



The 2003–2004 Word & World Lecture

Restoring the Dignity of the Human Spirit

DOUGLAS A. JOHNSON

A number of years ago I was looking over the day's letters when I opened a note that was written with the elegant, but shaking hand of an older woman. She said that she had wanted to send a donation for our work for some time, but first the rent had been due; then, when she had received another fund-raising letter, she had needed to pay medical and heating bills, and there had been simply too many burdens on her small income. But then, she said, she was studying her Bible and came to the passage in Heb 13:3: "Remember those who are in prison, as though you yourselves were in prison with them; those who are tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured."

"Well," I said to myself, "there you have it—the perfect text to help communicate the importance of our work to the religious community." I rushed to my bookcase that evening and pulled out my old King James Version and found: "Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body." That was less than satisfactory, so I reached for the Jerusalem Bible, which was only a bit more helpful: "Keep in mind those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; and those who are being badly treated, since you too are in the one body." The only other translation of the Bible in my house was in Spanish, also missing the words I wanted to find.

And I wondered, what is going on here? Perhaps, I thought, it was not unusual for the King James Version to avoid the translation "torture" in a passage that

Torture is a despotic government's most effective weapon against democracy. Caring for victims of torture, listening to them, and telling their story is the most effective way to counteract this weapon. The Center for Victims of Torture in Minneapolis stands in the forefront of this important work.

specifically promotes sympathy for its victims, even though that version does refer to the “torture” of earlier biblical martyrs in Heb 11:35. Roman and Greek law both incorporated torture as an essential part of their legal systems, though initially the practice was limited to slaves who, it was assumed, could not tell the truth unless submitted to torture. When Roman law was reintroduced in the Middle Ages, the legal systems throughout Europe again incorporated a special status for torture. A pivotal struggle between the absolute authority of the king and of broader political rights in England was the right to be free from torture and cruel punishments. The King James Bible was produced well before this struggle had been won; for whatever reason, its commendation of sympathy here only for those “in bonds,” with no reference to torture, provided no fuel to the reformers.

Guarantees against torture were introduced in England over the next centuries, and ultimately incorporated into two mutually supporting aspects of the U.S. Constitution: the right to be free from cruel and unusual punishment and the right to be free from self-incrimination. The European Enlightenment led to a movement to end torture as an official form of law enforcement and interrogation, based on the long-repeated experience that torture is an ineffective way to arrive at truth. By the 1880s it was widely assumed that the struggle against torture was completed, as governments around the world excluded it from official legal processes and banned its use.

After additional digging, I was able to locate the reference made by our supportive donor, in the New Revised Standard Version, which indeed translates the original text as “Remember...those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.”¹

But if the King James Version possibly had political or cultural reasons to favor a gentler interpretation of the epistle’s language, what about the other translations? Perhaps the confusion comes from the fact that the jailer in these Roman times was also the torturer; it was not a separate role but a key part of the judicial process. Yet, in that context everyone imprisoned was, as a matter of course, tortured to force a confession or provide information the authorities wanted.

In fact, torture has never disappeared, even when it stopped being a recognized and legitimate part of the legal system. It has continued to be used by police, military, and security forces as a weapon of political repression and as a substitute for effective police work to construct corroborating evidence. In the 1930s, the U.S. Supreme Court banned the still infamous “third degree” form of interrogation, because torture is banned by our Constitution. But this did not stop the practice, even in America. In fact, wherever judicial systems give special weight to confession, torture remains a constant worry; thus, the American legal system has developed a series of procedures to lessen the importance of confessions or to protect their status as voluntary and uncoerced.

¹Of the standard versions, only the NRSV refers to “torture” in Heb 13:3 (perhaps reflecting a more recent consciousness of this terrible reality?).

But perhaps these translations avoided reference to torture for another reason: it makes us uncomfortable and squeamish. Torture is a word full of despair and hopelessness. It is ugly, full of dirtiness and blood. Its images of people stripped naked in front of others imply sexual perversions and humiliations that simply aren't nice to think about. Torture is the ultimate indignity to the human spirit. We would rather not think about it.

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But think about it we should. Even the death of Jesus is often so sanitized and ritualized that we fail to understand that Jesus died under torture. What is the point of whipping a man bloody before his planned execution? Of impaling his face with a crown of thorns? Or nailing him to a cross or tying him up so that the weight of his body will gradually tear his limbs from their sockets in excruciating pain that will last for days until thirst and hunger ultimately kill him? Of displaying this cruelty on the public roads, on the hillsides, in clear view for all—man, woman, and child—to see the humiliation and suffering of the crucified?

One of the first torture survivors I met, nearly sixteen years ago when I joined the Center for Victims of Torture, was an African bishop. He answered these questions for me then from his own experience. His answer was true for torture's purpose against Jesus as well as for torture in the modern world: “If they will do this to me, what will they do to my flock?” Whether made public or hidden in a prison, the message remains clear to a victim's family and friends, to a network of admirers and loved ones, to those who have known him or her, and ultimately to everyone in the community. Torture is a warning of the power of the state to produce pain and fear. When a state uses torture, it is delivering a message that is intended for everyone, not only the victim.

This is very clear when we think of the times of Christ. An imperial, military, and economic power was dominating a tribal kingdom. There were places in the ancient world where the elites welcomed Rome and the security, trade, and luxury that it brought. But there were also places where Rome was resisted and where cruelty was assumed to be the best mechanism to exert control. So the letter to the Hebrews is not only stating a moral good. The author recognizes that, in these times and in this place, torture is intended to create fear and control. Solidarity with the victim, care for the victim, is also a way to create care for oneself and for one's community, as though we are “also of the body.” Hebrews exhorts us to overcome our fear of the disfigurement, the ugliness, the bodily filth that would have been present in those languishing in jails, and to provide care. We do this for the victim; but we also do it for ourselves.

I must say that I am also taken by the practical optimism of the passage, the recognition that care is important and that it will have an effect. The solidarity of

care will help the victim, even if it is recognition, listening, or simple acknowledgment. But it is care for both the victim and the giver because it recognizes that the true target is the community. As another victim from Argentina told me, “Torture’s purpose is to sever the links of solidarity.” Care’s purpose is to recover the links.

It is discouraging to think that this understanding might have been lost to us by softened translations of the message. And while many say that torture has been with us for thousands of years as a natural human condition, the organized and systematic rekindling of the theme of care is recent and new—a movement of only the last twenty-five years or so, emanating from Denmark and a group of doctors working with Amnesty International who sought to learn how to document when torture occurred in hopes of preventing it in the future. As victims assembled in the waiting rooms of these doctors, they began to affect the consciousness and the imagination of the doctors who were, after all, healers and not forensic researchers. And so the movement began, leading to the establishment here in Minnesota of the Center for Victims of Torture in 1985—the first such treatment facility in the United States and only the third in the world.

In retrospect, the idea is so simple and so humane that one wonders why it took so long to occur to anyone and why it took such effort to make it take root and spread. But spread it has, with now over 250 specialized programs for torture survivors around the world, many in places like Minnesota where torture victims have sought refuge, and with others forming where torture is still in practice. Most of this growth has taken place in just the last few years. This remarkable growth in the movement to provide care to survivors of torture indicates that this is an idea whose time has come; it reflects the aspirations of Americans and people around the world to intervene against the horror of torture.

***“When they tortured me, they kept repeating over and over again:
You will always be alone with this. No one will believe you. You are
here because no one cares about you.”***

I would like to reflect on these issues by drawing on the work of the Center for Victims of Torture in Minneapolis, with nearly twenty years of direct service with survivors of government-sponsored torture from over seventy nations.

I feel privileged by my early orientation to our work, coming from that first survivor. As I said, he was a bishop in his native country in Africa, a man of great inspiration and wisdom. He took me aside to tell me about his experience and to challenge me as the new director on what needed to be done. “When they tortured me,” he said, “they kept repeating over and over again: You will always be alone with this. No one will believe you. You are here because no one cares about you.” He described the sense of desperate vulnerability that this message had conveyed, repeated over and over until he began to believe it. We call this the torturer’s rap; it is repeated to victims across cultures, across political spectrums.

Our clients come from many cultures and backgrounds, from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. A small number of our clients are Americans who were tortured abroad. What distinguishes all of these as a group is that they were targeted for torture by governments because they were leaders in their communities. They may have been labor or peasant leaders, doctors or political leaders, business or religious leaders, but this characteristic they largely hold in common.

Having experienced leadership, they are also hopeful that they can resume a productive life—for themselves, their families, and their communities. But first they must deal with torture's legacy: physical pain, nightmares, panic attacks, anxiety, depression, thoughts of suicide, and a combination of reactions that are grouped together as "post-traumatic stress disorder." To protect themselves from awful memories, perhaps they have become forgetful. To escape the place of pain, perhaps they have learned to diffuse their attention to such a degree that they can no longer concentrate. They have been intentionally impaired as part of a political strategy.

We know from Holocaust survivors that this is not something people simply get over. Fifty years after their liberation from the concentration camps, survivors still have high levels of nightmares, clinical depression, and suicide. Perhaps even more disturbing, their children and even their grandchildren have higher rates of clinical depression and suicide. This is true for the families of torture survivors as well—trauma of this degree profoundly affects future generations.

THE WORK OF THE CENTER FOR VICTIMS OF TORTURE

The Center for Victims of Torture remains unique in both the depth and breadth of its work in the field, so let me begin by acquainting you with what we do. The core and moral center of our work is providing direct rehabilitative services to survivors of politically motivated torture. CVT's staff includes highly trained health care personnel—physicians, psychologists, nurses, and social workers—supported by volunteer health professionals, such as a dedicated team of physiotherapists and massage therapists, specialists in many fields, and over 300 community volunteers. Our intensive treatment programs in Minneapolis and St. Paul are designed to aid survivors to become healthy, productive citizens again while also teaching us about the human response to intense trauma and effective ways of healing. We have an annual capacity in this intensive program for only about 225 survivors each year. There are roughly 30,000 torture survivors now residing in Minnesota and over 500,000 living in the United States.

The contrast between our capacity for direct service and the need is staggering. It requires working in different ways and on a different scale. As part of our effort to do that, for example, our treatment programs in Africa, established within major refugee camps in Guinea and Sierra Leone, care for thousands of survivors of torture and terror from Sierra Leone and Liberia. Those programs are also de-

signed to help us understand how communities can recover from fear—the motivating source behind those who torture.

Our research program helps us to learn systematically about trauma and the effectiveness of our work. We share what we have learned with other care providers and those working with refugees through an active training program. With the help of the Minnesota legislature and local foundations, we train over 2,500 health care personnel in Minnesota each year as part of an effort to make sure that all torture survivors have access to the care they need within their health care systems. We train over 1,200 teachers and school personnel each year to understand how the experience of human-rights-related traumas in the family can affect refugee children's abilities to learn and grow. I raise these examples of our work in Minnesota to illustrate the kind of work that could and should be organized across our country as we begin to recognize the extent to which our communities are affected by torture.

CVT also provides technical assistance and training to each of the thirty-three torture rehabilitation programs in the United States; it provides funding and training to treatment programs in fifteen other countries where torture has been endemic, such as Cambodia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the West Bank, Rwanda, South Africa, Guatemala, and Peru. Our single largest training program is in West Africa, where we have trained 120 Sierra Leonean refugees to work as psychotherapists and social workers; we have now moved with them from the refugee camps back into the communities where the atrocities were committed, as we try to work on a much larger scale to help communities recover.

We also work politically to engage policy makers at the state, national, and international levels to understand the purposes and effects of torture. We have maintained an office in Washington, DC, for example, since 1992, to work with Congress and the Administration to develop policies that aid and protect torture victims. Together with the Minnesota congressional delegation, and with the help of congressional leaders like Tom Lantos and Chris Smith, we helped draft and pass the Torture Victims Relief Act to support rehabilitation programs around the world and are now leading the campaign to pass the new reauthorization act. We opened an office in Brussels to help spearhead the same focus on policy interventions in Europe, especially at the European Union.

We believe that any health care program must also have a public health component and engage in prevention. CVT's particular contribution has been the development of a global network of human rights leaders to reevaluate the tactics we have relied on and the limitations of current strategies to protect human rights. The New Tactics in Human Rights Project developed a workbook of over 120 useful tactics that could be engaged in the struggle to protect human rights and is now hosting a series of workshops in each region of the world. Ten innovative tacticians from Africa, for example, met together in May 2003 to cross-train each other in their tactical innovation, so that each one would leave knowing ten tactics rather than only one. This led to new insights about the kinds of strategic opportunities

available in their countries to resolve major human rights problems. Together with our growing group of colleagues, we will be hosting a gathering of about 700 human rights leaders next year in Ankara, Turkey, to learn about forty powerful tactics that can be combined together in new, more comprehensive strategies to end torture and other human rights abuses.²

The Center for Victims of Torture is a learning center; at the basis of this learning are the survivors of torture who take the enormous risk to trust us and to tell us their stories.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED FROM THIS WORK

Torture is fundamentally a political weapon, employed by repressive regimes to shape cultures through fear. The evidence of torture's use in Iraq is now clear to the American public, as it has been within the torture treatment movement for over a decade through the broken bodies and minds of our clients. What they, along with victims from over seventy other nations of the world, have taught us is that torture targets leadership of the opposition in order to snuff out creativity and to crush emerging movements that may threaten a regime's corrupt hold on society. Torture sends a message of fear throughout the network of that leader's family and community of followers and admirers. As the African bishop told me about the meaning of torture, the message is clear: "If they'll do this to me, what will they do to my flock?" We have also learned how traumas of this severity and scale have a transgenerational effect, shaping the health, the hopes, and the aspirations of future generations.

Because of these significant and predictable effects, we understand that torture is the most effective weapon against democracy. Even after a dictatorial regime has fallen, as it has in Iraq, we can expect that the impact of torture will be felt for generations: leadership broken and lost; their families and communities still frightened and disengaged from public life; a profound lack of trust in public institutions, police, and courts; a lesson in forced political apathy learned and lived out every day. Unless we find ways to understand and to heal the legacy of torture, our efforts to build democratic institutions will fail. They will fail in Rwanda. They will fail in Iraq. They will also fail in Minnesota and across America, unless we follow the mandate of Hebrews: "Remember...those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured."

But we need not fail, as our colleagues demonstrate in the many countries of repression where rehabilitation programs now operate. It is possible—and highly desirable—to recover leadership stolen by repression, to ease fear and apathy, to relieve nightmares and depression, and to address politics disrupted by panic and acute anxieties. The choice is ours.

The African bishop continued his story to me. He said, "When I heard that

²You can find out more about this project from the website www.newtactics.org or through CVT's main website, www.cvt.org, where, of course, you can learn more about the many programs of the organization.

my church was sending me to Minneapolis to the Center for Victims of Torture—even to know there was such a place—was very healing. It let me know that my torturers had lied to me. I was not alone. There were people, there was a community that believed me and cared about me.” And at that point, he urged me to do everything I could to make sure that people who could not come to our doors would still know of our existence so they would understand that their torturers lied.

THE UNITED STATES AND TORTURE

That was also the logic behind the Torture Victims Relief Act. We wanted to create a very visible message to torture victims throughout the world that their safety and healing was of great importance to the American people. Perhaps all Americans are not aware of the extent to which the United States has taken leadership over the past decade in work against torture; it is now the leading sponsor of torture rehabilitation programs, for which Congress currently allocates \$25 million per year. Of this amount, \$10 million is available for supporting treatment centers in the United States. This is woefully inadequate, representing an expenditure of only about \$20 per survivor for programs of care in a nation of at least 500,000 torture victims. The new legislation would double this amount in the first year and increase funding at \$5 million per year for two additional years. This would be a good investment for our country and for the State of Minnesota.

“the USA is now the primary supporter of torture healing programs around the world”

As inadequate as current funding is, it is still important to acknowledge that the USA is now the primary supporter of torture healing programs around the world. Other efforts by the U.S. government, both public and diplomatic, to intervene to halt torture and to support international action in prevention have offered very welcomed leadership in the struggle against torture.

That is why it is especially troubling that, in our time of fear following 9/11, allegations are surfacing that the U.S. government is engaging in forms of interrogation that incorporate acts of torture. President Bush issued an important statement on June 26, 2003, the UN Day in Support of Victims of Torture, positively asserting American interests and values in the struggle against torture and stating that any transgressors would be punished. But a recent article in *The Atlantic Monthly* sketches in detail the forms of interrogation in use and, even more troubling, argues that they are justified and should be used.³ The author, Mark Bowden, tries to distinguish these interrogation practices as coercion, rather than torture—what others have referred to as “torture lite,”⁴ a term that is deeply offensive to torture survivors.

³Mark Bowden, “The Dark Art of Interrogation,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 2003, 51–76.

⁴*Ibid.*, 53.

The justification argument is characterized as the “ticking time bomb.” Those arguing for the use of torture propose a hypothetical situation: a bomb is about to go off, killing some number of innocents; we have the guy who knows where this bomb is. “Isn’t it morally justified to use any pressure or technique available to get the information needed to save the lives of tens, hundreds, thousands of persons?” Bowden reports that, according to some interrogators, “A method that produces life-saving information without doing lasting harm to anyone is not just preferable; it appears to be morally sound.”⁵

This argument is attractive to many. It uses a consequentialist ethical framework, justifying actions by their presumed consequences. There are a number of things wrong with this argument, however:

1. “Without doing lasting harm.” The techniques discussed and proposed generally fall into highly destructive forms of psychological torture. In fact, our clients have reported to us that recovery from these forms of torture is much more difficult than from physical pain. The techniques include mock executions; threatening the safety of family members, especially children; being forced to watch or witness the torture of others; scenarios of extreme humiliation, such as being held in a group naked; threats of sexual violence; and sensory deprivation, among others. We know that these do produce lasting harm, and can lead to a lifetime of nightmares, depression, and suicidal tendencies.

What is so bad about that, some might ask, when we are talking about terrorists? Don’t they deserve what they get?

2. Torture is a notoriously unreliable method of getting accurate information. Victims will confess to any crime and provide any information in order to halt the suffering or prevent the suffering of others. It is often comforting to hear stories of those claiming they didn’t break. But torture has become so sophisticated, especially with the advances in forms of psychological torture, that everyone does and will break. Each of our clients could tell you a story of false confessions and information planted as part of their experience of torture.

3. The argument attempts to justify torture when it uncovers vital information that can save lives. But is it justified when it is used and uncovers no useful information? For years, the Israeli intelligence services used the techniques cited by these commentators, precisely with a “ticking time bomb” prevention rationale. Israeli human rights organizations believe the techniques halted few, if any, bombs from going off, and yet they were used against thousands of young Palestinian men. How can techniques of torture be justified when used against the innocent or in a fishing expedition?

The experience of our clients indicates that when torture is allowed, it will become widespread. And confessions will be sought to justify the perpetrators and their superiors who decide to use torture. I might add that the Israeli Supreme

⁵Ibid., 54.

Court reviewed the interrogation techniques that the intelligence services liked to call “moderate physical pressure” and which U.S. advocates call “coercion” or “torture lite.” The court concluded that these were all forms of torture outlawed by the Convention against Torture and therefore also violated Israeli law. They banned their practice altogether in 1999.⁶

4. What torture is very effective at producing is both fear and rage. Jean Améry, a Holocaust survivor and torture victim, wrote in his memoir, “Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world. It is fear that henceforth reigns....Fear—and also what is called resentments—[that] concentrate into a seething, purifying thirst for revenge.”⁷

The head of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, Hafiz Abu Sa’eda, argues that torture can actually promote terrorism. “Torture demonstrates that the regime deserves destroying because it does not respect the dignity of the people.” Members of Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood are among those transformed from relative moderates into hard-line fanatics after being tortured, Sa’eda explained. After being tortured in Egypt, Ayman al-Zawahiri, a surgeon, fled to Afghanistan to join the mujahedeen and eventually became Osama bin Laden’s chief deputy.⁸

5. I have talked to my friends around the world, who are disappointed in and afraid of an America that engages in torture and uses legalisms to hide the nature of what it does. Because, of course, so many of them—and so many of our clients—heard their governments say the same things and use the same excuses to justify the use of torture. The human rights community has documented this hypocrisy for decades. We are angry and afraid when our government begins to mouth the same words we have heard so often, from Argentina and Brazil, from South Africa and Kenya, from Turkey and Iraq, from Pakistan and China. Those words are, “Our community is in danger from terrorists. We must use extraordinary means to fight this hidden enemy. We must find the bomb that is ticking before it kills innocent people.” People around the world see this as a lie, because they have seen the practice ingrained and continuing long past the time when the threat was real, and we see the tens of thousands of people ground up and damaged by regimes addicted to violence and governance through fear. We know that this is an addiction, a sickness that warps not only the direct victims, but the torturers and the society at large.

I felt that warping when I participated in a radio talk show where the host was driven to convince me and his audience that torture was a rational response, a needed response, to the threat of terrorism. He encouraged his public to call in ideas of what torture should be used to make people confess and give information that was needed to save lives, and each call was uglier than the last. There are people

⁶See *ibid.*, 75–76.

⁷Jean Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980) 40.

⁸Owen Bowcott, “Torture trail to September 11,” *London Guardian*, 24 January 2003.

using our fears to build their popularity and their power. But we must also recognize that our fears are real and that we must find ways to confront them.

I was told a story about the meeting between President Bush and the new High Commissioner for Human Rights, Sergio de Mello, the lead UN official recently killed in Iraq. President Bush was briefed that the high commissioner would discuss the allegations of torture, so he made that the first agenda item, rather than avoiding it. And he said that the United States was not using torture and would not use torture. But he added that, if we caught an al-Qaeda operative who knew about a bomb that killed 3,000 people in America, then he would have to explain to the American people why we did not.

That is another kind of fear, the fear of failing in one's duty to others, to be seen as failing in the obligations to protect the innocent. That is a fear we must recognize, and understand as well, and help to relieve the burden inherent in these choices.

*“the use of torture destroys not only the victim, but also
the victimizer”*

We know that the use of torture destroys not only the victim, but also the victimizer. Yes, there are people who become addicted to violence, not only watching it but participating in it and inflicting it. But we know enough now about how torturers are created to know that it requires a methodology. Central to that methodology is creating an ideology that helps the torturers justify to themselves why they are doing something that is so counter to the values of humanity, to every world religion, to the teachings of every mother to her son or daughter, and that would bring shame to the eyes of his mother or his children. It is not a happy profession. It brings nightmares and estrangement and loneliness. And yet people do it daily out of a sense of duty.

In the gospels, Jesus says, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matt 19:24). What does this mean? I have read it as a condemnation of the rich, which it can be. But I also began to think of this as a statement of enormous compassion for how difficult it can be for the privileged and the powerful to be wholly a part of the community, rather than standing aside from the human family. Remember that Jesus spoke these words when Jewish culture was being challenged by imperial Rome, with its values and rewards of privilege and wealth to the rulers of conquered peoples who aided the imperium's rule. This was a cultural invasion as well as a military one. It held many promises for the future, but it also challenged the ideal of social justice and community exemplified by the obligation of Jubilee, when observant Jews were to forgive debts, release slaves, and so redistribute the wealth and give up the privilege that came with this wealth. Jubilee was a religious obligation to strengthen the community over the self, but it weighed more heavily on the wealthy, who had

much more to lose. Jewish tradition recognized the virtue of wealth accumulating through hard work and intelligence, but asserted that, for the sake of community, every fifty years the wealth had to be distributed. The slave was released from servitude. The debtor was forgiven. The widow, the crippled, the poor could share in the wealth produced by the most industrious. Community trumped wealth as a value.

The cultural values of the Romans were much different. They valued not only the accumulation of wealth, but also its display; they valued not only industry, but luxury. How attractive this must have been, this countervailing ideology, to the business and ruling elites of Jewish society. This new ideology made it all the more difficult for them to fulfill their obligations under Jewish law and made them stand apart from the community.

So Jesus recognized this struggle and this difficulty, and with compassion he tried to explain to the rest of us what burden the rich held. He did not say that the wealthy could not enter heaven, but that the burdens and obligations on them were so much heavier than on the rest of us. But neither did he revise the law and lower the standards. He only recognized that the struggle was enormous, inviting the rich to make that struggle, for the rewards would be great if undertaken with faith.

Perhaps what is true for the rich is also true for the powerful. We are the most powerful nation in the history of the world. Yet we now fear the actions of a small faction of fanatical haters that have done us and others harm. But we have the power to do anything, such as ignoring the advice of our allies, suspending our obligations under international laws that we helped to create, undermining values like the rule of law that have been the framework of our nation and of our freedoms. We have the power to set up special camps, outside of the law, hidden from scrutiny by our people and by other peoples. But is this a power we should use?

“we should ask President Bush to open up the detention and interrogation camps to the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and the UN Committee against Torture”

Although I am a supporter of free speech, I believe that arguments in favor of “coercion,” emerging from the press and in particular from right-wing radio talk shows, associate America with torture and therefore undermine our moral credibility as a nation and a people. This makes us less secure, not more so.

WHAT WE CAN DO

We should urge our congressional leaders to conduct an investigation into the allegations of the use of torture in interrogation by the United States. We should let them know that the practices of torture are beneath us as a society and a great nation.

We should ask President Bush to follow through with his pledge to prevent torture by asking him to investigate the allegations and to prosecute any deviation from American and international law. We should also ask President Bush to open up the detention and interrogation camps to the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and the UN Committee against Torture. The United States was deeply involved in the creation of these institutions. Using them at this time will strengthen the institutions and protect America's moral credibility to pressure other governments to end the use of torture—even when they feel threatened. It would be the most visible reassurance that the United States could offer to the world of the truth of our nation's word.

The United States should continue its leadership in promoting the safety and healing of torture survivors by passing the Torture Victims Reauthorization Act and fully funding it at the higher levels authorized in the act.

The African bishop asks us to let survivors around the world know: we believe in you, we care for you. It is up to you to take up that plea. Work to strengthen the treatment centers emerging in your communities, so that you can say to the world that Minnesota, all of its communities, and indeed our nation, are places of concern and caring. Our task together is to restore the dignity of the human spirit.

In a time of national fear, let us not adopt quick fixes that will ultimately diminish our moral stature and feed the self-justifications of terrorists. The challenge to us as Americans today is to make sure that our nation projects what is truly important to us, the values that make us a great nation. Let us stand as a symbol of protection and healing. We will regret anything less. ⊕

DOUGLAS A. JOHNSON is the executive director of the Center for Victims of Torture in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He delivered this address as the eleventh annual Word & World Lecture at Luther Seminary on October 13, 2003.