

Robert McAfee Brown  
Keynote Address  
at the  
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President Wolfe and Doctor Weisel, members of the faculty and ladies and gentlemen. It is an underserved honor for me to share in a program that is giving deserved honor to one who so clearly exemplifies humane letters. Not all letters are humane. Elie Weisel once wrote, "Words can sometimes, in moments of grace, obtain the quality of deeds." And his words, borne out of a crucible of the inhumane, unflinchingly witness the way in which words can call attention to the reality of evil in such a way that they become deeds that attest to the possibility of good.

The topic proposed for me this morning, morality and justice, is hardly to be exhausted in eleven minutes, a time that still goes a bit beyond what was proposed to me. I take consolation, however, from the fact that I know that you did not come to listen to me, but to honor Elie Weisel, and that if you want to know how morality and justice fit together, it is quite enough to see what he has done, rather than to hear what I have to say.

One who has been a victim of the greatest act of injustice recorded in human history either surrenders to despair or, like Elie Weisel, responds to injustice done to him, and people like him, by dedicating himself to justice for all others, whether like him or not. The particularity of his response to injustice can be universalized by recalling Aristotle's classic definition of justice, "Rendering to every person his or her due." And in both instances the ruling category is inclusiveness. Every person.

Elie Weisel has given us a marvelous example of how this works. As you know, he is Chairperson of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, charged with proposing an appropriate memorial in Washington to Holocaust victims. For him and for most of us, the word Holocaust initially invokes memories of the six million. The six million Jews who were the unambiguous target of Hitler's genocidal policies. And yet, Elie Weisel's first public act in 1979 as Chairperson of that commission was not to document some contemporary outrage against the Jews, though there is, sadly, always a new outrage against the Jews to document; it was rather to make an eloquent plea to the world to respond to the plight of the Vietnamese boat people. At that time they were being denied entrance to every port of call in the South Pacific because nobody wanted the burden of more refugees. And his sensitivity to their plight was sparked by recollections of an incident in 1938, when Jewish boat people left Hamburg to escape from Hitler and were similarly denied entrance at every port of call in the North Atlantic, the United States included. Nobody wanted the burden of more refugees, particularly, I'm afraid in this case, Jewish refugees. And so the Jewish boat people had to return to Hamburg, where their welcome consisted of being transported to the concentration camps. Hostages to human inhumanity.

Those juxtaposed episodes can serve to remind us that injustice to one particular group of people sets the stage for injustice to other groups of people, and finally to all. Surely it is the essence of justice that both these universal and particular dimensions must always be present in our thinking and acting. On the one hand, we do not have the luxury of thinking of justice only in terms of grand generalities - justice in general. It is always the particularity

of this group of Jews or that group of Vietnamese with whom we have to be concerned. Nor, on the other hand, do we have the luxury of thinking only in terms of particularities. Justice only for Jews. Or for white, North American anglo-saxon protestants, let us say. For if we are thus limited in our vision, we will fail to see an inexorable law at work. If we are not concerned about justice for Jews in 1933, we are paving the way for injustice against the Vietnamese in 1973 and injustice against Blacks or Hispanics or women or Filipinos in 1983.

Every movement toward justice for any one of these groups can serve to hone our consciences as we realize that other portions of the human family are still not receiving what is their due.

Elie Weisel's firsthand experience of injustice to Jews has led him to actions of concern about the injustice to others - in the Sahel, Bangladesh, South Africa, and Cambodia, to cite only a few areas of the world in which his sensitivity has led him to write and act. If we take seriously this sense of inclusiveness of concern for justice, it says something important about the other word in our topic and the relation of justice to morality. And I want to suggest that for those of us living in the United States today, at a time when we are the most powerful nation on earth, and thereby tempted to vanity, that our most important moral exercise is to demand of ourselves the same devotion to justice that quite rightly, we demand of others. Let me be quite specific.

As a nation, we continue to be appalled by the act of injustice committed in the name of the Soviet Union by the needless destruction of 269 human lives on Korean Air Lines flight 007. If ever 269 people were denied justice, that which was their due - in this case simply that what was their due was the right to go on living - if any people were denied justice, it was the people on that aircraft.



No one could argue with that. But to the degree that we simply allow ourselves to bathe in highly charged moral injustice against others, over the needless death of 269 individuals, we will be failing to demand of ourselves the same standard of conduct that in this case we so rightly demand of others.

The State of Israel gave a remarkable example of the kind of moral sensitivity I am calling for in the report of the commission investigating the massacre of civilians in Lebanon about a year ago. Israelis did not do the shooting in that massacre. Others did. But the shooting occurred in an area that was under Israeli control at the time. And the investigation carried out by an Israeli commission, found the Israeli authorities in the area negligent for not having foreseen that non-Israelies might act in the destructive way they actually did.

There, I suggest, is justice finely tuned, seeking not to shove all moral responsibility off on another - "They pulled the trigger." The Israelis assumed responsibility for acts done directly by others that, by any account, were unjust in the highest degree.

Now, let's take that precedent and bring it closer to home - to our own government. And let us use simply as an example the great unrest in the Phillipines at the moment. And whether you agree with my particular example or not, I think the principle still holds.

By any conceivable moral standard, the government of President Marcos is an infamous government. Employing terror as a means of staying in power. Imprisoning and torturing people without cause. Exploiting its citizens. Creating an ongoing atmosphere of repression and fear. But by any conceivable tool of analysis, it is also clear that our country, our administration, supports that government, not only financially and militarily, but morally as well. We must bear some

responsibility for the acts of that government. Not many months ago our Vice President went to the Phillipines and described Marcos as the head of a democracy Americans admire. Not too many weeks ago our Secretary of State also went to the Phillipines and repeated the public accolades about Marcos as a champion of human rights.

If we are going to talk about morality and justice, do we not have to question ourselves about a national posture that is outraged at the death of 269 people on an airplane, but seems unconcerned about the many times 269 people who have been murdered in the Phillipines by a regime that we support, and praise, and keep in power? A regime that can continue to kill because of the legitimacy we grant it? Could we not, in the wake of the tragedy of flight 007, begin to call in the name of justice and morality for a quickening of our national conscience? Could we not begin to communicate to our leaders that we do not want to be the sponsors of governments, any governments, that engage in wanton slaughter? Whether in the Phillipines, or elsewhere. For the Phillipines are only one example, and, sadly, there are other examples. The same kind of thing is at stake when a Salvadorean government can in the course of one year murder 14,000 of its citizens. That's about 269 people every week for a whole year. That the government there can do that and still be attested by our government as making significant progress in human rights, that we give that government military aid with which to continue the killings, we legitimate those killings with our stamp of approval.

No. I suggest that like the Israeli commission that investigated the Lebanon slaughter, we are called upon to recognize instead that if we are going

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to talk about justice, and embody justice, we must apply at least as scrupulous standards of moral accountability to ourselves as we do to others. When we legitimate the killers, we can be held accountable for the killings.

So, I propose that we are called upon to speak of this to one another, to our national leaders, to write about it, to reflect upon it. And if so, perhaps for us as well it can be true that our words can this time, in a moment of grace, attain the quality of deeds. And liberty and justice for all can be enhanced.