radio and Television

of the Thousand Hills – had broadcast anti-Tutsi hate propaganda. They were dehumanized as “cockroaches” that must be exterminated. This incitement to genocide was crucial in mobilizing the largely rural and illiterate population, preparing them for a diabolical plan that required thousands and thousands of obedient executioners. During the genocide, RTLM would even encourage the killers, reading out the locations of Tutsis with orders to kill them. One of the leading figures of this hatred was Léon Mugesera who was deported from Canada to Rwanda in 2012 to stand trial for incitement to genocide.

In January 1994, as the situation became alarming, the Canadian commander of the UN peacekeeping force in Rwanda, General Roméo Dallaire, asked UN headquarters in New York for approval to confiscate weapons that were being distributed by extremists. He was told that such action would be inconsistent with the neutrality of his mandate. The repeated warnings of an impending catastrophe fell on deaf ears. In the cynical world of geopolitics, Rwanda was not important; it simply did not matter. When the massacres began in April 1994, instead of protecting innocent civilians, the UN Security Council voted to withdraw the peacekeepers. The consequences were horrendous. A stark example was the École Technique Officielle, a

school in the Kigali suburb of Gatonga. Almost 2,000 terrified Tutsis were sheltering there under the protection of a small contingent of Belgian UN peacekeepers. The extremist Hutu militia, wielding machetes and clubs, did not dare confront the soldiers. That quickly changed once UN peacekeepers received orders to withdraw. Knowing what awaited them, the Tutsis asked the Belgian lieutenant in charge to shoot them so they would not face an agonizing death at the hands of the militia. Wanting to avoid the desperate pleas of the civilians, the Belgians left suddenly at night. A crowd chased after their vehicles, begging: “don’t abandon us”. Within hours, almost all of the 2,000 civilians were slaughtered; men, women, and children, hacked by machetes or bludgeoned with clubs. One of the leaders of the militia, Georges Rutaganda, was later convicted of genocide by the UN tribunal for Rwanda. Another crime scene at which he was implicated was the notorious Amgar garage that I visited in Kigali. So many people had been killed at that location that a large deep hole where they were dumped was overflowing with bodies.

My dear friend Esther Mujawayo was one of the few lucky ones to escape. Her husband had been murdered and she felt especially vulnerable as the mother of three little girls that she had to protect. After news of the UN

withdrawal, she became desperate, running frantically in the streets with her small children, trying to find a way to save them. She saw Belgian soldiers putting diplomats, aid workers, and other expatriates in army trucks to go to the airport. A military aircraft had been sent to evacuate them to Europe. One of the soldiers was handing a pet dog to one of the passengers sitting in the truck. Fearful that she would be killed at the next checkpoint, Esther begged the soldier to take just one of her three daughters and place her for adoption with a European family. The soldier explained that he was under instructions not to evacuate any Rwandans. When Esther told me this story, her eyes filled with tears: “the life of a European dog” she said “was more important than the life of my little girl.” As these horrors unfolded, world leaders did nothing but adopt UN resolutions. For just a few days, somewhere between the Hollywood gossip and sports news, CNN showed the heaps of mutilated bodies scattered in the streets of Kigali. Then it was forgotten as more entertaining stories like the O.J. Simpson trial emerged. We were bystanders and spectators to a new Holocaust. Where was the empathy, the solemn vows of “never again”?

I became increasingly astonished at the capacity of this self-contained world to rationalize inaction while paying lip service to human rights. I found a

compelling metaphor in Roland Barthes' *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*. He speaks of the "euphoria of aerial vision". On top of the tower he writes: "one can feel oneself cut off from the world and yet the owner of a world."

Preventing atrocities: Measuring success by what doesn't happen

Following the atrocities in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, the UN established two *ad hoc* international criminal tribunals. This was a radical departure from the culture of impunity during the Cold War period in which the likes of Pol Pot, Idi Amin, and Mengistu went unpunished. As a young lawyer, I had the good fortune of being in the right place at the right time, and played a role in establishing these historic institutions. I believed in justice for the victims. But when I left The Hague after almost a decade, I felt a sense of futility. The once untouchable Serbian President Slobodan Milošević – the mastermind of "ethnic cleansing" – had been arrested. The image of a Head of State as a defendant was powerful; an unprecedented triumph for the rule of law. But against the immensity of suffering that I had witnessed, I felt futile. Following the Nuremberg Judgment in 1946, Hannah Arendt had lamented that: "The Nazi crimes ... explode the limits of

law; and that is precisely what constitutes their monstrousness. For these crimes, no punishment is severe enough.”

I was struck by the fact that in Rwanda, there were many early warning signs of an impending catastrophe. Genocide is not a sudden natural disaster like an earthquake or tsunami. It is a political instrument, part of the cost-benefit calculus of power. It can be predicted, and thus, it can be prevented. It took many months of incitement, organization, and preparation to kill almost a million people. This was not even the industrial-scale killing of the Nazi concentration camps. It required the mobilization of thousands of ordinary volunteers, of willing executioners, to kill their victims one by one with machetes and clubs. It is true that military intervention for humanitarian protection is often not politically feasible. But use of force is an eleventh-hour solution, when all other means have been exhausted. The time to act is before manageable conflicts escalate to genocide, at which point the options are few; the time to act is before it is too late. The solutions can sometimes be far simpler than we imagine. Consider the vital role of RTLM radio in inciting the largely rural and illiterate Rwandan population to commit genocide. What if a few months prior to the mass-murder, the UN peacekeepers had been authorized to occupy the radio station and prevent

further broadcasts? How could the *génocidaires* mobilize an army of thousands without this vital means of communication? Perhaps the genocide could have been prevented. We must measure success by what does not happen.

Clash of civilizations? The reality of interdependence

For several years, the agonized faces of those I had seen, their desperate eyes, their cries of despair, haunted my conscience. I lay awake at night, consumed by the sounds and images, circulating endlessly in my mind. Post-trauma stress disorder was not yet a fashionable concept. I had set out from Harvard to save the world, and now I just wanted to save myself. Witnessing the birth of my son, beholding the miracle of life, changed everything. When I first held him in my arms, I realized that I must build a happy future for him. A decade of death and darkness was enough. I decided to leave The Hague to practice corporate law in New York, to start a new and normal life. That was just before September 11th, 2001!

Shortly before the terrorist attacks, I was reading an essay by my dear friend Mohsen Makhmalbaf, the world-renowned Iranian filmmaker. He had been filming the award winning “Kandahar” at a time most didn’t even know

such a place existed. At a film festival, when he spoke about the civil war and mass-starvation he had seen, someone had asked: “What is Afghanistan?” He lamented that nobody cared for these poor people.

This forgotten nation was first thrust into the limelight in March 2001. The Taliban had condemned the gigantic 6th century twin Buddhas of Bamiyan as idolatrous and demolished them with dynamite. Amidst non-stop media coverage of the story, Makhmalbaf asked: “Why is everyone crying aloud over the demolition of the Buddha statue while nothing is heard about preventing the death of hungry Afghans?” The statue of Buddha he concluded was not demolished: “it crumbled out of shame ... knowing its greatness didn’t do any good.”

The title of Makhmalbaf’s essay was *The limbs of no body*. It referred to the famous poem of the thirteenth-century Persian mystic Saadi – a poem inscribed above the portal of the UN General Assembly – that: “all people are the limbs of one body”. He lamented that nobody felt the pain of the Afghans; they were like a limb that was cut off from the body of humankind. In those days, I was settling into my new life at the corporate law firm. I had an office on the seventy-second floor of a sleek skyscraper, with a

spectacular view of Manhattan. On the morning of September 11th, my then wife and two-year old son, together with my visiting parents, were on their way to the World Trade Centre. After the airplanes struck, there was no telephone service for several hours. When I finally heard their voice, I could once again breathe. As I absorbed the enormity of what had just transpired, I thought of Saadi's poem: "All people are the limbs of one body". From the twin Buddhas of Bamiyan to the twin towers of New York, the affliction of that distant limb called Afghanistan had come to haunt America, a world away. Unlike Bosnia and Rwanda, I couldn't simply take the UN airlift and escape. This time it was my family, and not the family of others. September 11th was a day of terror, but also a reminder of the inescapable reality of global interdependence. Ignoring a festering wound in a distant limb of humankind had come back to infect the rest of the body.

Today, when we witness the violent disintegration of the Middle-East, we should be mindful of the consequences of interdependence in our world.

The horrors of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – known as ISIS – its "caliphate of barbarism", the decapitations, the genocide against Christians and Yazidis, the destruction of Shia mosques, these did not come into being overnight. There is a long and cynical history in the region of support for

authoritarianism, corruption, war and religious extremism. In the 1980s, during the brutal Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the Americans and Saudis supported the Mujahideen fighters, including the likes of Osama bin Laden. In those same years, the Americans and Europeans supported Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq war, and Iran bought weapons from Israel while calling for the destruction of Israel. The Americans were silent about the gassing and genocide of the Iraqi Kurds because the *peshmerga* fighters were allied with Iran. Today, the American, Iranian, and Kurdish forces are collaborating with each other to destroy ISIS. During the “Arab Spring” in 2011, the West condemned Assad but did nothing while he was massacring and gassing the Syrian people, reducing cities to rubble, backed by Iran and Lebanon’s Hezbollah. Now that Assad’s terrorization has helped ISIS displace the once moderate opposition, Assad and the Americans may yet join forces to fight a common enemy. Meanwhile, Iran and Saudi Arabia continue their contest for regional domination by supporting rival Shia and Sunni extremists, massacring innocent civilians in their ruthless proxy wars. They may find that these same forces could threaten their own régimes. “Politics makes strange bedfellows” the saying goes. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, and so on and so forth. The disaster that we see today was a long time in the making.

In this light, the “clash of civilizations” is not a convincing explanation. The profanity of power seems more persuasive. The image of Islamic extremism as a retreat from modernity is misplaced. The return to an idealized past – a “caliphate” in which Islam was still “pure” – is pure imagination. It is an identity constructed on modern political mythology. It has little to do with any serious understanding of Islamic civilization and history. Islamic radicalism seems more at home with the romantic ideologies of recent European history. In that context, fascism, communism, racialism – the seductive utopia of totalitarian ideology – was a tempting alternative to the anti-heroic mediocrity of liberalism. With the decline of Christianity during the Enlightenment – what Max Weber called “disenchantment” with religious thought – these ideologies became rationalized, intellectualized, substitute religions; their progeny were modern-day saviours like Hitler and Stalin. The scale of their crimes made past barbarity pale in comparison.

In the confusion between tradition and the cosmopolitan post-modern world – supplemented by the chaos of corruption, poverty, and war – the utopian “caliphate” of the imaginary past provides an alluring but false certainty, easy answers, a distraction from misery, delusions of grandeur, and sudden,

violent empowerment. The unemployed youth in Mosul that is recruited by ISIS is brainwashed with an enticing ideology of romanticized aggression and incentivized with the sudden power of an SUV, a mobile phone, a machine-gun, cash, and a license to murder and rape. Such a young jihadist is probably more at home with a violent video-game than he is with the seventh-century Islamic state in Medina.

With the proliferation of so-called “home-grown” jihadists in the West – including the British rapper suspected in the decapitation of American journalist John Foley – the consequences of shortsighted conceptions of national security will be catastrophic. We should have no illusions that this violence will not spread to our own shores. The only lasting solution is a new vision for the Middle-East, built on courageous leadership that transcends the cynical politics of the past. Instead of more violence, could we look to the future and imagine a common market in the Middle-East? Stretching from Damascus to Dubai, from Tehran to Tel Aviv, it will embrace Arabs and Jews, Sunni and Shia, Persians and Turks, all sharing a common destiny. If someone had predicted in the 1930s that one day there would be a European Union, would anyone have taken it seriously? Interdependence is not a naïve aspiration; it is an inescapable reality. The

only question is whether we will embrace it by choice, or only after we suffer unimaginable calamities. “All people are the limbs of one body.”

Empathy and emptiness: the search for authenticity

In 1962, the great Canadian philosopher Marshal McLuhan observed with remarkable foresight that: “The new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village.” That was long before the emergence of the internet and “Facebook nation” made our shrinking world even smaller. As a multicultural, bilingual, immigrant nation, Canadians are naturally drawn to a global identity. We see ourselves as a caring and peaceful nation; like Americans with healthcare but no guns!

In recent times, some have argued for a robust Canadian nationalism. Senator Nicole Eaton even proposed that “the beaver step aside as a Canadian emblem” in favour of “the stately polar bear”. Affirming Conservative national pride, she berated the once venerable beaver as a “dentally defective rat.” A politically correct Liberal Senator would never speak that way. Instead of a “dentally defective rat”, she would refer to a “dentally disadvantaged rodent person”.

Beavers and bears aside, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms is a symbol of our national unity. It reflects a shared belief that human rights should be at the core of who we are as a people. These values in turn connect us with the global ethos enshrined in the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights. In the shadow of the Holocaust, it articulated transcendent and unimpeachable axioms uniting all nations. In the modern world, human rights assume the role of the sacred, even if clothed in secular terminology. As Émile Durkheim observed in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, “the distinctive trait of religious thought” was the division of the world between the sacred and the profane, a division that also applies to secular thought.

In our conception of the sacred, what distinguishes a hypocrite from a saint is authenticity. “To thine own self be true” Shakespeare wrote in *Hamlet*. How then can we reconcile our sacred values with the profane distractions of our consumer culture? In *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm wrote perceptively that modern society is “well fed, well clad, satisfied sexually, yet without self, without any except the most superficial contact” among people. Beyond the democratic institutions that protect our rights, beyond complaining that our parliamentary representatives don’t do enough, what do we really stand for? What is our relation to the suffering in the world?

There is much that is good in our society, but also much that reflects indifference. In our cyber-world of endless entertainment, in our culture of instant gratification, we often confuse superficial sentimentality with genuine empathy. We engage in “slacktivism”, substituting transient “feel good” activism for social commitment. We confuse clever sound-bytes and tweets with meaningful engagement. We admire Hollywood celebrities that glamourize suffering and make human rights “sexy”. In this world of *kitsch*, authenticity is worthless. Why pay a steep price for the original when the imitation looks just as good? Why fill in the emptiness with depth when exaggerated emotions can provide effortless meaning? In this global village, some toil in the vineyard of human suffering, and others arrive just in time for the wine-tasting, intoxicated with moral narcissism, shedding the occasional tear at a prestigious award ceremony.

Building a world on empathy means that we must each assume personal responsibility; that we must enter into an intimate communion with those that suffer. It is not enough to assume that our leaders will solve the world’s problems on our behalf. The divisive, opportunist world of politics, is hardly an inspiration. It is not enough to write a cheque to a charity so we

can sleep better at night. We must roll up our sleeves and become directly engaged. Without allowing ourselves to be touched in a profound way by others, we cannot make a profound change, whether in our own lives, or the lives of others. In our empty consumer culture, where we fill the void with mindless distractions, in our search for meaning, we need those in distress as much as they need us. Without empathy, our deepest human potential will never be fully realized. We will consume more and more, and experience happiness less and less. Without sacrifice, we will remain incomplete, spiritually handicapped.

Every one of us has their share in the betterment of the world. Some of us may choose to serve humanity overseas, in distant lands. But let us not forget the suffering in our own backyard. Consider that in Canada, with all its prosperity, 15% of children live under the poverty line; one in six children face hunger. For aboriginal children, the rate is a shocking 40%. This is simply unacceptable. Each and every one of us bears a responsibility to put an end to such injustices, to give comfort to those in distress. Our completion as human beings, our dignity as a society, depends on it; it is the inescapable law of spiritual interdependence.

The mourning mother: a new conception of power

“I have lost my child. Can you help me?” I began this lecture with the story of a mourning mother seeking justice. I described the helplessness that I felt in trying to respond to her simple demand for redress. I had to tell her that I could think of no court that would hear her case. I felt that I had failed her, and thousands of mothers like her, who lost their sons and daughters in the gallows of Iran. After the 1988 mass-executions of political prisoners, the bodies of the victims were unceremoniously dumped in an unmarked mass grave, on the outskirts of Tehran, in a neighbourhood called “Khavaran”. This became the cemetery where the mothers would go to mourn their lost children. For many years, the régime denied the executions. The mothers were even beaten and imprisoned for mourning their loved ones. But nothing can stand in the way of a mother that has lost her child. Despite the brutal repression, a group was formed known as the “Mothers of Khavaran”. They became an iconic symbol of the struggle for human rights and democracy. They have become to the Iranian people what the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo were to Argentina in the 1970s when they defied the military junta in public protests, demanding to know the fate of their children who had disappeared in the so-called “dirty war”.

Instead of giving up, a group of us responded to the cries of the Mothers of Khavaran, by establishing an unprecedented truth commission in exile. We envisaged a tribunal with popular legitimacy, all the elements of a judicial process with eminent judges and lawyers, but without a formal status. It was a rare instance of grassroots justice, for the people, by the people. Its purpose was to expose the world to the truth of what happened in those terrible years, to promote national reconciliation, and to help the survivors and their families in their process of healing. The so-called “Iran Tribunal” held sessions during 2011-12 in London and The Hague, during which some one hundred witnesses testified to unspeakable crimes. One woman, Mother Esmat, had lost ten family members. She sobbed as she told the story of how an eleven-year old child was hanged with his father. An international panel of eminent commissioners and judges heard this testimony and rendered their judgment before the eyes of the world. The hearings received extensive media coverage and were broadcast to millions. After years of denial, the public outcry forced the Iranian government to finally admit the truth, though much remains to be done. I recognize here the presence in our midst of the Iran Tribunal’s Chairperson, Professor Maurice Cophithorne, a founding director of the Laurier Institution, and the former UN Special

Rapporteur for human rights in Iran, who generously offered his time and energy to this historic undertaking.

The Iran Tribunal was as painful as it was uplifting. Just as all those present shed tears at the unspeakable grief of the mourning mothers, their exceptional strength and resilience was truly inspiring. It was astonishing to see how they were transformed by this catharsis, by simply having a public forum where they could tell their stories, where others would listen to their plight with empathy. They spoke of the intense happiness and relief they felt to be heard after enduring years of silence. It was a profound healing experience. It calls to mind the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for residential school victims in Canada.

In the end, after years of struggling with loss, my encounter with that mourning mother made me realize how misguided we are in our conception of power. We feel overwhelmed by events in the world. We feel bewildered and helpless to do anything. But there is within us an exceptional capacity for spiritual transformation. “You are not a drop in the ocean” the great poet Rumi wrote, “You are the entire ocean in a drop.” When we embrace wounds instead of escaping them, when we are broken

open from the prison of self, we become worthy of deeper connections, and different understandings. When we surrender fear so that we can know the pain of longing, we enter into a wondrous journey of discovery, transported by the eternal dance between self and other. The ultimate source of power is the courage of empathy. The very source of life is selfless love, captured in the image of that mother's bond with her child. We all have a choice, to remain in the dark prison of egotism, or to awaken to the powerful light of selflessness. I close with the immortal words of the Persian poet Hafez, from the city of Shiraz, where Mona drew her last precious breath:

Even After All this time The Sun never says to the Earth:

"You owe me."

Look What happens With a love like that;

It lights the whole sky.
