

McGill Model UN
Opening Ceremony
Speech of Payam Akhavan
January 22nd, 2015

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to Montreal.

Welcome to McGill University. I am honoured to address you tonight at this important gathering.

It is not the first time that I take this podium. It was exactly ten years ago, in 2005, that I first delivered the keynote address at the McGill Model UN.

Much has changed in the world since then. But what remains the same is the vital importance of the United Nations. What remains the same is the imperative necessity of a global forum where world leaders can deliberate and find solutions for the serious challenges confronting humankind.

Looking at so many of you here in the audience from all over the world, I feel nostalgic. Looking at you, I recall my own student days, and my model UN misadventures. Thankfully, YouTube did not exist in those days.

Otherwise, my career would have been destroyed a long time ago! There are

rumours circulating that in my misguided youth, I loved to use inflammatory polemics in my speeches. It is not true. I did not once refer to a delegate as a “godless stooge of the imperialist conspiracy”. Don’t believe a word of it. And some may tell you that in order to win votes for a resolution, I passed a note to a delegate threatening to invade his country. I deny everything. It’s not on YouTube, therefore it never happened.

You are here to learn how the United Nations works. You are here to learn the art of diplomacy. Winston Churchill famously said that “[d]iplomacy is the art of telling people to go to hell in such a way that they ask for directions.” The American celebrity Will Rogers put it differently in the 1930s: “Diplomacy” he said “is the art of saying ‘Nice doggie’ until you can find a rock.” However we choose to define diplomacy, we can all agree that debate and dialogue are preferable to war and violence.

Here at the Model UN, we gather to learn the art of world peace. We come to this great hall tonight, inspired by great dreams. We come in a spirit of goodwill, with a transcendent vision of a better tomorrow. Why is it then, that once you sit behind that placard bearing the name of your country, you are suddenly transformed from Mahatma Gandhi to Dr. Evil? I do admit of

course that diabolical plans for world domination do have their advantages. Why work long hours on position papers and frustrating debates when just one doomsday device allows you to rule the world?

At the Model UN, pariah states have the most fun. Who wants to be a boring, predictable superpower with rational policies, when you could be a trigger-happy Stalinist dictator with nuclear missiles? Why else does everybody want to be North Korea? It cannot be denied that President-for-Life Kim Jong Un is a not-so-nice dictator. But how can you take seriously a tyrant that is a cross between Justin Bieber and the Teletubbies?

The problem with the UN is that it can be a bit nerdy. I mean all that protocol, and speeches, and debates, and procedures, and resolutions; it can become really tedious. It is for this reason that tonight I have decided to launch my campaign to become the next UN Secretary-General! So I share with you for the first time my ingenious ideas for making the UN a much much cooler organization. First, I will change the job title by dropping the word “Secretary” while keeping the word “General”. I mean which world leader wants to be called “Secretary”? I shall simply be addressed as “General” Akhavan; much better than my “Professor” title. With this new

image, I would replace the UN blue-helmets with ninja masks; think of it as peacekeeping with teeth! Second, I would re-name the Security Council the “Wizards’ Council”; or better yet, the “Council of Elrond”. My deputy will be Gandalf, and every time a permanent member exercises the veto power to block a resolution, he will say: “you shall not pass.”

At this point, some of you may be wondering how much longer the organizers will wait until they ask security to escort me out of this hotel. All this talk about power-hungry megalomaniacs and delusional tyrants with fantasies of world domination is all far-fetched, isn’t it? Or perhaps it is much too close to reality, even if I have given myself a touch of creative license. The fact is that the world that we witness is a reflection of its leadership, or rather, the failure of leadership. Hatred, war, terrorism, genocide, greed, poverty, disease, hunger, the poisoning of our planet, all these afflictions, all these causes of human suffering, they are merely a mirror reflecting the choices made by those that wield power.

I began my career with the United Nations while still in my 20s. Going from the university to a war zone was a rude awakening. It is one thing to talk about ideals in the classroom, and yet another to see the reality of

human suffering. I had graduated from Harvard Law School confident that I had all the answers. I believed in the mission of the UN. I believed in human rights. I knew everything there was to know about international law. With the outbreak of the Yugoslav war in 1991, I was among the first on the ground. I was an idealistic human rights investigator, ready to bear witness to the horrors of “ethnic cleansing” and genocide. I remember the excitement of putting on my blue-helmet for the first time, of flying the white UN helicopters and cargo planes to Vukovar and Sarajevo, of dodging bombs and bullets and living on the edge. But none of my academic qualifications, no amount of professional self-confidence, had prepared me for the horrible scenes that I would witness in the years that followed. Beautiful cities reduced to rubble, homeless families wandering in the winter cold in search of food and shelter, the unspeakable pain of the survivors of rape and torture in the concentration camps, and of course, the unforgettable images of weeping mothers looking for their children in mass-graves. It was a profoundly humbling experience, to go from theoretical learning and professional ambition, to feeling the intimate reality of those that the UN was built to protect. And then to go from the Bosnian villages where I saw families that had been burnt alive, to the meetings of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, where diplomatic euphemism and carefully worded

resolutions, sanitized unpleasant realities, and created the illusion of progress.

The worst was in 1994 when despite repeated warnings that a genocide was about to happen, the world abandoned the people of Rwanda. Instead of protecting civilians, the UN withdrew its peacekeepers, knowing the terrible fate that awaited those that were left behind. While diplomats justified their cynical policies with sophisticated terminology, almost a million civilians were exterminated. My dear friend Esther Mujawayo was in panic as news arrived that many of her loved ones had been murdered. Without anyone to help her, she began running frantically in the streets of Kigali, to see how she could save the lives of her three little girls. She saw European soldiers that had been sent to evacuate the expatriates, and their pets. She saw them picking up dogs and cats and placing them in the army trucks that would take the diplomats and aid workers to the airport from where they would fly to Europe. In a moment of utter desperation, she gave her infant daughter to one of the soldiers. She begged him to take her little girl to Europe and place her for adoption with a good family. It was the act of a desperate mother, trying to save at least one of her children against the prospect of impending death. The soldier refused to take her little girl. He explained

that he was under instructions to only evacuate expatriates. As Esther told this story, her eyes filled with tears, and she said: “The life of a European dog was more important than the life of my little girl.” There is something so vivid, so stark, in the contrast between Esther’s story, and the empty deliberations and resolutions that the UN was adopting at the time. It makes a mockery of smug leaders that remember the Holocaust and say “never again”, while allowing such radical evil to unfold before our very eyes. It is only when we have this intimate glimpse of suffering that we begin to understand the meaning of leadership. It is in understanding the contrast between declarations of lofty principles among the powerful, and the grim reality of the downtrodden, that we can begin an honest conversation about the future of the UN.

We cannot reduce human suffering to statistics, solemn statements, and superficial sentimentality. Victims are not statistics. Behind every victim, there is a name. Behind every victim, there is a story. There is a mother and father, a brother and sister, a best friend and work colleague. Behind every victim is a universe of emotions and relations, ripped apart by violence, forever destroyed. When we sit and deliberate on world problems in the corridors of power, and we talk about those problems in antiseptic politically

correct language, and legalistic terminology, and bureaucratic procedures, we create a self-contained universe. We blind ourselves to the contradiction between our virtuous self-image, and our lack of commitment; the contradiction between our willingness to pay lip-service to morality, and our unwillingness to pay a price for it. Leadership is not about VIP status. It is not about charismatic politicians and Hollywood celebrities. It is not about appearing on CNN. It is not about dominating or controlling others. It is not about accumulating obscene wealth. Leadership is above all about empathy; the courage and compassion to feel the pain of others; the power and insight to substitute selfishness with selflessness. If you consider the leaders that have truly inspired change in the world, those that give us hope for a better future, you will see a common ingredient. You will see that even though they lived in different historical periods, and different cultures, and faced different challenges, they all shared a common experience. The Mahatma Gandhis, the Martin Luther Kings, the Nelson Mandelas of this world, they all suffered. They all paid a price for what they believed in. They didn't mistake mere good words for good deeds. They weren't enslaved to their selfish interests and comforts. They were free in spirit, willing to experience pain in the path of righteousness, and to be selfless in their fight against injustice. And what is most important is their attitude towards power. They

did not lust for power. To the contrary, their power was in their not seeking power for its own sake. How many political leaders will tell us that they want power for the sake of doing good? And how very very few actually end up doing good as they are corrupted and forced to compromise in the treacherous road leading to power? This is the cynical world of those that are too weak to resist egotistic temptations; those that try to mask their indifference with delusional, empty words. That conception of power we must understand means nothing. It is merely an illusion. True leadership, moral leadership, comes from not wanting power for power's sake. True leadership begins with an authentic conversation with our own self, a sincere desire to feel the pain of others, to help those that suffer not because of reward or recognition, but because of the depth of our own conscience. To achieve greatness, we must achieve humility. To become masters of humanity, we must first become servants of humanity.

We must not think that just because we are not the President or Prime Minister of this or that country, that we are somehow powerless. We must not imagine that so long as we sit back and watch, those we call leaders in this world of chaos and calamity will somehow solve our problems. Let us not forget that the UN Charter begins with the words: "We the Peoples of

the United Nations”. It does not begin with “We the Heads of State and Government” or “We the diplomats” or “We the bureaucrats” or “We the experts” and so on and so forth. In re-imagining the world that you inherit as tomorrow’s leaders, you must also re-imagine the concept of power and personal responsibility, of leadership at the grassroots, and often against impossible odds. Consider the heroic courage of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo confronting the military dictatorship in Argentina. They defied the powerful generals and protested in front of the presidential palace, demanding to know the fate of their children who had been disappeared in the so-called “Dirty War” of the 1970s. Consider the Mothers of Srebrenica that for so many years have demanded justice for the 1995 Bosnian genocide that claimed the lives of their sons and husbands. Or in my country of origin Iran, from which I have been exiled for so many years, consider the extraordinary “Mothers of Khavaran”, named after the neighbourhood where their children were dumped in a mass-grave after the mass-execution of political prisoners in 1988. These brave mothers have faced beatings and imprisonment merely for mourning their loved ones. But they have never stopped speaking out and mourning and demanding justice for their loved ones. Consider the power of a mother that has lost her child. What force can possibly stand in her way, as she cries for redemption of her

irredeemable loss? And contrast her courage with the cowardice of those opportunists and thugs that murder the innocent, and fear the truth so much that they cannot even let a mother mourn at the grave of her child. The violence of these men flows from their weakness, from their desperate want of power, from their inability to even recognize their own humanity.

In my career, I have met many famous leaders. But those men and women that have inspired me the most, those that have shown me the power and resilience of the human spirit, those that have filled me with hope for the future of humankind, are those you have probably never heard of. They are the unsung heroes of this world, those that labour in silence and love, wanting to help others, not for fame or riches, but because of their inherent caring and compassion as human beings. So whether you are the UN Secretary-General, or a student delegate at the McGill Model UN, doesn't matter. We all have a role to play. We must all shoulder our share of the burden, in struggling for a better world. This is especially important as you, in the early stages of your adult life, make the choices that will go on to define your lives and careers in the years to come. The question you must ask yourself is, what do you really stand for, and what price are you willing to pay to be true to your principles, to be true to your own self?

I began my speech tonight with the metaphor of Dr. Evil and his doomsday device. I stand guilty of harsh criticism of those with power in this world, of the failure of leadership. So as partial redemption, I will end with the words of a world leader that dared to be different; that did not allow his eminent status to obscure his deepest beliefs and moral principles. I speak of the Swedish diplomat Dag Hammarskjöld, the UN Secretary-General from 1953 until his untimely death in 1961, in a suspicious airplane crash in the Congo. Hammarskjöld had to navigate the cynical world of Cold War politics at the UN. He had to fight to keep his independence and integrity, not to become the tool of this or that nation's narrow interests. It is reported that upon his death, friends discovered a prophetic poem inscribed in his family bible. The poem beautifully captured what many felt at the grievous loss of this great visionary and courageous leader. I leave you with those same words, as you learn about the UN in the coming days, and reflect on the choices that you must make with your life in the years ahead, in your search for meaning and purpose:

The day you were born, everybody was happy – you cried alone. Make your life such, that in your last hour all others are weeping, and you are the only one without a tear to shed!

Thank you for your patience. I hereby make a motion to end this speech!