

Putting Faces on World Problems

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I will always be grateful that over the course of my fourteen years so far as the president of a university at the heart of Seattle—and hastening toward what I hope will be 20 years of service—I have had the privilege and the warmth of collegueship of this Rotary Club. I am honored to be called on at times to be—as it were—your priest and prayer leader. You’ve given me access to the best podium, pulpit, or platform in our city to speak about moral leadership, about the “can-do generation” of young people, and about inter-religious dialogue. In this I hope I have brought my world to you. But this club’s collegueship has also brought its world, its big world, to me every week that my crazy presidential schedule has allowed me to be with you. The real world comes to Rotary #4 every week in our speakers and, just as importantly, in ourselves. We are expanded people because of this privilege and we are deepened people. The world comes rushing at us week after week and we are called to respond from our hearts in our service which is surely beyond self but also deeply from within ourselves.

My theme today is not one which I chose, but one which chose me. I call it “Putting Faces on World Problems”. We are surrounded by world problems, long-lasting, seemingly insoluble, often impossible to understand, issues. We don’t choose them; we live in their time and within them. We can’t seem to get a grasp, a hold, a purchase on them so that we can respond to them. They seem to be beyond us: war, poverty, ecological degradation, terror, an interlocking world economy which reaches into our lives and homes, the education of new generations, an overwhelming, rushing technology and how it impacts our humanity, one world and we one part of it and it a big part of us.

Today I want to put a face on three world issues. My belief is that putting a face on them makes them less mega, humanizes them, allows us to enter into them not with mind alone but heart, and to follow how the heart leads us. I didn’t choose these issues, they walked in the door of my president’s office at Seattle U., looked on me, smiled, spoke, moved me. I am eager for you too to see these faces and meet the three students who are the faces of three of the world’s pressing issues.

I suppose you could call the first issue “The Palestinian Problem” but it is more than that. It came to me and took on a face in a student named Khaled. Khaled has a rounded, wide-smiling, olive face with eyes which show suffering and compassion. Khaled laughs easily, fully, often. Khaled is from the part of Bethlehem called Beilsahur. He is a Christian Palestinian, a Catholic. On his mother’s side, they trace their family in Bethlehem itself back beyond Jesus to King David! The family was there when Jesus was born; they were there a thousand years before; they’ve always been there. In Khaled the Palestinian people of Bethlehem walked in my door.

Khaled is missing his right arm. When he was 13, in the midst of an Intifada when all schools were closed, he was helping out in a relative's bakery. An eggshell fell into a machine in which he was mixing a special sweet. Khaled reached in to get the shell, got his hand caught, and his arm mangled and nearly ripped off before he went into a coma. Only because of local Palestinian doctors who called Jewish doctors at the world-famous Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem was his life saved and his arm amputated. Because of this handicap he was able—once schools reopened—to stay in school while the other six of his family had to go to work. He received no therapy till six years later when some nuns took compassion on him. One of them suggested that this listless, depressed 19 year-old visit a small school which they ran for traumatized children. Khaled reluctantly went. When he entered, a little girl traumatized by war, by death, by violence, by family rage taken out in abuse of children, scooted for fright under a table because of her trauma. Big Khaled, one-armed Khaled—and he is big—just naturally crawled under the table and talked and played with her and was able to eventually lead her back out into the light. He discovered in himself an unknown and unusual gift of compassion arising from his own suffering and a heartfelt desire to identify with and help traumatized children. Khaled, from that day, has totally dedicated his life to work with traumatized children, to use dance, music, play, storytelling, shouting to unlock and release the trauma within and to begin some healing. He is a “healer from Bethlehem”! Does that ring any bells?!

Friends brought him to Seattle for medical help, for education in how to work with the traumatized, and eventually to Seattle U. for not only a Bachelor's degree in Social Work but also a Masters degree in Not-for-Profit Leadership. He has now founded—with help from dozens of professors and fellow students (for no one can say no to big one-armed, laughing, suffering-eyed, compassionate Khaled... and neither can I!) the Children of Peace Foundation to build and run a new school in Bethlehem for all traumatized children there, whether Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. He's calling it “The Gabriel Project” because the angel Gabriel appeared to the prophet Daniel, to Mary of Nazareth, and to the prophet Mohammed. Trauma knows not the boundaries of religion.

The face of Khaled is now for me the face of the land holy to all three religions, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and struggle for peace, the place at the center and origin of what so many of us believe and live by. In fact Khaled's face so moves me that it has replaced the face of Jesus—born in Bethlehem somewhere near Khaled's ancestors who had already long been there—as we have traditionally depicted him in the west. Khaled's face has become the face of Jesus for me: both the smile and the suffering, but above all the compassion. Putting Khaled's face on the Palestinian Problem doesn't solve it but humanizes it and allows me as a person to enter into it, helps me to be one with it, to learn about and pay attention to it, and to respond to it from my position of influence and from my place of hope and of prayer. In fellowship with you as Rotarians and compassionate colleagues, I get to introduce Khaled and to bring his world to you, and to put a face on it for you. When Khaled looks on us how does service above self and from deep within self make us unable to say anything other than “yes” and to follow that “yes”?

Come on along with me again into my office because I am eager for you to meet another Seattle U. student who puts a face on a different world issue. Meet Anthony. If Khaled is the face of Palestine—and for me the face of the one born in Bethlehem whose name I bear as a Jesuit—Anthony is the face of Africa. Anthony's face is deep black, shiny, with a scar running

from forehead to cheek down one side of his boney face, and he has flitting bloodshot eyes. Anthony laughs too, he smiles, he kids, but he's more worn and more serious. His is the face of Africa we hear about and think we know in its violence, poverty, sickness but also the face of Africa the resilient, hopeful, warm, welcoming, with something to teach us about ourselves.

Anthony came into my office because Greg Alex from the Matt Talbott Center and Killian Noe from Recovery Café picked him up from the streets of Seattle, got him sober and recovering from alcoholism, and saw bright promise in his mind and heart and in his Catholic faith. Could I help to get him a university education? When I heard Anthony's story and looked on his face, saw Africa at its worst and best, and looked in those eyes, I could only say "yes". I took him to a big-hearted donor, Jim Sinegal of Costco, who also—after making sure Anthony was for real and would go back and help his own people—said "yes" to Anthony one quarter at a time for tuition, room, and board. Anthony had to prove himself and he has.

Anthony is from southern Sudan, he's now 41 and he is an undergraduate senior. He's had a long story. Anthony is one of 13 children of his mother, who is one of seven wives of his father, and so he is one of 51 brothers and sisters. After all those wives and all those children his father became a Catholic, and so too did little Anthony. His father was one of the top leaders of the Sudan People Liberation Army and was killed in action. In 1983 the family was scattered by war. That was the last time Anthony saw his mother. He was conscripted at age 11 as a child soldier; by age 13 he was strong enough to carry a pack and an AK47. He roamed Sudan for fully 16 years in a band of rebel soldiers till he finally escaped, found a refugee camp, met an Italian Jesuit priest there, and was sent to do high school in the Cameroons. He then was sent by Catholic Relief Services to do humanitarian and relief work in Goma in the Congo, filled with refugee Hutus from Rwanda, where he saw more bloodshed than when he was a boy soldier in war. He had to be evacuated with other relief workers, was declared a "Lost Boy" by the U.N. High Commissioner, and was resettled in one of three countries which would take the Lost Boys of Sudan, the United States of America. For some reason he was resettled as a political asylum from Sudan to South Dakota (this man did not have much luck in life!), where he worked for four years in a plastic garbage bag factory, a meat packing company, and a machinery assembly plant. There Anthony began for the first time in his life to drink.

Anthony came to Seattle to go to Alaska to try to make extra money, worked on a fishing boat for three months, landed back in Seattle and squandered it all on a drinking spree in 15 days. Ashamed to go back to South Dakota, he lived homeless on our streets, sleeping under bridges, lining up for food at shelters. He tells me, "Living on the streets of America was the hardest year of my life, worse even than being a boy soldier in Sudan or a witness to the bloodshed in Goma." One night a homeless beer-drinking street pal of his jumped from an overpass in an attempt at suicide. Anthony doesn't know what he himself did, only that he woke up the next day lying in his own blood with the gash down the side of his face, which has left the scar, not of Africa it turns out, but of America. That was the last day he has had a drink. It took a very long time and a long journey for Anthony to hit bottom.

Because of friends like Greg Alex of the Matt Talbott Center and Killian Noe of Recovery Café and Jim Sinegal of Costco, Anthony—though still alarmingly skinny and seemingly perpetually exhausted—has thrived at Seattle U. for the past two years and will graduate this year in Public

Affairs. He has recently become an American citizen and proudly brought me his certificate. He too wants to do a Masters in Not-For-Profit Leadership and to set up a foundation to start a sports camp back in Sudan on his grandfather's land so that boys there have something else to do other than what Anthony did. As he says about this project and its purpose, "Everything has to start somewhere."

I had not seen Anthony for a few months when he came to me in December to ask if he could not go to school for one quarter so he could go back to his village in Sudan and see his mother whom he has not seen for 28 years and who is now blind. He told me that friends from a Catholic parish were getting him to Khartoum and back. Good, I thought, he's not asking for money! But he then said he had to get from Khartoum to Juba and from Juba to Malakal, and then get up the Nile to his village to his mother, and had to bring her a gift, as well as gifts for his brothers and sisters (remember there are 50 of them). I asked him how much he was asking for, I cut it in half, and emailed my buddy, Jim Sinegal, to see if he could continue to help our Anthony. Jim called me back and—after some good cross-examination of this Jesuit priest about whether Anthony is for real—said "yes", if Anthony worked at Costco when he got back and paid Jim back part of the amount. Only then did I break the news to Jim that the gift Anthony had to bring to his mother after all these years away was a cow! (In Anthony's culture that's the only gift from a son which counts for a mother.) Jim said to me, "OK, Father, but that's the first time I've been asked to buy a cow for someone; here at Costco we sell meat, we don't give away cows!" I thought to myself, "Aren't people who say 'yes' the greatest!"

Anthony did get back, but just barely. I talked with him last Friday. He is skinnier and more haunted than ever. Here's what happened. He got up the Nile to his home village bringing a small cow which was not yet milking. (I think he economized because of me.) His ailing, blind mother was overjoyed to have him back. His clan slaughtered a bull to celebrate his return from America with a big feast. He said everything was destroyed in his village because of the wars and he had to rebuild his mother's house, but everyone was very happy because of the election and the promise of independence.

But one month ago today, on February 9th at 2:30 in the afternoon just as Anthony was paying the "donkey man" for bringing water from the river, the donkey man was shot. He was the first victim of a revenge attack upon the village by a militia general who lost the election. In the attack on the villagers that afternoon 270 were killed, many of them recent refugees from the north living in shelters by the river, many of them drowned in the river fleeing for their lives. Anthony—the ex-soldier—knew how to keep his family in one place, seated on the ground, unmoving. None of them were killed.

Although his mother wanted to keep Anthony there, she was the only one. Everyone else in his family insisted he leave, return to America, finish his studies, start his foundation and then come back to build the sports camp. As you can imagine, our haunted, skinny Anthony—now more haunted than ever—is the pride of his village, almost a savior from another world. He sees even more the need for the sports camp because he saw last month how the only thing children there know how to do is carry guns.

Anthony is a remarkable face on the issues of our world today: the face of southern Sudan, the face of child soldiers, the face of African violence but more so of African resilience, the face of political refugees in America, the face of Seattle homelessness, the face of alcoholism, the face of the hunger for education, the face of hope restored by very good people, and the face of faith, for that, Anthony says, is the only thing that has kept him alive and kept him going. When I look at Anthony I am amazed at how much one person can endure—which humbles and encourages me in my life troubles—and I see in his face the Africa which will come through—and that gives me hope. Doesn't looking at the face of Anthony confirm our commitment to service above self but also service from what is deepest within ourselves?

The final face is the face of immigration reform in America. I know Hernando—though that's not his real name—best of these three, but then everyone knows Hernando; he's the life of the campus, the most extroverted and ebullient Junior you could imagine, a student body officer, a resident hall assistant... and an undocumented person. He wrote to me when he wanted to come to Seattle U.—might as well start at the top with the big softie—asking if we give financial aid to undocumented students. We do. I got him in touch with the right people. He came. We fell in love with him. He not only comes to my office; sometimes I think he is going to take over the office and my job! Hernando is one face of the immigration issue which presses close to us and is all around us but which we don't see. He has a chubby face, short wiry hair, red cheeks, a wild eye, and a bouncing body he really owns. Hernando's not quiet or unconfident.

His father who worked in America as a farm laborer and benefited from Reagan's amnesty told his son back in their small village in Mexico that if he was tops in his class he would bring him north and show him snow. Hernando, of course, came out tops. His father tried every legal means and spent 30,000 pesos to try to bring his family to the United States, but failed. Hernando at the age of 11 and his younger brother came across the border hidden in the trailer of a semi-truck, his mother hidden in another trailer. They ended up in the Seattle area where at first he very fearfully tried to go to school and found to his amazement that there were translators and programs to learn English. He learned English quickly and was mainlined in high school in the Bellevue School District. Until the last week of his first year in high school he never raised his hand in history class—though he loved history—because of his betraying accent. Then he starred, did advanced placement courses and got an International Bachelor's diploma. He was bright, and he was going to college.

He was so bright that he tackled the problem of how to get his 32 Latino classmates of his senior class to graduate and go to college. In his school 76% of Latinos were dropping out, getting pregnant, joining gangs, or just giving up. He was going to get them into college. He spoke with Superintendent Mike Riley who blessed his efforts if he could do anything to help Latino students stay in school and graduate. Of his own initiative he sought the help of lawyers and got signed parental consent one by one so that he got access to the transcripts, the report cards, of all of his 32 Latino classmates! Each week he met with each of them, usually in groups of five, depending on the academic problems they had: which classes they had to take to go to college, what exams to take to graduate, what attendance to maintain, how to do better in failing courses, how to apply to college, and above all why it was worth it. Hernando figured out the system and he applied it personally to those Latino students week by week. None escaped Hernando's attention... nobody does! But that was not enough, once a month he stayed up most of the night

typing a personal letter in Spanish to the parents of each student, convincing them of college and getting their support and involvement. It worked. 27 of those 32 Latino students graduated from high school and went on to further studies.

Hernando got accepted at UW, WSU, Gonzaga, Whitman, and Seattle U. and for kicks applied to Harvard and Princeton just so he could receive a polite rejection letter on their fancy stationery... which in due time he got. He's studying Public Affairs, Political Science, and International Business—besides running Seattle U.—and he'd like to become a politician at the local level of government, a council member, mayor of either Bellevue or Seattle, or—and this is what I hope—Superintendent of Public Schools.

The hurdle of course is that when Hernando graduates he'll not be able to get a job because he cannot get a social security number. That's what brought him to my office. Together we fought for the passage of the national DREAM Act which would allow students like Hernando or soldiers from our Military Services—who came to the US as children and went through our schools—a qualification for work and a pathway to citizenship. It is, of course, a very small part of immigration reform. I got busy and got informed, wrote and published an Op Ed in The Los Angeles Times on Hernando and what the DREAM Act would do for America. It passed the House in November and got 55 votes in the Senate—but that was five votes short of what it takes for success in the Senate. Senator Patty Murray told me the galleries of the U.S. Senate were packed with hopeful Latino students when 55 Senators said “yes” to them and to their contributions to America, but they were crestfallen when that was not enough in our system. The vote was 55 for them, 41 against. Don't worry, they won't give up, nor should we, nor certainly will the brave and bubbly Hernando.

How could we not support these kids as our best future citizens and the best friends of our own, less-involved-in-America kids? Immigration reform has to start somewhere—as Anthony said about his project and purpose in Africa. I'd say a great place to start would be for our country to say “yes” to Hernando and to those 27 Latino classmates he knew how to get into college. Hernando graduates a year from this June: there is still time. When I put his face on this problem, I'm clear about what I should do. It's not about 11 million people in America, it's about Hernando. No matter what we do for this brilliant kid who wanted to see snow, his face will always show gratitude, joy, and hope to make his dream come true.

There you have it, three faces on three world problems: Khaled, the face of trauma in Palestine; Anthony, the face of Africa; Hernando, the face of undocumented Latino college students. They happened to be three men. I could as well have had you see the face of veiled Hajer, who has figured out how her Islamic religion should create secular states for the sake of religious tolerance and for the sake of its own truth and principles; or Rebecca, who is learning how to reteach trust to abused and neglected little children; or Katie from Wasilla, Alaska, who though she can't see Russia from her backyard, is the best and most powerful of what our women college students are becoming as they begin to take over America from us.

I end by asking myself and you two questions as we recommit ourselves to service above self and service from what is deepest in ourselves:

1. Should we really dare to address any world problem until we have put a face on that issue, a face which engages our hearts and calls for and makes possible a fuller human response from us?
2. What are the problems all around us in our world, our country, or our city which choose us, which are not problems but people, which walk in our doors, do have faces, and have the power to get us to say “yes” to them and to see where that little “yes” takes us and them?

Thank you, my colleagues, for the kind of compassionate colleagues you are and for the privilege to speak to you today.