



Remembering the Past to Transform the Future

“The history of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom.” G.W.F. Hegel

Several observances during the month of August remind us of the perils of war, the challenges to peace and the possibilities of social transformations using principles of human rights. On August 6th and 9th the bombings in 1945 of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are remembered with sadness for the awful pain such A-bombs brought to human beings. Yet, the 9th of August has been named Sadako Peace Day in honor of the Japanese girl who died from leukemia before her attempt to fold 1000 paper cranes was complete. She believed a wish could come true if you folded 1000 paper cranes, symbols of peace. Her friends completed her task, and thousands have joined in the ritual since then. To bring hope out of the observance of tragedy is noble and valuable. Such hope could be strengthened by a universal commitment by governments as well as citizens to the removal of nuclear weapons and a rejection of their use. The threatened use of nuclear weapons implicit in a policy of nuclear deterrence is a weak foundation for building peace among mankind.

Currently, there is revived concern about the risks of nuclear energy for peaceful uses. The impact of the meltdowns in Japanese facilities has awakened fresh thinking as well as fresh fears about our human ability to control nuclear resources. Many protest that their potential for damage is out of proportion to their benefits, especially when other alternatives can be developed. Some technologies cannot be defended creditably as instruments of peaceful living.

More defensible and more universally influential are ideals including principles for organizing liberal, democratic societies with maximum opportunities for freedom, peace and justice. August 26th marks the anniversary of the proclamation of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* in 1789. The *Declaration* was written by leaders of the French Revolution and approved by the Constituent Assembly claiming to represent the “Third Estate”, that is the people. Its proclamation turned this group of educated, philosophically inclined citizens into revolutionaries hunted down by the King’s soldiers. Brief but dramatic, the document includes ideas such as a natural right to liberty, property, equality, security, religious toleration and freedom of expression, press and association. The new Assembly also outlawed slavery. Its bold statements are more comprehensive than the carefully crafted defense of independence contained in the American

Declaration of Independence. Although the French were less successful in setting up governmental institutions than the Americans, their Declaration of Human Rights served as the grandest statement of universal human rights and citizenship until the United Nations approved a Universal Declaration of Rights in 1948.

Such documents have provided both an organizing foundation and a set of ideals for radically transforming social conditions and political systems. Modern political history illustrates amply their influence in every corner of the globe. Although some might complain of the excesses of freedom or disruption to social order and cultural traditions resulting from the influence of these powerful statements of human rights, few want to live in a society bereft of their transformative and protective influence. Where human rights and democratic government are well established, citizens live in peace and participate freely in voicing their views on global issues of war, weapons, environment, famine and social justice to name a few. Of course, the dissemination of ideas for the last 500 years has been facilitated by the technology of printing. Thus, political history and self-government reflect a debt to the publication of the first Gutenberg Bible on August 24, 1456. Making the Bible, as well as scores of books, journal and newspapers widely available released a freedom to know and think that transformed human consciousness.

The people of India used the ideals of the French and American Revolutions as well as British traditions to defend their right to independence from British colonial rule. Thus, on August 15th, they will celebrate the 64th anniversary of that non-violent victory. Although the contributions of a remarkable leadership group including Gandhi may be a dim memory, the Indian Independence movement stands out as a remarkable accomplishment in a complex context where both historical continuity and modernizing change influenced the success of the movement. Despite the weight of traditional factionalism and its own possession of nuclear weapons, India is emerging as a constructive contributor to a global community based on diplomacy and commerce.

The commitment to universal principles of human rights and democratic institutions of government does not conflict necessarily with loyalty to religious and culture values. The Hindus of India will celebrate on August 22nd, the birth anniversary of Lord Krishna who they believe to be a Divine Personage. Others of their countrymen along with Muslims living all over the world will observe the month of RAMADAN, beginning August 1st and ending with the festival of EID on August 30th. Such observances of religious holidays are now part of the rhythm and culture of a world divided up into nation states. To assume that the values and practices of modern liberal democracies are incompatible with loyalty to traditional religion and culture is not a valid assumption. . The agitation and violent protests of minorities do not destroy the eclectic processes whereby men and women in contemporary societies build a peaceful and productive life rooted in a rich array of cultural values and social ideals. Their efforts to construct an internally felt mixture

of values drawn from many sources, old and new, ideal and practical, individual and shared is what makes them peaceful and productive citizens. It is those who have not developed and internalized a culture of truly human values who are drawn into committing such horrific acts of violence and evil such as we read or hear about in the daily news. Their violence thrives in symbiotic relationship with the less visible violence built into political rationalizations of war and weapons. Let us use moments of remembrance and observance to nurture an alternative world culture of peace. Remembrance of the past can become a progressive way to imagine a better future.

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August 2011