

Speech at Metropolitan Richmond Day, Nov. 9, 2012.

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Though I have inflicted God knows how many talks on all manner of audiences, I feel diffident today. Yes, I am a professor on a major US campus, and have lived in this country more or less continuously for the last 12 years. My first visit to the US was in 1957, and I have made several visits, all of them too short, to Richmond. But I am a citizen of India – I did not vote on Tuesday. As far as the Emancipation Proclamation is concerned, a bright middle school student in Richmond will know more about it than I do.

In India I grew up on stories of India under British imperialism, of India during earlier kingdoms and of India's fabled if not always wonderful past. At times I grew up in the company of my fabled, always wonderful, and often teasing and chuckling grandfather. His company was rare, however, since for much of the time he was either in a prison where India's British rulers had confined him, or in some far-off corner of India, rather than in New Delhi, where I was being raised.

As I grew up, World War II began, expanded and ended. Simultaneously, my own country strode towards freedom, which arrived in 1947 but was joined, alas, not only by a division of India into two, but also, tragically, by bloodshed on a large scale. In 1947, when I was 11 going on 12, about half a million people perished in clashes involving Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs.

My father Devadas, the Mahatma's fourth and youngest son, was a journalist in New Delhi. On occasion Americans visited our home. One was Richard Gregg, who wrote the book *The Power of Nonviolence* in 1934. Another visitor – in fact our house guest for a few days – was Bayard Rustin, the Civil Rights leader. As a boy I was thus aware of America's Race Question, of the fact that slavery had existed here. I read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and was stirred by it.

I was aware too that my grandfather was interested in equality in the US. Later I would learn that Gandhi and American Civil Rights leaders were curious about one another at least from 1917, and that over a period of three decades mutually enriching interactions had occurred between Gandhi and American Civil Rights

figures including Howard Thurman, Benjamin Mays, Channing Tobias and Stuart Nelson.

But as I went through high school in New Delhi and entered college, it was the fast-changing scene in India that dominated my mind and heart. Most of the 1947 killings of which I have spoken occurred in the region right next to New Delhi, the region known as Punjab, which in 1947 was split into two, one half going to the newly-created country of Pakistan, the other half remaining in truncated India.

Why Punjab had to be divided and why bloodshed accompanied it has been the subject of my research for the last two and a half years. Hopefully I am near the end of this attempt to trace the historical roots of Punjab's 1947 tragedy.

You can see that I would have been more confident today speaking about Punjab.

However, I did learn something about the 1862 Emancipation Proclamation when not long ago I studied the Civil War here as well as a major Revolt against British rule that occurred in India at about the same time as the Civil War.

I saw that the Emancipation Proclamation was historic but also limited in its application. I found that it restricted the freedom it bestowed to Blacks in rebel states – it did not apply to slaves in the Border states or even to slaves in rebel areas captured by Union forces. And yet it was historic.

We may say that the Proclamation did not go far enough, but Lincoln knew that it would make history. We have all heard that when the moment for signing arrived and he found his hand and fingers trembling from fatigue, Lincoln was anxious to ensure that his signature on the Proclamation should appear firm, not hesitant.

Once the Proclamation was issued, Blacks everywhere, including in the Border states, including in the liberated areas, and elsewhere in the US, knew that a great moral wrong was being righted, that it was being righted in and from the highest place in the country, that their chains were being cut and their feet were being freed. Oh yes, even if invisible, the chains were still being felt, the chains were still there, even in the free states -- until the Emancipation Proclamation.

No wonder so many Black mothers, fathers and grandparents cried. No wonder a six-year-old boy called Booker T. Washington – all of you know the story -- saw

that his mother, who was standing by his side, leaned over and kissed her children, while tears of joy ran down her cheeks. No wonder she was crying. As she explained to her children, this was the day for which she had been so long praying while fearing that she would never live to see it.

A day you pray for *all* your life, and you think you might die before that day arrives, and then it comes while you are alive. Can there be a greater gift? And that gift was given to millions. No wonder people cried.

Abraham Lincoln was the deliverer rather than the creator of the gift – he was history’s mail man. History prepared it. Some will say God supplied the ingredients.

There was more to Emancipation than the Proclamation. As all of you know, thousands of African Americans liberated themselves and joined the Union forces. Black troops entered Richmond and helped put out the fires in this city.

It is natural that men like Lincoln and Booker T. Washington should be carefully scrutinized for imperfections. Yet we should be careful that we don’t blame people for weaknesses that belong to their times rather than to the persons themselves. We should be careful that we don’t blame yesterday’s great women and men for not being aware of today’s discoveries.

The less known of my two grandfathers, a man from the South – the South of *India*, I should clarify --, offered an interesting analogy while expressing the need for caution while judging yesterday’s great personalities. Said this maternal grandfather of mine: “A boy who gets a bicycle for the first time, and is able to pedal away, should not look with disdain at his feet.”

As for the Emancipation Proclamation, we can only salute it as a stirring signal in its day and one of our world’s great documents.

The history of emancipation is of course older than Lincoln or the Civil War or the founding of America. In the Bible, God sends Moses to emancipate or liberate the Jews held captive by Pharaoh. What were the Jews of Egypt emancipated *for*? What was the *purpose* of an America emancipated from British rule in the 1780s, and from slavery in the 19th century? What was the *purpose* for which the people of India and Pakistan found their freedom in 1947? When much of the world was

emancipated from fascism and communism in the 20th century, a liberation for which earlier generations of Americans of all backgrounds gave so much, what were all of us emancipated or saved *for*?

Today we should use the Emancipation Proclamation anniversary as a prod for our minds. What does emancipation mean in our time? How do we as a community become truly free? These are some of the questions we have gathered to reflect upon.

Before sharing a thought or two on this subject, I would like to bring in another oft-expressed phrase, the American Dream. This is a global phrase, spoken and understood in Latin America, Africa, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Asia and the Pacific. The phrase is never rendered into a local language. In Chinese, Hindi, Arabic, Hebrew, Turkish, Swahili, Spanish or Russian, the American Dream remains simply the American Dream.

While the world in all its languages speaks of the American Dream, it does not speak, even in local languages, of the Chinese Dream, the Mexican Dream, the Brazilian Dream, or the Nigerian Dream. Yes, we can speak of the dreams or hopes of *a* Pakistani, *a* German, a French person, *an* Egyptian, but as far as I know there is no counterpart on any continent of the American Dream.

And what do we understand by the American Dream? Many using the phrase have in mind the belief that in America a poor person's son or daughter can through hard work become rich. He or she does not need to belong to a favored clan or bloodline, a favored tribe, or an elite club; is not required to believe in a particular religious or political doctrine, or to produce a diploma from a favored school or college. If she works hard and for long hours, she will rise. A truck driver's son will become a College President. My children will be better off than me.

These are some meanings of the American Dream. Also, there is always more than one door in America. If one closes, another door will open.

In the 19th century, a German immigrant in America was relieved to find that no policeman was trailing him. An Irishman discovered that in America he didn't need to bow before an Englishman. The European Jew saw that in America he did

not need a ghetto's security, that he could walk to a synagogue without being stared at in disapproval. *Freedom* was part of the American Dream.

And there was a shortage of ceilings. In Europe, your family background either enabled you to cross a ceiling, or it forced you to clip your aspirations. "No trespassing." "Thus far and no farther." Such signs blocked your social space and at times your geographical space. Not in America, where one occupation was as honorable as the other, you could travel and settle as you pleased, and the rich and the poor stood on the same footing.

As for Hispanics, some were living in the western territories before the US acquired the territories. Later, other Hispanics came seeking refuge from political persecution or from economic hardship.

The Asians who flocked in large numbers to the US in the last part of the 20th century and in the first decade of the 21st – Indians, Pakistanis, Chinese, Koreans, Vietnamese, Filipinos and other Asians -- discovered that in addition to liberty and scope America offered *physical space and privacy*. Back in Asia, you were surrounded by swarms of cousins, uncles, aunts, most of them knowing what you should do or say, what you should eat or not eat, and who you can or cannot marry. In America, on the other hand, you were far from well-meaning, interfering relatives, but never far from open spaces where you could walk and reflect and figure out your next steps.

Though always very individual and personal, the American Dream had a larger and more social meaning. It included the image of a society free of barriers and free of repressions. For quite a few who came to America, or thought of coming here, their American Dream was surely influenced by their awareness of the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence:

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.

A Virginian wrote these words. Nine years ago, when, too, Hope in the Cities invited me to give a talk in Richmond at the Tredegar Gun Foundry, I quoted other lines from the same Virginian, Thomas Jefferson:

Believing that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, ... I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their Legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between Church and State.

‘All men are created equal.’ ‘A wall of separation between church and state.’ Very few in history can claim to be the authors of two short phrases that are repeated time and again by human beings and scholars across the world, repeated in national and international declarations. If your Thomas Jefferson is inclined to murmur, ‘I think I did OK with those two sentences,’ the listener would have to say, ‘You sure did, Mr. President.’

Nine years ago I underlined in Richmond the wall-of-separation phrase. Today I am inclined to stay with the other historic and history-making set of words, while reminding ourselves that today those words should be read as, ‘All women and men are created equal.’

I am sure you are aware that Martin Luther King Jr. linked Jefferson’s 18th-century words to the American Dream. In his "*Letter from a Birmingham Jail*" (1963), King spoke of the Black quest for civil rights in these terms.

[W]hen these disinherited children of God sat *down* at lunch counters they were in reality standing *up* for *what is best in the American dream*, and for the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage.

Standing up for dignity and equality is at the core of the American Dream, King was saying. And the lunch counters he was speaking of have a direct meaning today when poverty is a sharp reality for a large number of Americans.

In his ‘I have a Dream’ speech, King, as all know, borrowed from Isaiah when he said, ‘I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight.’

He was talking about a level playing field, which brings me to what has struck me again and again, the similarity in the articulations of King and Gandhi.

Eighteen months before his death, when India's independence was round the corner, Gandhi was asked about his dream for India. The picture that Gandhi provided in response was not geographical, or religious, or racial. It was -- geometric.

Writing of a nation of 'innumerable villages' where 'the last [person] is equal to the first or, in other words, no one is to be the first and none the last,' Gandhi added:

In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever-widening, never-ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integral units.

Therefore the outermost circumference will not wield power to crush the inner circle but will give strength to all within and derive its own strength from it.

Gandhi's geometric design emphasizes equality, plus the strength that can emerge when women and men

feel they are the equal of anyone else,
treat everyone else as their equal, and
thirdly, *support* one another of their own free will.

No highs. No lows. A society where we support one another. That's the dream of King and Gandhi. I think it's the American Dream.

But has the US achieved it? In terms of economic equality as measured by the GINI index, the US seems to stand at number 27 in the world. The most recent HDI or Human Development Index rankings, which factor in per capita income, education, and health, show the US at number 4 in the world, behind Norway, Australia and Holland. When equality or inequality is added to the mix, the US falls to number 12 in the world.

Studies suggest that America's historically celebrated upward mobility has faced hurdles in recent years. The prospect of children doing better economically than their parents may now be stronger, it seems, in several European countries and in Canada than in the US.

However, I can think of three reasons why America can reverse these troubling trends. One is the fact that when the US sets for itself a hard goal, like placing a man on the moon, it usually achieves it. Another reason is that America is not an individual sport. It is not one person's elevator ride. America is a team enterprise. America is a project of, by, and for the people.

Thirdly, there is the arc of history, including the history of technology. Cell phones, i-phones and tablets have brought to millions possibilities that yesterday even millionaires could only dream about. The question is, can America show in its society what it has shown in its technology?

We seem able today to access anything and everything in terms of information, amusement, music. But will we access the thoughts, hopes and anxieties of the neglected and the hidden, of those we would rather not see?

An American victory over poverty, illness and pain is needed for the sake of the American people and also for the sake of the rest of humanity. In particular, I would argue that fairness within America is needed to show an example to newly advancing nations such as China, Brazil and India.

During the last two decades, China and India have demonstrated impressive rates of growth. Yet appalling poverty continues there even as more and more billionaires are counted in those countries, and even as corruption allegations involving astronomical sum of money surround prominent politicians and businessmen.

The contrast between the life-styles of the elites of India and China and the lives of tens of millions of impoverished Indians and Chinese is unbearable to anyone who remembers Gandhi, his life, and his teaching.

Writing in 1928 -- 84 years ago, that is --, Gandhi warned of the consequences of unrestrained expansion and consumption. "God forbid," he wrote, "that India should ever take... after the manner of the west." He added: "The economic

imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom – *he was speaking of England* -- is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million – *today India has 1.2 billion* -- took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.”

‘Strip the world bare.’ Gandhi was picturing a planet wounded by unchecked growth and unchecked greed.

Today China and India are spoken of as countries that will lead the world in coming decades. Some talk of an Asian Century. Yet with their current inequalities and corruption China and India cannot model tomorrow’s world. India and China themselves need a model, which is why I find the search of many in Richmond for a more equitable society so meaningful.

I have a belief in Richmond’s potential. This belief is based on changes I have seen in this city, which I first visited in the late 1950s. Richmond’s visible willingness to acknowledge a difficult past, learn from it, and move forward in interracial partnership is not only a great American story, it is a great global and human story.

Like most other parts of this amazing country, Richmond has been hit in recent years by a severe global economic crisis. Your city faces tough challenges about which a professor from India who teaches in Illinois can tell you very little. But this I can say: I ardently wish you success in confronting your challenges. I wish this for the sake of all the people of your precious city; and I wish it for the sake of people far away, including in India and China, whose need for a model is great indeed.

The phrase about a shining city set upon a hill has been greatly used, perhaps over used. Let us however remember that the phrase refers to a city and implies a people, a whole population of inhabitants, not a fortunate few. As I said before, America is a team project, and so, specially, is Richmond. May success be met in your audacious effort, in this great city, for a fairer society.

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