

Excerpts from Speech on Legitimate Rage

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Fortunately, as Mr. Williams has demonstrated through his program of education, the solution to improved race relations – both on and off campus – can be quite simple.

Unfortunately, there are obstacles to its implementation that tend to make it rather more complicated. So, here I am – only one minute into my remarks and, already, I have contradicted myself.

Now I must try to un-contradict myself. To this end, it is my goal this evening to describe both the solution, as I see it, and the obstacles, as I see them, and then to respond to any questions you may have.

It is a curious phenomenon that in our 21st-century sophistication – both technological and intellectual – we do not find the means to solve some of the most persistent problems of human kind. And surely one of these elusive problems is putting the terrible era of armed conflict and terrorism behind us. And I speak both of conflict between individuals and conflict between whole peoples. Especially the type of conflict that seems to derive its intensity from longstanding hatred that prevents one side from identifying with the other.

This type of hatred – hatred that is passed down from one generation to the next – is insidious in that it dooms young children to a clouded sense of morality. I remember seeing years ago, in the 1960s I think, the cover of an issue of LIFE magazine featuring an article on the Ku Klux Klan. In the cover photograph, a Klansman, dressed in the white garb and hood of the organization, held in his arms an infant dressed in the same garb.

That baby, in my opinion, was being horribly abused. He was being taught to link his self-esteem to the degradation of people whose skin color or faith differs from his own. His inborn sense of morality was being twisted and deformed. This is a form of child abuse. And, as we know, children who are abused grow up to abuse others. It is worth noting, by the way, that studies show how children quite naturally concern themselves with morality. In Robert Coles' book, The Moral Life of Children, he cites a startling case of childhood nobility. The story he tells is of a young African-American girl in the 1960s who broke the color barrier in a southern school. Although she was continually taunted, she chose to pray for her tormentors rather than to curse them silently in bitterness and hatred. Ruby believed that, rather than sink to the morally misguided level of her oppressors, she should await a better future with patience and hope.

Perhaps not many among us could stave off our legitimate sense of rage with such phenomenal spiritual generosity. And yet the story should give us all pause. At the very least, we see that human beings are capable of a tremendous breadth of responses to injustice and that we can all choose to react with a greater or lesser degree of humanity and responsibility.

Any person who teaches or preaches hatred as a response to legitimate rage is displaying an egregious lack of responsibility toward his or her fellow human beings. And no matter what side of an issue we stand on, we should not quietly listen to such talk. Always, always, we must bear in mind the words of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.: "Until all are free, none is free." Our freedom must never come at the expense of another's freedom.

I want to take a moment here to address the idea of legitimate rage. Because rage is a feeling, we must try to understand it. But can we automatically justify any rage? The term "legitimate" comes from the notion of law. We may say that our feelings are valid, authentic. Oftentimes, we react with rage – even with outrage – when we feel hurt, when we feel a sense of

injustice. Yet feelings are not rational. And we may react emotionally without knowing all the truth about people, situations, circumstances or history. So how legitimate can our rage be? In fact, the word “rage” derives from the Latin “rabia,” meaning madness. So if we act impulsively out of our “legitimate rage,” we will probably be acting in an insane and destructive manner. Rage is often described as being blind. Acts of rage are carried out with great indifference to consequences.

Unfortunately, examples of this kind of behavior abound. In the domestic sphere, crimes of passion abound. And in the political sphere as well, crimes of passion abound. In the latter sphere, they are known as acts of terror.

The killing of rabbinical student Yankel Rosenbaum in New York in 1991 was such an act. The bombing of the bus in Tel Aviv and the many similar cruel and senseless murders perpetrated by Hamas extremists likewise are acts of terror. They accomplish nothing but destruction. Worse yet, they result in an ever-expanding cycle of rage. So there are questions we must ask ourselves: Can rage be controlled? Can we take a deep breath? Can we try to defuse the bomb? Can each one of us remember a time when we felt furious until we learned some piece of information that changed our perspective on the situation at hand? Can we channel such feelings? Can we try to understand the other person’s feelings, motivations, background or circumstances? Or must our rage only explode uncontrollably, giving rise to more rage and perpetuating an endless cycle of hatred and terror? And I think the answer we must come up with is “yes, rage can be channeled; yes, it can be transformed into something positive.” It can and it must. Our quality of life depends upon this, and even our lives themselves depend upon it.

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Since Facing History and Ourselves uses the tragedy of the Holocaust to explore the issues of individual choice and social justice facing young people today, it seems appropriate to me to end my remarks this evening with an entry from the Diary of Anne Frank. Anne wrote, “All children must look after their own upbringing. Parents can only give good advice or put them on the right paths, but the final forming of a person’s character lies in their own hands.”

And isn’t it a powerful coincidence that Anne, who lived in hiding and in terror before dying at the hands of the Nazis, shared so much idealism with young Ruby, the African-American girl who broke the color barrier two decades later? Said Anne, “In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart.”

And I believe that we owe it to those who are really good at heart, to the Annes and Rubies of this world, to become as good at heart as we can be. Let us start here, tonight, at this forum. Thank you for listening to my thoughts.

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