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RESTORING HOPE FOR AMERICA'S FUTURE THROUGH DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF PEACE

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12th Annual Frank K. Kelly Lecture on Humanity's Future

February 8, 2013

In Stanley Kubrick's classic film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, just after the majestic opening of Richard Strauss' *Also sprach Zarathustra*, a soaring sun splits the darkness, seemingly heralding the new Genesis, and next a man-ape uses a femur bone to dispatch the leader of another group in order to gain control over a water hole. It is a simple act of one mammal clubbing another to death. It is what Friedrich Nietzsche, in his novel *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, may have countenanced as "the eternal recurrence of the same." Yet, Kubrick does not leave us stranded upon the darkling plain of brute violence, for emotion is admitted, and so exultant is the conqueror at the demise of his extent competitor that he flings the femur skyward in triumph and, through the match cut magic of movie-making, the femur tumbles end over end, high up into the heavens, where it is transformed – into a space station!

We surf on Kubrick's monolith into an evolutionary spiral across space and millions of years, now equipped with high technology, but burdened with the signal responses of our lower limbic system and its embedded fight-flight conflicts, ever ready to take up the electronic cudgel to drive contestants out of water holes or oil holes. Violence is. Its expression neither regressive nor progressive, it exists as a disconnection from our own divinity, a fall from the heavens, a departure from grace, a descent into the lower circles of that philosophical hell of dichotomous thinking, of us versus them, whoever they are. The invention of the other, the evocation of the out-group, and the conjuring of the enemy are the precedents of violence. We hear the siren call. But what makes us answer the tocsin of rage clanging in our heads, in our homes, in our cities and in the world? Could it be the ripping of the moorings of our reality, the anxiety of separation shaking our core, the earthquake beneath our ground of meaning, dissecting through our bedrock beliefs when we learn that what we thought was true was indeed false? Peter Berger

once wrote that reality is socially constructed and culturally affirmed. What happens when the sociopathic trumps the authentic?

We cannot justify violence, but we must determine its roots. Before Kubrick, before Strauss, there was Zarathustra, or Zoroaster himself. He confronted us with this moral proposition: That the central struggle of our existence is the determination of what is true and what is false. Is it our inability to strive for, to discern and to receive and to know truth which binds us to violence?: *Is what we see what we get?* Are we bound to truth-shattering illusions? How do we know what we are told is true? Has the misuse of power in our society so distorted meaning that truth and lies are indistinguishable, or worse, morally relative? These are questions of import in our interpersonal relations, and the consequences of untruth grow geometrically when a major progenitor of perceptions in our society – the government – stumbles or seeks, and practices to mislead.

September 11, 2001

To ponder that question, let us first look at another production called *2001: September 11* – the catastrophe of nearly 3,000 innocent souls perishing in waves of hate. That date is burned into our memories as one of the worst days we have ever known. We know the choices which our government made, acting with the tacit consent of we the people, to respond to the 9/11 crimes committed against our nation. But we seldom reflect on our government’s response, as though to do so publically is either impolitic or un-American. Is it rude to mention that, acting upon the color of crime and tragedy on September 11, 2001, we began a descent to officially-sanctioned mass murder called war, into the lower circles of the infernos of torture, rendition and drone assassination? We established an anti-democratic state of emergency which exists to this day, with its Orwellian “Patriot Act,” its massive spying networks, its illegal detention, its extreme punishment of whistleblowers, and its neo-police state, in violation of *posse comitatus*, which put MPs on the streets of Washington, D.C. during the recent Inaugural.

“Violence has enabled the government to grow and the republic to shrink.”

We have cut and pasted the Constitution in the manner of a disambiguated Word Document through sheer casuistry, excising those sections which guarantee protection from unreasonable search and seizure, which protect an individual’s rights of habeas corpus, and due process, which prohibit any one person from simultaneously being policeman, prosecutor, judge, jury, executioner and coroner. Violence has enabled the government to grow and the republic to shrink.

It was ten years ago next month that the United States, despite a massive peace movement that put millions in the streets protesting the upcoming invasion, launched a full-scale attack on the nation of Iraq. “Shock and Awe,” it was called. Hellfire was brought to the cradle of civilization, its people, its culture, its antiquities – in our name – for a war based on lies. In awe of our weapons, we shocked ourselves, vicariously, with their effects, never experiencing the horror visited upon the people of Iraq.

When I say “we,” I mean all morally conscious Americans. Over a million Iraqis were killed in our name, for a war based on lies. In awe of our destructive power and its toll on innocent human life, we shocked ourselves and then returned to our normal lives. Trillions of

dollars of damage was done to that country, in our name, for a war based on lies. Trillions more spent by the US taxpayers, for a war based on lies. In awe of the monetary cost of war, we shocked ourselves with massive deficits. Thousands of US troops were killed and tens of thousands wounded. In awe of the long-term, human cost of war, we shocked ourselves with broken lives, broken families, suicides, PTSD.

Shock and awe, indeed. We attacked a nation which did not attack us and which had neither the intention nor capability of doing so. We attacked a nation which did not have the yellow cake to be processed into the substance fit for a nuclear warhead. We attacked a nation which did not have weapons of mass destruction. We visited upon the people of Iraq the equivalent of one 9/11 a day for a year and with it the irretrievable rending of families, of places to live, places to work, places to worship, ripping apart Iraqi society in a war which soon became so remote that it was finished off by unmanned vehicles. The mission that was “accomplished” was wanton destruction, ecocide, alienation, statecraft puppetry – and for what?

What was it all about? It did not make us safer. It weakened our military. It killed and injured our soldiers. It seriously weakened our nation financially. The long-term cost of the post-9/11 wars of choice will run over \$6 trillion. Want one reason why we have a \$16 trillion debt? We borrowed money from China, Japan and South Korea to pursue wars while those countries built their economies and their infrastructures. We blew up bridges in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan at such expense that we are now preaching austerity here at home, unwilling to face the fact that we have over \$2 trillion in infrastructure needs in America which have not been met, unwilling to invest in America. All too willing to invest in wars, we became the policemen of the world and ended up being resented worldwide. We have fueled the fires of reactionary nationalism abroad, which are easily stoked by foreign occupation or invasion. We have helped further fundamentalism and made decisions which placed in positions of power those whose very existence supposedly drove us into conflict in the first place. What passes for our recent history is an acculturated, sleep-inducing lie from which we must wake up. We must awake from the stupor of our self-imposed amnesia or shock; we must shake off the awe which comes from the misuse of power on a global basis. We must always question governments whose legitimacy rests not upon accountability and truth, but upon force and deception. A government which assumes that we are neither intelligent enough, nor loyal enough, to know the truth about its actions a dozen years ago or a dozen hours ago is not worthy of a free people. We must bend the fear-forged bars which imprison the truth. We must seek the truth. And we must know the truth. For it is the truth that will truly set us free and lead to the wisdom which can rescue us from destruction: the wisdom which can reclaim America. America. The mere utterance of the word should set the pulse pounding with the excitement of discovery, of possibility, of love – not fear.

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TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

We must demand that America, our nation, establish a fully-empowered Commission on Truth and Reconciliation, so that those responsible for misleading us into annihilating innocent people in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere be brought forward to a public

accountability in a formal process of fact-finding, of inquiry, of public testimony, of admission, of confession. There is no way out of the moral cul-de-sac in which resides the monstrous crimes of mass murder, torture, kidnapping, and rendition, other than to have atonement: AT ONE MENT. It is in atonement that we will achieve what Blake called “the unity of opposites.” It is in reconciliation that the Blakean idea of the contrary nature of God, containing multitudes of humanity, causes us to understand the fragility of our social compact and the possibility that any of us could be murderer and victim. Lacking public expiation over the unbridled use of force, the wanton violence we have writ large in the world will replicate, perpetuate and be our ruin. This is the importance of a formal process of Truth and Reconciliation. We had and have a right to defend ourselves as a nation, but we went on the offensive, and the violence which we have visited abroad will inevitably blow back home. The violence we create in the world in turn licenses and desensitizes the wanton violence which is exercised in our streets and, unfortunately, in our homes. We must understand the causal links. What is outermost presses down upon what is innermost. What is innermost becomes outermost.

Once a full process of Truth and Reconciliation has helped us to discern the truth of our experience of the past decade, equipped with the truth of our errant descent into errant wars, we must be prepared to forgive those who would be forgiven, and forgive ourselves for having participated with either our assent or our silence. Then we may move forward with the truth as the standard under which we organize a stronger, better America.

We must think often of our nation, re-imagine it, reestablish it as the exemplification of our highest ideals. [We must think of] those lofty sentiments present at its founding, of its spiritual origins, of *Annuit Coeptis*, a US Motto: “He has favored our undertaking.” [We must think of] its transcendent purpose presaging human unity, *E Pluribus Unum*: out of many we are one. The paradox of multiplicity in singularity. Let us renew our faith in our nation. Let us unite so that the power of unity will lift up this nation we love. Let us declare our faith in each other, as it occurred so many years ago with that clarion call for the rights of “we the people!” Let us find that place within ourselves where our own capacity to evolve catalyzes the evolving character of America, where, through the highest expression of informed citizenship, we quicken the highest expression of informed nationhood: America for Americans for the World. Let the truth be our empire, the plowshare our sword, nature our textbook and let us once again celebrate the deeper meaning of what it means to be an American.

“We need to come together now, in the town halls across America, to appreciate our common experiences, to share our narratives about the best that is America, about what it is that we love about this country, about our own journeys, our own miracles, about those things in our lives which directly connect us to what we have called the American Dream.”

Then, reimagining the town hall model, let us consider what America represented to each of us on September 10, 2001, the day before 9/11. Let millions of people in tens of thousands of places across our nation meet, rediscover and celebrate again our nation and its purpose and recapture the spirit of America which we know already resides in countless places. That spirit of America is always ready to be called forward with a sense of wonder and joy, which our children

will in time come to understand as our capacity to rise from the ashes of our own suffering and disillusionment, a quality which becomes their civic inheritance.

While we were founded with the idea of striving for perfection, we were not a perfect nation by any means before 9/11, but I remember a greater sense of optimism, of freedom, of security, of control of our destiny. We need to come together now, in the town halls across America, to appreciate our common experiences, to share our narratives about the best that is America, about what it is that we love about this country, about our own journeys, our own miracles, about those things in our lives which directly connect us to what we have called the American Dream. And when we so share, we will know each other better and love our country even more.

VIOLENCE AND AMERICA

Violence today casts us in a psychological wilderness. There is a path out of the wilderness of violence in which so many of our fellow countrymen and countrywomen are lost. If we are to help them find that path, it would be helpful for us to look again to the origins of our nation and find the map.

“Today, violence is an overarching theme, encompassing personal, group, national and international conflict, extending to the production of nuclear, biological, chemical weapons of mass destruction, which have been developed for use on land and in the air, sea and space.”

On July 4, 1776, the Second Continental Congress unanimously declared the Independence of the 13 colonies, and the achievement of peace was recognized as one of the highest duties of the new organization of free and independent states. Peace at the Founding. Yes, [this was] the paradox of revolutionary war, but the destination was peace, articulated and enshrined.

The drafters of the Declaration of Independence appealed to the Supreme Judge of the World, and derived the creative cause of nationhood from “the Laws of Nature” and the entitlements of “Nature’s God,” celebrating the unity of human thought, natural law and spiritual causation, in declaring: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” The architects of Independence “with a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence” spoke to the activity of a higher power which moves to guide the Nation’s fortune and lends its divine spark to infuse principle into the structure of democratic governance. The Constitution of the United States of America, in its Preamble, further sets forth the insurance of the cause of peace, in stating, “We the people of the United States, in Order to Form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessing of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.” We must remember where we have been so that we can chart where we will proceed. It is the sacred duty of the people of the United States to receive the living truths of our founding documents and to think anew to develop institutions that permit the unfolding of the highest moral principles in this Nation and around the world.

Those words from the Constitution are included in the preamble of legislation I wrote in 2001. They form the basis of my understanding of the conceptive power of freedom. The Founders of this country gave America a vision of freedom for the ages and provided people with a document which gave this Nation the ability to adapt to an undreamed of future. What can we give back?

When I first came to Congress, I saw how easily we slipped into conflict. I saw how normally placid people could get swept up by war fever. It led me to study war. I learned that during the course of the 20th Century more than 100,000,000 people perished in wars. Today, violence is an overarching theme, encompassing personal, group, national and international conflict, extending to the production of nuclear, biological, chemical weapons of mass destruction, which have been developed for use on land and in the air, sea and space. Such conflict is taken as a reflection of the human condition without questioning whether the structures of thought, word and deed which the people of the United States have inherited are any longer sufficient for the maintenance, growth and survival of the United States and the world.

Personal violence in the United States has great human and financial costs, costing hundreds of billions of dollars annually, not including war-related costs. Child abuse and neglect cost over \$100 billion annually.

We are in a new millennium and the time has come to review age-old challenges with new thinking wherein we can conceive of peace as not simply being the absence of violence, but the active presence of the capacity for a higher evolution of human awareness, of respect, trust and integrity, where we all may tap the infinite capabilities of humanity to transform consciousness and conditions which impel or compel violence at a personal, group, or national level toward developing a new understand of and commitment to compassion and love, in order to create a “shining city on a hill,” the light of which is the light of nations.

It was this thinking, this articulation which I was privileged to bring forth on July 11, 2001, fully two months before 9/11, to introduce a bill, HR 808, to create a cabinet level Department of Peace, soon to be reintroduced by Congresswoman Barbara Lee as the Department of Peace Building.

Imagine, coming from a position of love of our country and for each other, if we moved forward without judgment, to meet the promise of a more perfect union by meeting the challenge of violence in our homes, our streets, our schools, our places of work and worship, to meet the challenge of violence in our society through the creation of a new structure in our society which could directly address domestic violence, spousal abuse, child abuse, gun violence, gang violence, violence against gays. This goes much deeper than legislation forbidding such conduct, or creating systems to deal with victims. Those are necessary but not sufficient. We need to go much deeper if we are to, at last, shed the yoke of violence which we carry throughout our daily lives.

CONCLUSION

We know violence is a learned response. So is non-violence. We must replace a culture of violence with a culture of peace, not through the antithetical use of force, not through endless

“thou shalt nots” and not through mere punishment, but through tapping our higher potential to teach principles of peace building, peace sharing at the earliest ages as part of a civic education in a democratic society.

Carl Rogers, the humanistic psychologist, has written that “the behavior of the human organism may be determined by the external influences to which it has been exposed, but it may also be determined by the creative and integrative insight of the organism itself.” We are not victims of the world we see. We become victims of the way we see the world. If we are prepared to confidently call forth a new America, if we have the courage to not simply re-describe America, but to reclaim it, we will once again fall in love with the light which so many years ago shined through the darkness of human existence to announce the birth of a new freedom.

Out in the void I can see a soaring sun splitting the darkness. Behold the dawn of a new nation, our beloved America



AUTHOR

Dennis Kucinich is a passionate and articulate leader for peace and disarmament. He led an effort in congress to establish a U.S. Department of Peace. He was also an early supporter of the nuclear abolition movement. During his 16 years in Congress, he was a spokesperson for U.S. participation in many disarmament treaties, including the Biological and Chemical Weapons Conventions. He was an advocate for the U.S. joining the International Criminal Court and a driving force in the effort to stop the U.S. from attacking Iraq. He also led the effort to get U.S. troops out of Afghanistan.

THE FOUNDATION

The Nuclear Age Peace Foundation is a non-profit, non-partisan international education and advocacy organization. It has consultative status to the United Nations Economic and Social Council and is recognized by the UN as a Peace Messenger Organization.

Founded in 1982, the Foundation is comprised of individuals and organizations worldwide who realize the imperative for peace in the Nuclear Age.

VISION

Our vision is a just and peaceful world, free of nuclear weapons.

MISSION

To educate and advocate for peace and a world free of nuclear weapons and to empower peace leaders.

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