

Safeguarding our World

By Lynn C. Franklin

“Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.”
-Desmond M. Tutu

Traveling and getting to know people in different cultures has been central for me in both my personal and professional life, and with it I've been an observer of these societies and their politics.

For 20 plus years, I was Archbishop Desmond Tutu's literary agent, representing many of his books for publication. I've been privileged to hear from him and from many others during my various trips to South Africa personal accounts of life under Apartheid, and how ultimately freedoms were won albeit with tremendous sacrifice. I've relished my visits to the country and have been inspired by the spirit of people I've encountered. Even with ongoing inequities in income, housing, etc.... by overcoming Apartheid with a peaceful transfer of power, South Africans 'know' they can overcome anything. The confidence has been palpable.

That said, freedoms are fragile and require vigilance to support good governance and leadership within and outside government. In his midnight Christmas Eve message current Anglican Archbishop Thabo Makgoba rebutted President Zuma's recent admonition that the church should stay out of politics. But addressing human rights and social justice issues isn't the same as politicking. In his address, Archbishop Makgoba said that the situation required that they stand up to injustice, and asked, “At what stage do we, as churches, as mosques, as synagogues, withdraw our moral support for a democratically-elected government?...When do we name the gluttony, the inability to control the pursuit of excess? When do we name the fraudsters who are unable to control their insatiable appetite for obscene wealth, accumulated at the expense of the poorest of the poor?” He commended other institutions including the media and civil society, and particularly the Constitutional Court, for their resiliency in defiance of excesses in the Presidency and in helping uphold hard won democratic principles (Huffington Post, 2016).

My work also took me to the Soviet Union during Perestroika, and I enjoyed many visits to the emerging Russia over a decade as I worked with authors and publishers. On one occasion I arrived in Moscow in August 1991, ten days after the attempted coup. A publisher proudly took me to 'visit' the rock barricades. People I met were uncharacteristically jubilant and eager to share their stories of how they had participated or contributed and were visibly hopeful for their future as I interviewed and recorded their accounts. Over the years we witnessed a dramatic opening in that society, only to see it seriously at risk now as the Putin government has clamped down on the press and has become steadily more repressive and aggressive.

In an opinion piece for the Washington Post on Dec 29, 2016, Fareed Zakaria wrote that while elections took place where dictators had been deposed, other fundamentals of democracy like freedom of the press, the rule of law, respect for minorities, and other traditions were being abused. He refers to these tendencies as attributes of an illiberal democracy, as opposed to a liberal democracy that, in addition to assuring participatory elections, respects and protects a bundle of human rights. He fears that the culture of liberal democracy is deteriorating in many countries, and in the US. Laws and rules and good constitutions have not been a sufficient barrier to this subversion of the principles of effective democracy. He said that "... what sustains democracy is not simply legal safeguards and rules, but norms and practices — democratic behavior." (Washington Post, 2016).

India is another country I particularly enjoy. Over the years there has been significant economic growth and development with a rising wealthy and middle class, despite ongoing communal clashes amid continuing poverty. Hinduism, traditionally tolerant of a range of beliefs, also has a nationalistic wing, Hindutva that essentially views Indian culture in terms of Hindu values. The current ruling BJP party embraces Hindutva as its official ideology. Prime Minister Modi, whose reputation was tarnished by the Gujarat riots of 2002 is a proud adherent of Hindutva and has been associated since childhood with the RSS, the right wing, 'service' and paramilitary parent of the BJP. Even if Modi isn't publicly espousing a "Hindu" state, tensions have risen as followers have felt empowered under cover of his government. Meanwhile, as he promotes his vision for economic development, funds for health, education and social welfare have been cut, and civil society groups are being characterized as "anti-national."

In the US, Bryan Stevenson, founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, and author of the acclaimed bestseller *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, said in a recent interview with *The Intercept*, "...I think we're all burdened by this history of racial injustice, which has created a narrative of racial difference, which has infected us, corrupted us, and allowed us to see the world through this lens. So it becomes necessary to talk about that history if we want to get free." (*The Intercept*, 2017). In South Africa, despite the many difficulties, I've seen more healthy dialogue between racial groups. In the States, our bottled up segregated conditioning has spilled over into vitriolic discourse and violence, all the more heightened now with the appeal of the new President and similarly minded elected officials, and inflamed by partisan politics and media.

Stevenson also addresses the growing divide between the wealthy and more disadvantaged. "I think our identity is shaped not by how we treat the rich, the powerful, and the privileged — we are shaped by how we treat the poor, the incarcerated, the disfavored. And if we say, we only want to be an America for people who have lived here for five generations, we only want to be an America for people who are Christian, and a particular kind of Christian, we only want to be an America for straight people, or white people, then we become a country that is at war with its ideals, with its values, with its principles, with its very Constitution." (*The Intercept*, 2017).

There are clear parallels in these and many other countries of how easily institutions we rely on can backslide on the commitment to the common good. This is no time for complacency or resignation. Good leadership and governance don't exist in a vacuum. Wherever we are and

however we can, each in our own way, we have to stand up and work strategically to make our voices heard. Michelle Obama in her final address before leaving the White House called on young people in particular to educate themselves, to think critically, and to do their part to preserve and protect our rights, because they have to be earned every day (TIME, 2017).

The good news is that the now transparent fissures in our societies have made it crystal clear that we can't ignore what is happening, and we can and must stand up for ourselves and for others.

Lynn C. Franklin is a literary agent in New York.

Bibliography

News24 Correspondent. "Archbishop Makgoba Really Hauled Zuma and SA's Leadership Over The Coals This Christmas." The Huffington Post. December 25, 2016. Accessed February 13, 2017. <http://www.huffingtonpost.co.za/2016/12/25/archbishop-makgoba-really-hauled-zuma-and-sas-leadership-over-t/>

Reilly, Katie. "Read What Michelle Obama Said in Her Final Remarks as First Lady" TIME. January 6, 2017. Accessed February 13, 2017. <http://time.com/4626283/michelle-obama-final-remarks-transcript/>

Speri, Alice. "I don't think we're free in America' – an interview with Bryan Stevenson." The Intercept. January 2, 2017. Accessed February 13, 2017. <https://theintercept.com/2017/01/02/i-dont-think-were-free-in-america-an-interview-with-bryan-stevenson/>

Stevenson, B. 2015 [2014]. *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. New York. Spiegel & Grau.

Zakaria, Fareed. "America's democracy has become illiberal." The Washington Post. December 29, 2016. Accessed February 13, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/america-is-becoming-a-land-of-less-liberty/2016/12/29/2a91744c-ce09-11e6-a747-d03044780a02_story.html?utm_term=.91e627f72429