

REITH LECTURES 2004: Climate of Fear

Wole Soyinka

Lecture 4: The Quest for Dignity

TRANSMISSION: 28 April 2004 – Radio 4

The Times Newspaper of London, Saturday Feb 21, this year, carried the story of the suicide of a teenager in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Apparently, it should have been a double suicide but that youth, after yet another bout of humiliation from his tormentors, decided that he simply could not wait. He was one of a close-knit group of seven, the report continues, who had attended school together and continued to spend all their spare time together. Of the seven, only two still survive. The motor accident that earlier took the lives of three of them may not have been deliberate, but it is on record that one of those three had also once attempted suicide. All lived in fear of some degrading punishment by the local vigilantes known as the INLA. In one case, a fourteen year old boy, suspected of being a police informer, was tarred and feathered, dragged through the streets, then 'knee-capped' - that is, shot through the back of the knee, in short, crippling the youth for life. Here is what a consulting psychiatrist in North Belfast had to say:

'In a culture where it is acceptable for a young man to be dragged down an alleyway and shot, children grow up believing there is no such thing as respect for human dignity. They....often develop anxiety and a fatalistic approach to their own lives.'

Now why did the psychiatrist settle on that word 'dignity' over others in his clinical notebook? We are trying get to grips with the concept 'dignity', and why it appears to mean so much to the sentient human, almost right from childhood. Why has it been entrenched in so many social documents across cultures, civilizations and political upheavals. Why was it given such prominence in the Charter that resulted from one of the bloodiest revolutions in human history - the French - was further enshrined in the document for the enthronement of peace after World War II. - The Declaration of Universal Human Rights? In one form or the other, the quest for human dignity has proved to be one of the most propulsive elements for wars, civil strife and willing sacrifice. Yet the entitlement to dignity, enshrined among these 'human rights', does not appear to aspire to being the most self-evident, essential needs for human survival, such as food, or physical health. Compared to that other candidate for the basic impulse of human existence - self-preservation, it may even be deemed self-indulgent.

Considerations of this intangible bequest, human dignity, often reminds me of a rhetorical outburst in the United Nations by a Nigerian representative - no, that desperate rhetoric did not lead to hysteria as identified in an earlier lecture, except one chooses to remark the barely suppressed hysterical laughter in the hallowed halls of the General Assembly. The occasion was the nation's arraignment before the General Assembly on charges of violations of human rights and the denial of democracy to the people. In what he must have considered the definitive argument on the subject, he challenged his listeners to combat in more or less the following words:

‘What exactly is this Democracy that we're talking about? Can we eat Democracy? The government is trying to combat hunger, put food into people's stomachs and all we hear is Democracy, Democracy! What exactly is this democracy? Does it prevent hunger? Is it something we can put in the mouth and eat like food?’

I felt bound to come, quite unnecessarily, to the defence of the United Nations and wrote an article in response. I remarked I had dined in the cafeterias and restaurants of the United Nations on a number of occasions, and had never seen Democracy on the menu, or indeed on any menu in restaurants all over the world. So what, I demanded, was the point of that statement?

Well, Democracy as such may not be on the UN restaurant menu, it is nonetheless on its catering agenda. So is Human Dignity. Needless to say, both are inextricably linked. Indeed, Human Dignity appears to have been on everyone's menu from the most rudimentary society, recognized as such by philosophers who have occupied their minds with the evolution of the social order. Nothing is more fascinating, but permanently contentious than the kind of binarism attributed to the motoring force of the evolution of the social order by Hegel, Nietzsche, Hobbes and Locke among others. The historic man, according to them, would appear to be a product of a choice between abject submission or bondage on the one hand, for the sake of self-preservation and, on the other, a quest for dignity, even if this leads to death. Karl Marx, on his part, felt compelled to distance himself from their deductions, yet even he refused to ignore the importance of that element, human dignity, naming it as a reward that comes naturally with the evolution of man whose labour is ungoverned by necessity. That is the phase when it becomes possible to celebrate: the dignity of labour. What is worth noting for us today is simply the prodigious output of numerous minds on this theme, nearly all of which emphasize that the pursuit of dignity is one of the most fundamental defining attributes of human existence.

Today, we can hardly conceive of the individual outside the membership of a socialised group that constantly re-invents itself, not as some static organism under observation in a permanently controlled setting. Thus it is within human relationships that the essence of a human attribute, such as a dignity, is most meaningfully sought, not within the self as some mystic endowment, but as a product of social interaction. It is futile to seek out evidence of dignity in the life of an anchorite communing in the wilderness with only birds, reptiles and the elements for company. In other words, the essence of dignity that is unique to humanity is manifested through the relations of one human being to another, one human being to the family, clan or community, in the relations between one collectivity and another however defined, including race relationships.

Regarding this context of relationships however, one common reductionism that also courts dismissal, is that of conduct under suffering. Superficially, acceptance, or resignation may appear to convey dignified bearing. Would we, however, place a victim of torture, or of rape within this category? Definitely, what the very act of violation achieves is to rob the victim of that inherent, individualized, yet social property that answers the name of dignity. Something is taken away with the act of violation, and that innate entitlement is not restored by one's ability to fulfill social or theological expectations that belong to fortitude. There is no such being as a dignified slave, with or without the tarring and feathering that appears to have been

appropriated for Irish youths in that territory of unrelenting anomie. When the being that is labeled 'slave' acquires dignity, he has already ceased to be a slave.

The Yoruba have a common saying: Iku ya j'essin lo: This translates literally as 'Sooner Death, than Indignity'. It is an expression that easily finds equivalents in numerous cultures, and captures the essence of self-worth, the sheer integrity of being that animates the human spirit, and the ascription of equal membership of the human community. This does not in any way belittle other humane virtues - integrity, love, tenderness, graciousness, generosity or indeed the spirit of self-sacrifice. Dignity, however, appears to give the most accessible meaning to human self-regarding. Its loss, in many cultures, Japan most famously, makes even death mandatory, exile coming as a second best.

To offer some intimation, at this stage, of our ultimate destination, let us remind ourselves that - as with individuals, so it is with communities and nations. Equally, to identify with a community beyond the self is to take upon oneself the triumphs and humiliations, the glories and mortifications that the larger entity undergoes. The very development and maturation of self-consciousness implicates the absorption, into the self of that community or association - the alma mater, social clubs, honour societies, the professional register. Through a variety of habits, tastes, social interactions, profession, even hobbies, one acquires, or is indoctrinated into a new family, an extension of the self that may actually come to take precedence over even the immediate family and community into which one is born and earns a living. I think of this sense of belonging as Community with a capital 'c' - a community of thought, values and sensibilities, one that, like the quasi-state, transcends boundaries and governments. Often Community is founded on shared historical experience which may be negative - such as political or economic bondage or marginalisation. Finally, let us not forget, or underestimate the Community that is - Religion.

Dignity in the management of Community lies at the heart of our preoccupation. The global climate of fear owes much to the devaluation or denial of dignity in the intersection of Communities, most notably between the stronger and weaker ones, an avoidance of the recognition of this very entitlement, this craving, this inbred addiction if you prefer, in chambers of negotiations, compromises, cold statistics and resolutions, including the United Nations. It is easy enough to speak of, and even condemn the building of concrete walls that turn whole peoples into prisoners in glorified camps but somehow the expression of one critical, implicit denial is itself denied: dignity. Such a wall reaches beyond its physical terrain, and is experienced as a gesture of disdain against the Community of which such people form a part. If the Berlin Wall was held to reduce the inherent dignity of a people since it circumscribed their freedom, then a Wall in Palestine cannot be viewed with the same regard as is elicited today by the Great Wall of China.

Here is an anecdote from real life, an attempt at breaking out from a different kind of walling in, this time of the economic - but not at any price! About six years ago, I was approached by a Cuban ambassador to my country Nigeria, with whom I had developed a warm relationship. He felt that I might know some influential individuals within the United States government or the intellectual circles that relate to that government. His government, he stated, was anxious for a resolution of the state of undeclared war between the two nations - these formal and informal probes are part of

public knowledge, so I am not revealing any privileged communication. Cuba had weathered the general economic sanctions by the US reasonably well, he said, but after the infamous Torricelli Act, that extended the ban on trade with Cuba even to her existing foreign partners, that small island began to feel the economic stress of claustrophobia, and sought diplomatic means of breaking the deadlock.

The ambassador said, Cuba was ready to meet and talk with the US on any platform, formal or informal, no preconditions - oh, except one. Cuba would not compromise her dignity. It struck me as a remarkable statement, even then. We are a small people, he declared, we are powerless compared to the United States, but we will not compromise our dignity; we would rather starve to death.

That declaration by my friend - we shall not sacrifice our dignity - is very much the language of nations, or states to one another. For instance, during conflict negotiations or their aftermath - and I refer here to those unpublicised sessions, familiar to arbitrators - a phrase, an insistent, minimal appeal surfaces with remarkable constancy, even when all else has been surrendered. It goes thus: please, let us leave these negotiating chambers, at the very least, with our self-respect. It is very much the historic cry of a defeated people, defeated either through a passage of arms or on the diplomatic field, when they discover that they have no more bargaining chips left. What their representatives are saying is simply: the very least you must concede is that we leave this place not as slaves of imposition, but as partners of consent. Yes, we are compelled to make peace, we accept that we must submit to force majeure, but leave us at least our self-respect. This is the motivation behind every formula of diplomatic contrivance that is sometimes described as - 'face-saving'.

Dignity is simply another face of freedom, and thus the obverse of Power and domination, that axis of human relationship that is equally sustained by fear, its poles doomed to remain in permanent conflict, yet complement each other. I shall expand on an experience that I narrated in the first of these series - The Changing Mask of Fear - where I commented on the emotional state of my neighbours when we were confronted by a raging fire that threatened to consume our homes, and indeed cast doubts on our very survival if we hesitated a moment too long in its path. I tried to contrast the feeling of helplessness that one encounters when Nature herself is the force of domination, as opposed to when any human, an equal of others in most ways, takes on the role of dominance and robs one of the faculty of volition.

The human response in face of such a menace is, I am certain, near universal. I observed no sense of reduction in self-esteem, no conduct that equated indignity despite the fact that we were impotent in face of this assailant. This was Nature at work, and with awesome power that annihilated all that lay before it. The power that is exerted by Nature does not humiliate. Indeed, not even the daily precarious habitation in the shadow of a rumbling volcano as in the case of Mount Etna, that in recent decades sent the inhabitants scurrying yet again for safety, or the earthquake that recently devastated parts of Turkey, and lately Iran - none of these remotely attains the reduction of individual self-worth, as the condition of arbitrary control by another. Those citizens of California who live along the St. Andreas fault, that is, live with the consciousness of arbitrary seismic eruption, are unfazed by the possibility of death whenever the earth decides to challenge their rights of occupancy. In the Caribbean, the islanders are inured to hurricanes and the accompanying floods. Mud

slides occasionally wipe out ancient habitations and bury thousands, later to be dug up in grotesque shapes of mortality - the Philippines recently joined the ranks of these entombed casualties. None of these victims however, can be said to exist in fear of humiliation, or loss of dignity. The kind of power that reduces our self-worth ranges through the most mundane, even domestic relationships, such as fear of ejection of a tenant by a landlord in a system that offers neither preventive measures nor legal redress to a wife or child subjected to constant physical and mental abuse by a husband or parent, an Irish teenager in the grip of terror of a vigilante committee, a Zimbabwean recruit in the burgeoning terror training camps of a Robert Mugabe where some are raped as a mandatory rite of induction. The kind of power that humiliates is that which compels the head of a Palestinian family to sit helplessly under Israeli guns, drenched in tears, as he watches his ancestral olive grove, the sole family source of livelihood, fall under the electric saw, tree by tree, to make way for the very wall that will, from then on, reduce his space of volition.

Or else wake up suddenly in the middle of the night to find strangers in your bedroom - a battering ram has knocked a huge hole in your wall, and a group of armed men are hustling you, your wife and your children into a holding pen - such experiences must rank as the ultimate erosion of one's self-esteem. The diet of the average Palestinian in the Middle East today - for this is where we are headed - the table fare of the average citizen is that forced diet of indignity that even children swallow daily, and worse still, watch their parents undergo, encounters that denigrate their very humanity. The reality of this territory of collective indignity can be studied close by anyone who can make the pilgrimage, one that is attested as such by United Nations agencies on the ground, by humanitarian groups that are constantly involved, and find themselves sometimes at risk, a zone that is at the very heart of today's climate of fear.

In April 2002, at the invitation of the Palestinian writer, Mahmoud Darwish, I formed part of a delegation of the Paris based International Parliament of Writers, now known as the International Network of Cities of Asylum, that visited both Israel and Palestine. We were there both to convey our solidarity to the imprisoned writers, artistes and intellectuals on both sides - imprisoned, that is, by circumstances that defeated even their customary borderless vision - and to bear direct witness to what we saw, what was said, and what might be expected.

I shall sum up my apprehension of the Palestinian situation in one word: humiliation. No, it was not because of one of our Palestinian guides who kept on repeating: 'We want to live in peace with the Israeli, but let them at least grant us at least our dignity' It was not because that the word cropped up at least a hundred times both in street encounters, and during the concert of music and poetry that took place in the ancient theatre of Ramallah - as the film made of that journey amply testifies. No, it was simply something that I witnessed myself on this journey of enquiry, and affected me so intensely that I could hardly wait to share my disquiet with that Israeli leader for whom I have developed enormous respect after several encounters - Shimon Peres. He kindly received us - the then President, Russell Banks and me - in his office, straight from his arrival from a visit to China, while we came in directly from a visit to the Shatila camp. We spoke candidly, and I said to him, 'What I saw, what I read on the faces of Palestinians, young and old, was - humiliation. I encountered a people who seemed devoid of a hope for peace, yet desperate for a restoration of their human dignity.'

Jose Saramago, the Portuguese novelist and Nobel Prize winner, was even more graphic. Indifferent to his popular standing in Israel, he used a metaphor from concentration camps that continues to ring round European literary and intellectual circles even a full year afterwards. Saramago's intent has been much misunderstood, being considered insensitive and hyperbolic by many, including from within our own rank of literary witnesses, but the very fact that this comparison was wrung out of a friend of the Israeli literary constituency contains its own lesson, and is one that cannot be ignored except at peril.

I witnessed the reality of this humiliation in domestic settings on which the contempt of an occupying force had been visited. I witnessed it at checkpoints, I heard it in the numerous recitations of personal experiences across all classes, in numerous episodes, on the campus of Bir Zeit university. Most depressing of all, I read it in the eyes of the young where humiliation had hardened into a resolve not to abandon that ineffable possession, dignity, the loss of which would finally affirm the nullification of their human status. Most frightening of all, I saw it congealed into a hard, cold, unremitting hatred. Yes, I understood the counter claims of Shimon Peres, his legitimate anger at what he read as the treachery of the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat over that leader's repudiation of a negotiated agreement with the former Prime Minister, Barak, in Camp David. And I acknowledged the weight of responsibility that rests on a leader, whose primary mission must be to shield his people from attacks that have raised the barometer of terror through the relentless use of the suicide bomber. Nevertheless, it was clear to me that, on his part, this astute Israeli leader, perhaps the most thoughtful of past Israeli leaders, did not truly grasp, or else deeply underestimated the factor of humiliation, and the human attachment to that contentious possession - dignity.

There is a moment of manifest disdain in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to which my mind often returns - the attack on the headquarters of Yasser Arafat that began even while the U.N. Secretary-General's envoy, Roed-Larsen, was physically in Arafat's office. The Secretary-General and his other envoys were also within Palestine - in short, this assault took place right under the nose of the United Nations. If nothing else, that incident must surely have completed the ongoing erosion of the confidence of a large interlocking Community - the Arab and the Islamic - in an impartial and authoritative intervention from that world organisation. If we have to look for defining moments of despair and desperation within that Community, the disdainful dismissal of its worth within international regarding - this surely must rank as one of the foremost - and there have been many. The Republic of the disillusioned expands by the day. The recruits into its army have abandoned all hope of justice from within and without, but remain committed to one all-consuming pursuit - dignity. As that goal recedes, they come to lose, like the Irish youth, all faith in a universal concept of human dignity and become indifferent to the moralities and restraints that hold up the scaffolding of civilized co-existence. These are the willing recruits to the army of terror, the 'harmless neighbour', the shy but pleasant young man or woman who helps with putting out the garbage, and wishes you a good morning. Behind that friendly 'Good morning' at a shopping mall however may lurk the sardonic smile that is powered by secret knowledge of a terminal 'Good bye'.

The quasi-state, we know, sometimes overlaps or interlocks with Community and seeks to take it over. The critical mass is the point at which one can no longer be distinguished from the other, and the overrun Community is seen to appear to bow

totally to the control of the quasi-state, if only for a measure of preservation of its own identity. The responsibility that we owe ourselves is to prevent the attainment of that critical mass that then pits one Community against another. No community dares succumb to an arrogation of power over the lives of its innocents. Yet even as we build protective ramparts, and pursue the violators of such a basic norm to the ends of the earth, the mind that aspires to an all-inclusive Community must expand beyond the immediate and address the genesis of the current climate of fear, not as abstraction, but as reality within the compass of redress. That genesis will be found right within the smouldering heart of the Middle East, a confluence of multiple civilizations within which are nestled the most influential spiritualities of the world - the Judaic, Christian and Islamic. The dispersal of the climate of fear rests therefore on a just solution in the Middle East - it has been said often enough, it cannot be disputed.

The time for evasion is over. True, we dare not succumb to acts that unilaterally abrogate our own rights to dignity and life, acts that left such a flaming imprint, so recently, on the railway tracks of Madrid, that there flashed across my mind a moment in the career of fascism. That was when a General Astray, in the Spanish Cortes, spat the shout of 'Long live Death' in the face of the humanist philosopher, Unamuno. That banner of morbidity appears to have been hoisted all over the world. To take it down, the world must act in concert, and with resolve, but must also embrace or intensify a commitment to the principle of justice that ensures that the dispossessed enjoy restitution, and the humiliated are restored to dignity.