

Reconciliation and the American Dream: Pointers from Gandhi & King

Keynote talk by Rajmohan Gandhi at the “Reconciliation in America” Symposium organized by the John Hope Franklin Center, Hyatt Hotel, Tulsa, May 31, 2012

Let me say I feel stirred being here. I am stirred by the stories of John Hope Franklin and his parents, by the anguish of 1921, by the sorrow of April of this year, and by the resolve of John Hope Franklin and this Center to transform past pain, and past shame, into a signpost for a journey of healing, hope, and pride.

Being a first-time visitor to Oklahoma and not being a good enough student of race in America, I am unable to present an insider’s account. In fact for parts of my talk I will take you far from here, hoping that the perspective offered will be of interest.

My career as a historian, for whatever it is worth, began fairly late in my life. From the start I wanted to be a reconciler, and for years thought I was working as a reconciler, until I realized that I was also becoming a historian. I recognized what John Hope Franklin so powerfully underlined, that memory – detailed memory, harsh memory, painful memory – was critical to reconciliation, and I understood that the past had to be acknowledged before it could be addressed, let alone healed.

I was eight when, in 1944, my grandmother died while she and my grandfather, then in their mid-seventies, were prisoners of the British – my parents, my siblings and I were allowed to visit her shortly before her death. I was 12 when in 1947 India won its independence, and 12-and-a-half when in New Delhi, the city where I was going to school, my grandfather was killed by a group of Hindus who thought that Gandhi, a Hindu, was friendlier than necessary to India’s Muslims.

The India that became free in 1947 had also been divided into two, a Hindu-majority ‘India’ and a Muslim-majority ‘Pakistan’. Killings had marked the partition, and many Indians and Pakistanis stepping into the future thought of one another as enemies. Although I had been moved by my grandfather’s unceasing and extraordinary efforts

for Hindu-Muslim reconciliation, some of which were made around me in New Delhi while I was growing up there, I too imbibed the prejudice.

I was 16 years' old in September of 1951, four years after India and Pakistan had emerged as free nations, when a young journalist working on the newspaper my father was editing came up to our apartment, which was located on the floor above the newspaper's offices. He had with him with a piece of paper, hot off the teleprinter, which he wanted to show my father. I looked at the piece of paper as I let him in. It read, 'Liaqat Ali Khan, Prime Minister of Pakistan, has been shot. MTF.' Knowing that MTF meant More To Follow, I said to the journalist, 'I hope what follows is news that he is dead.'

Expecting a smile at my clever remark, I was surprised when the journalist gave me a frown. Embarrassment followed. Afterwards I realized that along with popular prejudice a desire to be macho had prompted my comment. I was after all a boy trying to be a man.

Thirty-three years later, the memory of my mean reaction was a factor in my producing a study of the lives of eight influential Muslim leaders (including the man shot in 1951) who had helped shape the Pakistan and the India that had grown along with me. Thanks to my luck, and to God's grace, and also perhaps because of an effort on my part to tell all sides of those eight stories, this 1985 book not only remains in print in different languages in India and Pakistan; Hindus and Muslims have both liked it, and the book may be said to have aided reconciliation – not, I must concede, to a high enough degree.

In trying to tell all sides of a story, I also resisted the temptation to skip over facts that appeared likely to hinder reconciliation. It was with good reason that Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his close allies, including Nelson Mandela, called their South African commission a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Without truth, 'reconciliation' can serve as camouflage for continuing injustice, mistrust, unfairness or domination.

In the nineties, I wrote a study of Indian history entitled *Revenge and Reconciliation*, which followed the battle over centuries in India between the force of revenge and the

force of reconciliation. On both sides, siblings of these warriors joined this battle. While forgiveness, trust, accommodation and acceptance did duty alongside of reconciliation, the sibling-partners of revenge included power-lust, domination, and rejection.

Where did forces like honor, autonomy, equality, justice, self-respect and dignity line up? Though revenge frequently claimed these soldiers as allies, and though the status quo usually felt nervous about them, they belonged, my study suggested, to the column of reconciliation.

Not only does reconciliation demand honor, history suggests that a real fight must often precede reconciliation. We know that Gandhi and King insisted that such a fight had to be nonviolent, yet it was a fight all the same.

Whenever either Gandhi or King went to nonviolent battle, some of their friends or admirers became uneasy. They disliked the idea of their friend or hero inviting tension, or opposition. Most here are familiar with King's answer to such doubting Thomases, given in his Letter from a Birmingham City Jail in April 1963, but for the sake of those who are not, let me read it. While insisting that "one who breaks an unjust law, must do it openly and lovingly," King added:

I have earnestly worked and preached against violent tension, but there is a type of constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth... I have never yet engaged in a direct action movement that was "well-timed," according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly... For years now I have heard the word, "Wait." This 'wait' has almost always meant 'never'.

The African-American has many pent-up resentments and latent frustrations. He has to get them out. So let him march sometime; let him have his prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; understand why he must have sit-ins and freedom rides. If his repressed emotions do not come out in these nonviolent ways, they will come out in ominous expressions of violence. This is not a threat; it is a fact of history.

Like King, Gandhi had many white friends, British and American, who sympathized with his independence movement. They liked the fact that it was nonviolent and the fact that Gandhi sought reconciliation between the Indians and the British. But each time Gandhi

felt he had to launch a new struggle of civil disobedience against a British order or law, these friends were filled with misgivings.

Gandhi's reply to such friends was usually two-fold. One, the law he was planning to violate, he argued, was unjust. Secondly, a nonviolent struggle was the only way to prevent a violent struggle, perhaps an uncontrollable violent struggle.

My guess is that today Gandhi would wholeheartedly welcome the nonviolent struggle for basic Palestinian rights that many Jews and Arabs are jointly waging and that he would see it as the best way of preventing a spiral of violent attacks and counter-attacks. To Gandhi, the answer to violence was not a thesis on its harms but an alternative nonviolent way of fighting.

Here is what he wrote in 1920 to the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, whom he had personally befriended even as he was about to lead India's Hindus and Muslims in an open fight against British laws:

Your Excellency must be aware that there was a time when the boldest though also the most thoughtless among the [Muslims] favoured violence...

The school of *hijrat* (Gandhi speaks here of an influential group with extreme ideas) has received a check if it has not stopped its activities entirely. I hold that no repression could have prevented a violent eruption, if the people had not had presented to them a form of direct action... (20: 413-16)

A great all-India fight followed and the Empire was shaken. Tried for disaffection against the King-Emperor, this is what a 53-year-old Gandhi said in open court in March 1922:

I have no personal ill will against any single administrator, much less can I have any disaffection towards the King's person. But I hold it to be a virtue to be disaffected towards a Government which in its totality has done more harm to India than any previous system...

I do not ask for mercy. I do not ask for... clemency. I am here to invite and cheerfully submit to the highest penalty that can be inflicted upon me for what in law is a deliberate crime and what appears to me to be the highest duty of a citizen. (26: 377-86)

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The intimate and direct connection between reconciliation and dignity is my first point. My second point relates to the theme of this symposium: the political dynamics of reconciliation in America. No theme is more urgent, yet we will not do justice to it if we forget the world outside America. Just as there is no reconciliation when honor is missing, a reconciled *America* may be impossible if *the world* is absent from our thoughts.

After all we are meeting in a Center named after someone who, I learn, ‘had rejected the idea of having a center for African-American studies named after him, insisting he was a historian of America *and the world*.’

Not only are places like Iran, Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Pakistan important elements in this year’s political campaign, not to mention China, or immigration, or the European economy’s connection to the US economy; not only is America linked inextricably and in a thousand different ways with the rest of the world; what is America if not the world itself in a unique, wonderful and hope-giving form? Was it not, from the start, the *New World* rather than the new *nation*?

The old world helped create a new world in a new space, and the old world continues to recreate America, even as America continues to reshape the world as a whole. This continual recreation owes much to the migration of people and the flow of goods but even more perhaps to the fast and furious traffic of ideas, feelings, images and voices.

An idea becomes a device, a device becomes universal, and millions are empowered. Then the hand-held cell-phone yields place to the hand-held phone-computer-TV-and-newspaper, all rolled into one. No nation has done more than America to bring this ongoing revolution into the daily lives of hundreds of millions.

Yet this revolution also reduces the space between Americans and non-Americans. The Atlantic and the Pacific are barriers no more. It is impossible to go ahead any longer with an insulated American experiment conducted in a hermetically sealed, walled off and fortified island nation.

Let us look at two of the dominant realities of our world today: China and the world of Islam. Are these external to America? Or do they regularly touch the lives of millions of

Americans -- their concerns, hopes, fears, pocket-books, jobs? China and the world of Islam certainly figure in US political debates.

One of the oldest clichés in political science is that enmities are more potent than friendships, that antipathies motivate voters more than sympathies. Joined to it is a supposed axiom that playing on fear is a better bet than playing on hope.

More than other lands, America has been able to challenge if not wholly disprove this thesis. Whether it was because in America you possessed abundant space, or the blessings of wisdom, or both, your forbears did not always need to advance politically by pointing out to neighbors how unscrupulous their brothers, uncles or cousins were, or how bad the religion of ‘those people over there’ was, or how untrustworthy that neighboring tribe was.

In many a crowded country, this negativity has often been the formula for political success. For example, in parts of India, political hopefuls often look for the most rewarding enemy – one that would drive a variety of ethnic groups or castes into a winning alliance. Thus they may ask themselves: “Which is more likely to work, an anti-high-caste alliance of low caste Hindus and Muslims, or an anti-Muslim alliance of all Hindu castes, high and low?”

Instincts and calculations of this kind are probably at play in all countries with diverse populations and a history of previous conflicts. We know that the US in its history has witnessed frequent appeals to racism for political energy and for preferred political outcomes. Yet American history has also seen a great many political contests where someone’s race, religion or ethnicity was not attacked, which could suggest that the American people, generally speaking, do not take kindly to insinuations against an entire category of people.

Yet how sure are we about such a conclusion today, when it seems that political points can be gained by provoking fears and dislikes of, for example, China -- or the world of Islam? Let me add that this expression ‘the Muslim world,’ is hardly satisfactory, for that world is divided, often bitterly divided, by sect, language, tribe and nationality. Homogenous is exactly what the world of Islam is not. Even so, for brevity’s sake I will speak of ‘the world of Islam.’

To return to America, if insinuating that President Obama is a Muslim -- or not tough enough against Muslim countries or against China -- is seen as an effective way of hurting his re-election prospects, then we have to ask whether America truly rejects the proposition that some categories of human beings are inferior to, or more dangerous than, other categories.

Muslims of different ethnicities have been Americans for a long time. Many Muslims from Africa were brought here as slaves. That it was constitutional to practice and preach Islam was pointed out in specific terms long ago -- by Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. Today American Muslims serve in the US Armed Forces in significant numbers and participate in American life in numerous other ways.

Yes, 9/11 changed the climate. If critics charged that Muslim voices were not loud enough or clear enough or frequent enough in denouncing terrorism and extremism, Muslims replied that their repeated denunciations were not aired or recognized, and added that discrimination against Muslims was not being addressed.

Yet I have also heard Muslim visitors and immigrants say they feel freer and more comfortable about their faith in America than in most countries of Europe.

Today, thankfully, inter-faith dialogue takes place in a number of American cities, but there is room for more dialogue internationally -- between Americans, and Arabs, and between Americans and Iranians, Turks, Pakistanis, Afghans, Indians, Bangladeshis, Indonesians, Nigerians, Sudanese and other peoples containing a large Muslim presence.

This may be important even for reconciliation inside America, for in most cases immigrants cherish their links with their country of origin and long for it to have a relationship of mutual respect with the US.

In my view, it is likely that in the long run the hitherto uneasy relationship between America and the world of Islam will improve so as to benefit both sides. From the autobiography of Malcolm X, we learned that his encounter with Islam in the Arab world helped heal the rage that had occupied his heart. It is possible, similarly, that their interaction in America's free air with people of different ethnicities and beliefs will give Muslims from the Middle East, Africa and Asia inspiration and ideas to strengthen America's ties with their countries of origin.

If we look around, we will find that something like this is already happening with Muslims in our communities. Let us not gauge the future of the world of Islam from the headlines of violent incidents or from the extremist rhetoric of some of its self-appointed spokesmen. That rhetoric is being challenged with bravery or ingenuity in country after country in the Muslim world, openly by some, indirectly yet effectively by many others. One day, God willing, persons of goodwill will command the megaphones in the world of Islam, and all of us will hear the words of reconciliation that today are uttered either softly or at great risk.

Yet how the megaphone is being used in this country is also worth asking. During the recent primary contests for the Republican nomination, it was troubling at times to hear language denigrating Muslims or disparaging their faith.

“I get a kick out of folks who call for equality now,’ said a presidential candidate in Boiling Springs, South Carolina, on January 20, speaking to an enthusiastic crowd packed into a restaurant. ‘Well’ he added, ‘we want equality,’ and asked, ‘Where do you think this concept of equality comes from?’ Answering his question, the candidate said, ‘It doesn’t come from Islam. It doesn’t come from the East and Eastern religions... It comes from the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, that’s where it comes from.’”

I don’t think the candidate would have lost much had he spoken the last sentence but omitted the two preceding ones. It is a pity that he chose to put down Islam and the Eastern religions.

In much of the world, including several parts of the US, Muslims and non-Muslims live as close neighbors, in some cases as good friends, mostly as law-abiding, co-existing, non-interfering, at times cooperating citizens. Let us not condemn them to live in perpetual enmity, in an unchanging climate of fear and suspicion.

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As people move in or out, the demographic mix of a place changes. The mix may change differently in different parts of the same country. Moreover, the local dynamics of reconciliation may vary from a national dynamics. In either case the dynamics get complicated when more than two parties need reconciling, which is almost always the case.

This is true of course for today's America, where divisions exist between and within parties, and where the number of racial groups contesting for political and economic space is certainly more than two.

In Gandhi's old but relevant story, we find attempts to reconcile (1) Indians and the British, (2) Hindus and Muslims, (3) high castes, low castes and the so-called "untouchables," (4) individualistic colleagues of his -- members of the crucial team he was leading -- with one another, and (5) possibly the most poignant attempt of all, his eldest son Harilal with himself.

Gandhi had his work cut out. Indian militants, Hindu and Muslim, hated the idea of reconciliation between Indians and the British. Remembering the centuries of Muslim rule that preceded British rule, and conscious of dominant Hindu numbers, many Hindus wanted to rule over Muslims, not share power with them. On the other hand, some Muslims felt that the end of British rule should mean a return to Muslim rule.

High caste Hindus were shocked by the idea of equality with the untouchables. Radical untouchables wanted a separate world for their brothers and sisters, not a common world where the better-educated high-caste Hindus were likely to dominate. As for Gandhi's close and crucial team of Indian leaders, they were divided by human rivalry and also by ideology: some were socialist, internationalist and modernist, others conservative and parochial.

A simultaneous fight on at least three battlefronts was thus called for: one for India's freedom; another for Hindu-Muslim unity; a third for justice between castes.

Thanks to the toil and commitment of a great many Indians, and to Gandhi's own leadership skills, including on when and where to fight, India's several gulfs were in fact bridged, independence was won and reconciliation achieved, not fully, of course, and not for all time, but to a large and in fact astonishing degree.

Though to Gandhi's sadness Muslim-majority parts of India became a separate country, the rest of India that became free was neither a Hindu country, nor a country for high castes, but a large nation where equality was assured to all and punishment prescribed to those discriminating against anyone for their race, caste, religion or gender. All know that India's ground realities today do not conform to constitutional guarantees -- not by a long

shot --, but we should recognize those guarantees and the efforts of citizens and many leaders to secure them on the ground.

At the end of 1947, a few months after India and Pakistan emerged as independent nations, a tough question of justice arose. Holding in its treasury more than a hundred million dollars belonging to Pakistan, and required to send that money to the neighboring country, India announced, through Prime Minister Nehru and Deputy Prime Minister Patel, that the money would *not* be sent, because the Kashmir conflict had just started.

Gandhi, who was not a member of the government, was deeply troubled by this. At this time he was in Delhi, India's capital, trying to address great wounds left by the killings that had occurred four months or so previously, in August and September 1947 – killings in both Pakistan and India that took an equal number of Muslim and non-Muslim, i.e. Hindu and Sikh, lives. By December 1947, many mosques in Delhi had been taken over by Hindu and Sikh refugees who had suffered in Pakistan and an attempt was being made to push Delhi's Muslims out of the city.

Gandhi's response to the happenings in Delhi and to the decision of the Indian government to withhold the transfer of Pakistan's money was to commence, on January 13, 1948, an indefinite fast for reconciliation. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims in Delhi took pledges of peace and reconciliation and urged Gandhi to break his fast.

Nehru and Patel asked Gandhi, "What can the Government of India do to enable you to end the fast?" "Release Pakistan's money," replied Gandhi.

The money was released. Not enthusiastically, but it was released. Occupied mosques were vacated in Delhi. The plan to make Delhi a solely Hindu city was abandoned. On January 18, Gandhi broke the fast. And peace returned to Delhi. When, 12 days later, Gandhi was assassinated, he was mourned as much by the people of Pakistan as by the people of India.

Gandhi's effort for justice and reconciliation between India's castes may also be pertinent for this symposium. On this battlefield, Gandhi's great antagonist – and also his great partner -- was the leader of the "untouchables," Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar.

Twenty-two-years younger than Gandhi, Ambedkar, a gifted lawyer, fought passionately for “untouchable” rights after obtaining degrees at Columbia and the London School of Economics. He saw the British as allies, and the Hindu high castes as foes. In the 1940s, the British appointed Ambedkar to the Viceroy’s executive council. Charging that Gandhi, who had been born into a high caste family, did not confront the Hindu caste system hard enough or directly enough, Ambedkar declared that he would give up Hinduism some day in the future, and he asked for untouchable rights to be entrenched before British departure.

From the very start of his public life, Gandhi had attacked untouchability and caste superiority in passionate and unequivocal language, even though most of his close political colleagues urged him to focus solely on Indian independence and put untouchability on hold. Thanks to Gandhi’s unceasing campaign, the bulk of Hindus acknowledged untouchability as a great sin.

The dynamics were tough for Gandhi, for he needed the Hindu high castes for independence and also for Hindu-Muslim unity. But neither his conscience nor political realities would allow him to put the caste question on the back burner. In the event, he successfully persuaded the Indian National Congress, the organization working for independence, to commit itself to equality and full “untouchable” rights while also demanding independence.

Shortly before independence arrived, Gandhi asked his closest political colleagues, Nehru and Patel, to invite Ambedkar to join free India’s first cabinet. This sharp foe of the Indian National Congress, until lately a member of the Council of the British Viceroy that had sent Gandhi, Nehru, Patel and tens of thousands of others into prisons, was invited by Nehru and Patel to become free India’s first Minister of Law, and Ambedkar agreed. The “untouchable” Ambedkar chaired the drafting committee of the Indian Constitution and became the leading architect of that constitution.

With lyrical justice, history was made and an astonishing reconciliation between the castes was achieved.

In January 1948, Gandhi was killed. Ambedkar died eight years later, but not before becoming a Buddhist, fulfilling his earlier pledge to give up Hinduism. Ambedkar’s followers, some of them Buddhist, many still Hindu, are an influential force in India’s

politics today. At times they revisit the past and find fault with Gandhi's positions on caste.

Yet it is an unalterable fact of history that in 1949, reconciled with one another, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Zoroastrians and Buddhists, untouchables and Brahmins, high castes, low castes and middle castes, gave to India, in the name of all its people, a constitution that assures unqualified equality for all.

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Only 18 years younger than his father and for years a hero to his younger brothers, my uncle Harilal was one of Gandhi's first fellow-fighters in his *satyagrahas* in South Africa, battles for the rights of Indians living there. If participants clung firmly yet nonviolently to justice, that was a *satyagraha*.

But at the age of 23, Harilal walked out of the family home in Johannesburg. We may never know just what it was that pushed him. Was it the rigor of prison-life in South Africa? Or the father's stern policy that his sons should not be favored over any others? Was it the father's embrace of a simple life after some years of prosperity as a lawyer? Or was it simply Harilal's longing to be free, to be just himself?

Gandhi found it hard to be the ideal father and considerate husband while also waging his numerous battles and managing his growing team. During those critical South Africa years and later, Gandhi indeed gave much time to his son, meeting face to face or writing to him, though he perhaps advised Harilal more than he need have. The son was independent and could do what he wished, the father would say, yet what the father wanted him to do was also often spelled out.

Harilal enjoyed the publicity he predictably received whenever he criticized his famous father. He was drunk and created a scene when in 1944 he was permitted to see his father and his dying mother, then prisoners of the British empire in Poona. To nephews like me, Harilal was a charming and gift-giving uncle who arrived without notice and left with equal abruptness.

The father of the nation frequently found himself being rejected by his eldest son. The victor over Churchill was helpless before Harilal. Praise showered by the whole world

could not wash away the wound in Gandhi's breast about his son, who died less than six months after his father's assassination. Harilal went to a newspaper office in Bombay with a statement of tribute, but the journalist he met seemed to doubt that it was Gandhi's eldest son.

I speak here of the pain between the father and the son – my grandfather and my uncle -- in order to remind all of us that reconciliation in America or elsewhere in the world will have to include reconciliation in the family.

I am certain that not a soul here is unaffected by the pain of separated and suffering families, or of incarcerated near and dear ones.

For reconciliation to happen in the family or the nation, responsibility may need to replace blame; a readiness to understand may need to become more important than the longing to be understood. We may fail, even as Gandhi failed with his son; but perhaps we should try, even as Gandhi tried.

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As a national of another country who has spent several years in America, I have been struck by the American Dream, which says, 'Set a goal, no matter how high; work hard; be gritty; you will get there.'

In other parts of the world, a dream is a fancy. The power of the American Dream is that often it is reality. A janitor's son does on occasion become a college president, and so forth. Out of about two hundred countries in the world, only one has an image of this kind, which is one reason why at American consulates the lines of visa-seekers are long.

With an in-migration that has gone on for four centuries, and with people moving within America, some industries fading out and new ones growing, with the traffic of ideas, images and genes within America and with the rest of the world, America constantly renews itself.

Let me confess that when I visited America for the first time in 1957 and saw some of its cities, I did not imagine that a Black man would one day occupy the White House. Some at that time may have expected such a happening, but I didn't. However, to my great luck

I did meet Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. in the summer of 1957, in Washington DC. I was 21, he was 29.

Visiting the US again in 1960, I observed the suspense in that year's presidential election. On a cold and windy January morning in Washington DC, I witnessed President John F. Kennedy's inaugural.

For the first time, a Roman Catholic had become an American President. Forty-eight years later, an African-American made it.

Between these two events, President Ronald Reagan tried in 1981, in his first inaugural, to answer the question as to why Americans had "prospered as no other people on earth." His answer was, "Here... we unleashed the energy and individual genius of man to a greater extent than has ever been done before."

President Reagan added that America requires "our willingness to believe in ourselves and to believe in our capacity to perform great deeds.... And after all (*he added*), why shouldn't we believe that? We are Americans."

"Why shouldn't we believe that? We are Americans." Supreme self-confidence is thus an element in the American Dream. So is unleashing the energy and creativity of the individual endowed by her or his Creator with certain unalienable Rights, including Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Other key texts of the American story underscore the *society* or the *nation* of which the individual is a part. Thus the Preamble to the Constitution mentions six goals that shaped its design, each goal applying to a people living together rather than just to an individual: a more perfect Union, justice, domestic peace, security, general welfare, and the blessings of liberty.

Again, in his "I Have a Dream" speech of 1963, Dr. King highlighted not the innate greatness of Americans as individuals but rather the failure of the nation as a whole to honor the promissory note of equality signed in the Declaration of Independence.

He also asked for high standards from those who would fight for equality, saying (as all must know here): "In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup

of bitterness and hatred.... Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.”

The pursuit of happiness -- the defeat of poverty, of illness, of discomfort – is central to the American Dream. Yet, as we know, Dr King also spoke in “I Have a Dream” of the redemptive power of *undeserved suffering*. Thereby he deepened the concept of the American Dream.

Like America itself, the American Dream continues to evolve. Visiting the new King Memorial in Washington DC a few days back, I saw a quotation from Dr King opposing the Vietnam War. The next day, President Obama announced new steps to support and honor veterans of that war. Dissent is possible in America. So is reconciliation.

Let me recall some lines from President Obama’s inaugural, where he spoke of his wonder that “a man whose father less than 60 years ago might not have been served in a local restaurant can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath.” Added President Obama:

Our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and non-believers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth; and because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war and segregation, and emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united, we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace.

These powerful words apply to reconciliation in America and in the world, and I can easily end with them, but before I finish I should also share my difficulties with some expressions of the American Dream.

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One difficulty was implied in what I said about China and the world of Islam. Both China and the Muslim world certainly need major changes, but unease is caused when a dream appears to require enemies. The thought, “After all we are Americans,” should not need the reinforcement of “And *they* are Chinese,” or “*They* are Muslims.”

I am troubled too by the tendency of a great American virtue, Focus, to push aside another indispensable asset, Memory. Concentrated on eliminating a current threat, Americans seem willing at times to forget earlier history. Yet if the past is not squarely faced, an eliminated threat may return in the future.

A focus on Iran is certainly called for at present, but the question as to why America supported an anti-democratic coup there in the 1950s may also need attention. Lessons may have to be drawn also from the history of the 1980s, when support was given to Saddam Hussain during the Iran-Iraq War, to the Mujahideens in Afghanistan, some of whom were the parents of Al Qaeda, and to Pakistan's military ruler at the time, Zia ul Huq.

That the US was and is always right – right when installing a ruler and right again when removing him – is not a position guaranteed to produce good policies for the future.

Also concerning to me, if also entertaining at the same time, was a proposal made by another presidential candidate on April 13 in St. Louis, for an international gun-rights movement.

“The right to bear arms comes from our creator, not our government,” the candidate said. The NRA, he said, had “been too timid” in promoting its agenda beyond American borders. His presidency, he went on, “will submit to the UN a treaty that extends the right to bear arms as a human right to every person on the planet.” Every world citizen, he said, “deserves the right to defend themselves...” The candidate earned, we are told, a standing ovation from the crowd of roughly 5,000 NRA members or supporters.

A few billion new rifles would no doubt bring a modest profit to gun-manufacturers; but they might also shrink the world's population.

I know that the proposal that the candidate was suddenly inspired to offer was not taken seriously by most Americans, perhaps not even by the candidate himself.

I refer to it to bring up a final point: the power of symbols, which -- as the statues at the Reconciliation Park here show – this city and the creators of this Center have recognized. Among the symbols that many Americans seem to cherish are the gun, the flag, and the cross.

Though I am not an American national, your flag stirs me. In the famed Iwo Jima photograph, the flag held up by exhausted yet victorious soldiers conveys deep emotions, including pride in one's country, love of one's fellows, trust in one's fellows, the reward of endurance and bravery, and the satisfaction of triumph.

And though like my grandfather I prize nonviolence and am wary of military weapons, I acknowledge that the gun has often saved the innocent, the trapped and the enslaved.

And though I am a Hindu, the cross speaks truth to me: of unmerited, necessary and victorious suffering; of the triumph of the meek; of the superiority of what God wants or the world needs over what I want; and more.

I am troubled, however, when I detect an assumption in some Americans that the cross, the flag, and the gun are but three different forms of the same sacred object. An America wanting its citizens reconciled with one another and with the people of the world will need to remember the difference between the gun and the flag, and between the flag and the cross.

The gun has its place, but not as high as that of a fearless heart, a forgiving heart, or a caring heart.

Amazing as America is, it is not the world, and wonderful as Americans are, they do not constitute all of humanity, which, in the eyes of many, the cross represents and addresses.

The cross is no doubt a religious symbol. But then America also possesses non-religious emblems that attract the world, including the Statue of Liberty, the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address, and the "I Have a Dream" speech. Above all, America contains and offers humanity itself: humanity made one, humanity constantly renewed.

Allow me to end by offering my respect, here in Tulsa, Oklahoma, to the extraordinary people of an extraordinary country.

End