***“Leadership to bridge divides”***

**Notes for Jefferson Debating Society [as prepared for delivery]**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Hello my dear, beloved UVA students.  Thank you for inviting me to join you for this talk this evening.

For those of you who do not know me:

1. Dean of the Batten School, since 2019
2. Resident of Pavilion X since August 2020
3. Father to Dante (and Miles, 21, and Sumner, 18)
4. Husband to Marcia, whom I met on a Park Bench in NYC’s Central Park
5. Brother to 5 (or 12)
6. Born in NYC
7. Have had an interesting mix of professional experiences in both business, government, education, and international affairs, some of which I’ll talk about tonight.

Last week I had the honor to visit with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India where he has lived as a refugee from Tibet since 1959.  Dharamsala is in the foothills of the Himalayan mountains, at about seven thousand feet elevation.  To get there, you take a flight from New Delhi to the town of Kangra and then drive up impossibly steep and twisty and narrow roads alongside people and dogs and cows and motorcycles and other vehicles.

At several places the road was far too narrow for the number of vehicles, and we had to reverse to a place where cars could get by, which meant the line of cars behind us also had to reverse. At one point, we literally scraped the car next to us as we made our way near the main temple and the Dalai Lama’s residence.

I have learned to be pretty chill when being driven around abroad – it’s an act of surrender to things beyond one’s control -- because otherwise I’d probably have a heart attack.  On this drive, I found that I only got really stressed the five or six times we came within a centimeter of crashing into a child.

We spent five days in Dharamsala, and It was a wonderful visit along with two of my Batten colleagues as well as people from the Contemplative Science Center, UVA medical school, CU Boulder, Stanford, and the Mind and Life Institute here in Charlottesville.  There were also 14 amazing young leaders – called Global Dalai Lama Fellows -- involved in compassion-inspired projects around the world.

We had three days of conversations with the Dalai Lama and the opportunity to ask him questions. He had one main message that he repeated many times.  His message is that we are all the same.  All of us share the experience of receiving the maximum of affection from our own mothers, we all want to be happy, we all want to avoid suffering.  This common experience ought to be the basis for our affection and compassion toward each other. Religion and race, and politics are all secondary to the fundamental experience we all share of being born from our mother’s wombs.  We are all fundamentally the same.

It is a beautiful message, and one that resonates powerfully with me as true. Even though I happen to have the title of dean, or the Dalai Lama has the mysterious title Dalai Lama, and some of you may be different years at UVA, we are all the same.   The Dalai Lama punctuated this point by reminding us that he has to sleep, that he gets stomach problems and has to use the toilet. He even said that being a refugee had certain benefits for him because it forced him out of the Tibetan palaces where he had been isolated on a big throne, and it brought him to be with regular people.

*We are all the same.*  Does that resonate with you?

So, why do we spend so much time and energy and money and so much of our lives on hate and violence.

The Dalai Lama’s message can feel remote and perhaps even irrelevant in the heat of our political conflicts and in the face of all the war we are exposed to.

The Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights[[1]](file:///Applications/Microsoft%20Outlook.app/Contents/Frameworks/EmailRendererKit.framework/Resources/reactRenderer_mac.html" \l "m_5770898820923590859__ftn1" \o "#m_5770898820923590859__ftn1)monitors more than 100 armed conflicts underway across the globe right now.  You are aware of the bloodshed in Russia and Ukraine.  The Geneva Academy tracks 7 conflicts in Europe.  You are aware of the horrors in Israel and Gaza.  The Geneva Academy tracks 45 armed conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa.  They also track 36 armed conflicts in Sub Saharran Africa (including [Burkina Faso](https://www.rulac.org/browse/conflicts/non-international-armed-conflicts-in-burkina-faso), [Cameroon](https://www.rulac.org/browse/conflicts/non-international-armed-conflict-in-cameroon), the [Central African Republic (CAR)](https://www.rulac.org/browse/conflicts/non-international-armed-conflict-in-the-central-african-republic), the [Democratic Republic of the Congo](https://www.rulac.org/browse/conflicts/non-international-armed-conflict-in-democratic-republic-of-congo),  and [Sudan](https://www.rulac.org/browse/conflicts/non-international-armed-conflicts-in-sudan). ), 21 conflicts in Asia, and 6 in Latin America.

And some of these conflicts have been going on for decades, or longer.

As a result of these conflicts and also due to climate change, an estimated 117 million people worldwide have been forcibly displaced or are stateless.  We are all the same, but millions of us are displaced.

On top of this there were an estimated 458,000 victims of intentional homicide globally in 2021 – that’s 52 killings every hour, or one killing every 68 seconds [probably at least 5 murders somewhere since I’ve started.].

Not to depress you further, but look at our domestic political situation, and the intensity of conflict between groups in the United States.   There has been a steady process of transforming rivals into enemies, cultivating hate and fear, threatening violence.  Emphasizing the dehumanizing differences of others rather than our human sameness.

**TOPIC**

My topic today – leadership to bridge divides – comes out of my longstanding interest in helping groups of diverse individuals to reduce conflict and increase cooperation.

How do we help people with different values, preferences, identities, goals, habits, experiences, and even worldviews to accept enough of their common humanity to work together for the good of all?

To me this is the most important question facing America right now.  You could argue that it is one of the most important questions facing America since our founding.  I suggest it may be the existential test of human civilization in the age of climate change, artificial intelligence, and nuclear weapons.

I’m sorry but I don’t have a perfect answer.  All I have are a set of experiences, observations, and hypotheses that I hope you can help me test.

On the optimistic side, the possibility of successful collaboration holds extraordinary promise for human creativity, human flourishing, and peace. In many ways, human cooperation is at least as profound a feature of civilization as violence is.  Think of the large cities of the world where millions or even tens of millions of people manage to coexist.  Think of the cooperation required for global distribution networks and the world’s food supply.  Think of the achievements of science and collaborative knowledge creation which has enabled miraculous advances in medicine and human health. It is truly amazing.

And yet the examples of cooperation breakdown are dark, and many future scenarios are dystopian.

Optimistic? Pessimistic? I think the future is not pre-ordained nor inevitable. We are neither saved nor doomed.  Rather, we are responsible.  It is up to us.  Will we – all of us -- rise to the leadership challenge and tap the compassionate promise of the human spirit?

In this talk I will share a few of the leadership skills and practices that I think can help.

***South Africa***

After my junior year at Harvard, I traveled to South Africa.  It was the summer of 1993.

At the time, South Africa was a country of about 38 million people, living under a white supremacist regime that repeatedly turned its instruments of state violence against Black protesters. Perhaps you have seen photos from the African townships of school children gunned down by the police, their limp bodies carried away by their friends, or images of people’s homes bulldozed to force them to move.

Due to domestic and international resistance, by the late 1980s it had become untenable for the minority to maintain power, and the government started secret negotiations with Nelson Mandela, who was still in prison.  Mandela had been a successful lawyer turned freedom fighter who  was sentenced in to life imprisonment for sabotage in 1964.

In 1990 he was released from prison as an indispensable partner for a peaceful future.

When I arrived in South Africa a few years later, Mandela was leading a multiparty negotiation process. One can hardly imagine a more daunting path.  The people of South Africa would need a new constitution, an election, a process of remaking a country, redistributing resources, and healing from trauma.

Each week, dozens of people were killed in clashes between rival political groups. I was warned never to stop at a red light in certain neighborhoods—or risk facing a cold pistol against my neck.

Many members of the press predicted a race war.

Despite the dangers, it was the best learning experience of my life.  I spent time with real people, heard their stories, joined them in dancing and singing their songs, had my first taste of tear gas and running from police, and was able to bear witness to the difficult, rare, and hard-earned birth of an inclusive democracy.

The elections of 1994 were decisive. I volunteered helping people get to the polls to vote.  It was a time of hope and a glorious privilege to see the arc of the moral universe bend a little bit more toward justice.

Given the risks of war, how was this relatively peaceful transition achieved?

I believe it had a lot to do with the quality of leadership.

There are many wonderful stories of Mandela cultivating the respect of people who previously considered him a criminal and terrorist.

There’s a well-known story of Mandela winning over Colonel Viljoen, the former leader of the South African military who was threatening a violent coup after the election.  Mandela invited Viljoen over for tea at his home. Abandoning the formalities of a more typical political meeting, Mandela instead greeted Viljoen with a broad smile at his door, invited him into his parlor, offered him sugar and milk for his tea, and sat with him on the sofa.  The two of them spoke respectfully as men, not as enemies.  Mandela demonstrated his ability to see the good in this man and to speak to him as a human being.

When I think of this story, I’m reminded of the brilliant message from the poet Maya Angelou: “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”  Mandela honored Viljoen’s humanity, made him feel safe, made him feel understood.

Don’t assume it was easy for Viljoen to feel safe.  Young South African whites were raised with stories about the savagery and untrustworthiness of black Africans.  Those stories informed a worldview.  Mandela had been considered a vicious terrorist who might be vengeful after 27 years in prison.

Both men took a risk with that meeting, and it was successful.  Viljoen agreed not to spoil the election.

There’s another story of a man calling into a radio show to threaten Mandela that South Africa would be embroiled in a bloodbath. Mandela responded calmly.

“Let’s talk, Eddy,” he said to the man.  “I regard you as a worthy South African and I have no doubt that if we sit down and exchange views, I will come closer to you and you will come closer to me.” Eddy later described how he was shown more respect, integrity, and concern from Mandela than the white politicians begging for his vote. Asking questions and caring about other people’s interests can help us bridge the divide between us.

**I share these stories about Mandela to highlight the importance of the skill and practice of empathy.** Through empathy, Mandela came to understand his prison guards at Robben Island.  He asked them about their lives, their children, their ailing parents. He learned to appreciate the rugby matches that they watched.  He recognized some of the similarities between their culture and his own; simple things like caring for one’s children and respecting elders.

And everything that he learned became useful to him once he got out of prison and worked to reconcile the warring factions in South Africa.

Lesson one: Empathy is empowering.  And, like other skills, it is improved with practice.

***Barack Obama***

I carried with me these lessons of Nelson Mandela when I had the privilege of working with Barack Obama—for four years when he was a U.S. Senator and then through his first term as president.

[Have any of you interned on the Hill?]

When Obama was a Senator, those of us on staff would often brief him while we walked from the Hart Senate Office building down in the elevator to the Senate subways to the Capitol building.

I remember one day there was a man in the elevator who was talking to himself and not making a lot of sense.  Another staff member and I rolled our eyes and snickered a little.  Obama, on the other hand, engaged the man in conversation. Obama asked him questions, listened with interest to his answers, and showed he cared.

And when we stepped out of the elevator, Obama gently admonished us staffers, asking why we were so confident that our worldview was superior to the worldview of the man in the elevator.  Why did we feel we were any better than him?

On another occasion, Senator Obama and I were in his office discussing legislation that Obama had cosponsored with the very conservative Senator Tom Coburn of Oklahoma to promote greater transparency of government spending.  The two men disagreed about so many things politically, but Obama was always interested to learn precisely what Coburn’s goals and interests were with each phase of the legislative process. They were partners interested in understanding and, where possible, satisfying, the other person’s objectives in addition to their own.

**This approach to negotiation is very important, and it is the second key skill that I want to highlight this evening: The skill of integrative bargaining.**

Many people think of negotiation as a strategy to get what they want at the least possible cost.  With this mindset, the better person A does, the worse person B does.  There is a “fixed pie” of potential value to be divided between the parties.  My gain is your loss; your gain is my loss.

We sometimes call this “distributive bargaining” or “zero-sum negotiation” because value is distributed between the parties and any benefit to one party is offset by a loss to the other party.

But what if negotiators focus instead on creating value, on finding ways that an agreement can make both parties better off? That’s how Obama approached the negotiation with Senator Coburn.

In this case, the right wing liked the legislation because they wanted transparency on the money they believed was going to planned parenthood and liberal groups.  The left wing liked the legislation because they wanted transparency on the money going to Blackwater and private military contractors. Budget hawks and good government folks saw the potential to advance transparency on pork barrel spending.

The parties had many interests that were different, but the differences were complementary.  The parties also had interests that were the same, like passing the legislation.

Strategic leveraging of interests, differences, and similarities can create a lot of value.

A few Senators tried to block the Coburn-Obama bill from being considered.

Neither Obama nor Coburn could succeed without getting the left wing groups and the right wing groups to work together.

The negotiation strategy was win-win, creating value for both sides.  It required greater trust, and more transparent communication, but it was a bill about transparency after all.

Both parties would benefit from uniting their allies with economies of scale in advocacy and organizing.

By working together, across the political aisle and across the ideological divides, the grassroots organizations identified which Senators were blocking the bill and pressured them into allowing the legislation to get a vote.

Incidentally, hanging on the wall next to the couch where I would meet with Obama about this bill was a photograph… of Nelson Mandela.

**Problem Solving**

My interest in integrative negotiation inspired me to teach it at the University of Chicago and Yale and ultimately to create a conflict resolution consulting practice, called SolomonGlobal. That was my life before I came to UVA.

One of my projects was to facilitate an agreement between India and Pakistan related to the Indus Waters Treaty.  The Treaty, originally signed in 1960, was a brilliant example of bridging divides through **objective, non-ideological problem solving. And that is the third core skill I want to talk about.**

When the British left India in 1947, they partitioned the Indian subcontinent creating Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh.  The Partition of 1947 was a bloodbath.  An estimated 1-2 million people were slaughtered as Muslim communities rushed to Pakistan and Hindu communities rushed to India.  There were trains that would pull into stations with blood seeping out beneath the train doors and slain bodies stacked up in the train car.  Pure trauma from which neither country has yet healed.

Partition also meant that Pakistani farmers who previously relied on irrigation from rivers flowing from what was now India were suddenly at the mercy of India’s decisions about the flow of water.  Pakistan was terrified that India would divert the rivers to its own needs.

The World Bank stepped in to help and tried to separate the *functional* problem of water from the *political* problem of India-Pakistan relations.

The Indus Waters Treaty sought to turn the geopolitical conflict into a test of engineering.  The engineering concern was about the availability of water and the opportunity for hydroelectric power. The solution was to use dams and barrages and hydro infrastructure to meet the countries’ respective needs for water and power.

Though not perfect, the treaty has held for over 60 years, reducing conflict and war.

One of the things we say in negotiation training is “separate the people from the problem.”

The Indus Waters Treaty serves as an example of solving problems using objective criteria and evidence.  That is a strategy to help bridge divides.

But it is not easy.

***Resilient determination***

I recently finished a new biography of Martin Luther King.  I was reminded of the intense criticism he faced.

As leaders of diverse communities, we will, at times, hear things said to rattle us or hurt us or divide us or make us doubt ourselves—in fact, when we are at our most provocative, venturing into unchartered waters, this is to be expected.  It is smart to listen and recognize the expression of others’ needs hidden beneath the words, but it is smarter still to ensure that the words of others do not disempower us.  Don’t grant other people the power to make you upset or distract you from your goal..

As Martin Luther King started to criticize the Vietnam War and as he took on issues of economic justice in the United States, many argued that he was diverting attention from civil rights.  The youth were getting tired of nonviolent strategies that were not reducing police violence.  Even my biological father, a civil rights activist, believed King’s approach was irresponsible.

At the same time, the FBI was trying to tear down King with both real and manufactured stories of his marital infidelity. They bugged his phones and spied on him, and event sent a tape of recorded calls to his home, threatening him that they would release the tapes publicly to embarrass him if he did not resign from civil rights leadership.   They tried to intimidate and shame him into silence.

King suffered terribly from this and from other stresses, routinely checking himself into hospitals for exhaustion, though many people suspect it was actually depression.

But he kept his eyes on the prize.  He maintained his focus on his purpose, which was larger than his own personal comfort or safety.  He had the skills of what I might call resilient determination.

Being able to listen even when you hate what is being said.  To transcend the impulse to fight, to flee, or to shut down and simply to let the attack roll off of you. Having determination to persevere and the resilience to get back up when knocked low. That will enable your work to bridge divides.

**CONCLUSION**

Healing our democracy will take work. It will take empathy to understand conflicting perspectives, it will take the skills of integrative bargaining between opposing camps, it will take the power of creative and objective problem solving.  It will take resilience and determination.

These are all skills that can be practiced and improved. These are all skills we aspire to cultivate among students at the Batten School.

But is this enough?  Are these skills sufficient for exercising leadership to bridge divides?

Mandela, Obama, King, Gandhi – my heroes for their work bridging divides all possessed something else.  They all rooted their work in love, in goodwill, in respect for dignity of all humanity, and in a sense of deep responsibility for the public good.

That’s why I opened today by talking about my visit to the Dalai Lama.

Leadership to bridge divides requires an open and compassionate heart and a commitment to serve a more perfect union.

Which brings me to an incident 168 year ago, during the height of national debates over slavery and the future of the American Union.  South Carolina Senator Preston Brooks beat Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner on the floor of the Senate with a gold-tipped cane.  The cane shattered and Brooks just kept on beating.

What did the Jefferson Debating Society do in the face of this violence?  It purchased Senator Brooks a new cane.

That was a long time ago.  My prayer is that members of the Jefferson Debating Society today have more class, have more perspective, and have more love.

The Dalai Lama urged educators to develop compassion among our students as the most important thing.

My beloved UVA students and JeffersonDebating Society members, the world urgently and desperately needs your love.