



70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

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As we stand here today contemplating the immense and everlasting importance of promoting and supporting universal human rights – we must each ask ourselves what we are willing to do to ensure the recognition and upholding of the “inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family.”

In 1941, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt posed a similar challenge while delivering his State of the Union Address to the 77th Congress of these United States. In an effort to rouse an inward-looking nation bent on remaining neutral while the “democratic way of life” was “being directly assailed in every part of the world...,” President Roosevelt presented a vision of “a world founded upon four essential human freedoms”:

- Freedom of Speech and Expression;
- Freedom for every person to worship God in their own way;
- Freedom from want; and
- Freedom from fear.

He did not believe this to be a vision of a distant future but a “world attainable in our time” – a goal worth fighting and sacrificing for, not tomorrow, but today.

While I agree with most of the wise and beautiful words of President Roosevelt – the freedoms he expounded remain foundational and elemental to this very day – I disagree that the vision of a world founded upon those freedoms was attainable in any lifetime. Not because the victory of the Allies in World War II, nor the subsequent march of progress and the immense efforts of the global liberal-order did not vastly improve the well-being of millions. But because a world where those four freedoms, and the many other rights enumerated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are forever upheld, is not something that can simply be attained, as the effort has no end, it is eternal and ongoing – a struggle between the bright gleaming side of humanity and its darker recesses.

The fight for human rights did not end with victory in Europe or Japan, though those victories did free millions from fear and oppression. The battle continued – and continues every day – across the globe as the flames of ill-liberal movements still burn, and the cruelties of autocratic regimes persist. The global fight for universal human rights deserves our attention, our action, and our commitment – however, the cause also needs examples, models to hold up and show the world. That is why it is critical to never forget the battle also continues in, as Eleanor Roosevelt so eloquently put it, the “small places” – our neighborhoods, schools, and places of work – “the world of the individual person.”

It is in these places I believe Mrs. Roosevelt thought we could all have our greatest and most immediate impact on the effort to protect and promote the rights to “equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination.” As she said, “Unless these rights have meaning there [in the small places], they

have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.” These words are essential today – the toxicity and tumult of larger arenas have left many of us feeling powerless – but change starts from the bottom up:

- It may be fighting for a disabled child’s right to an education at a local school board meeting. Article 26 of the UDHR provides that “Everyone has the right to education” and that such education “shall be directed to the full development of the human personality...”
- It may be speaking out against dangerous language or acts meant to limit an individual’s right to practice their religion. Article 18 of the UDHR provides “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion...”
- Or it simply may be treating each neighbor, classmate, co-worker, or stranger you meet with dignity and warmth. Article 1 of the UDHR states “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

These acts may seem small. But it is the small acts, in the “small places,” which spur the wheels of change and move forward our eternal quest for universal human rights. Ahead of us are days, weeks, months, and years of persistent struggle for human rights. We should remember and take heart from the words of our 32nd President: “Freedom means the supremacy of human rights everywhere. Our support goes to those who struggle to gain those rights and keep them. Our strength is our unity of purpose. To that high concept there can be no end, save victory.”