

Remarks at Yale  
4/30/98

Transcript

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REMARKS AT YALE DIVINITY SCHOOL  
APRIL 30, 1998  
NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT**

[Acknowledgments -- Margaret Farley; Dean Wood; Dean Franklin; Kathleen Flinton; Susan McCone; the Reverend Dr. Letty Russell; The Women's Center; The Committee for Social Ministry; YDS; The Yale Community]

I am delighted to be here this morning. I am pleased that I finally have found my way to the Divinity School. (Laughter) I hung out on the other side of town when I was here but I know that this school has been not only home to many vibrant denominations but also inspiration for countless leaders in religion, government and academia.

I have been privileged in my own life to have benefited from the work of this institution through both my acquaintances with clergy and lay people who have passed through these doors. One whom I am particularly thinking of today is Congressman Walter Capps and his wife Lois, some of you may remember or have known the Congressman and now the Congresswoman, they built the Foundation for a Lifetime of Service here at the Yale Divinity School. In fact, I learned that they literally spent their honeymoon on a road trip, driving here in a salmon-colored Cadillac and arriving just in time for classes. So in a very real way I have seen the fruits of your work.

And it is a pleasure also for me to be back here at Yale, and to take part in a symposium that raises some of the most important questions facing us, as women, as men, as people of faith, as Americans, as human beings. I am here today to talk about how we find and raise our voices - and in many ways that's a discussion about the gift of faith in our own lives and the challenge it should present to us to preach and practice what that faith has taught us and to make a difference in the world around us.

Now I must admit that one of the last times I spoke about my faith and spirituality in a much larger setting at the University of Texas, there were many people who criticized me thinking that such topics should not be brought into the public arena. I was amused when one commentator wrote that my critics were divided between conservatives who suspected I did not mean what I said and liberals who feared that I did. (Laughter)

But for many of us in this room, one's faith and the struggle to practice it and to grow in it is very important to us. I come from a long line of Methodists who my father and grandfather claimed were converted actually by either, John or Charles Wesley in one of those fractious meetings where the people in the audience were literally throwing bottles of whiskey at the Wesley brothers. That strikes me as a possibly true story of my ancestors. (Laughter) But never the less, it has been a major part of my life ever since.

My mother taught Sunday school and my brothers and I were there as soon as the church doors opened not only for services but for all of the activities that were available to young

people growing up in the 50s and early '60s in a suburb of Chicago. My mother of course later confessed one of reasons she taught Sunday school was to keep an eye on my brothers, so they actually showed up after they were dropped off at church.

But I am grateful for my religious education and for the men and women who played a role in it. Of course, they taught me as best they could the lessons that they thought would stay with me through a lifetime but they also encouraged me, even challenged me to continue to grow and I am delighted that they did so. Although sometimes it is a difficult journey to be on one's own faith journey, it is a journey worth making and is one that has great rewards for any of us who embark upon it. I am particularly grateful that I had a youth minister in those long ago years who took it as part of his mission to tell this group of white suburban kids from a middle class suburb that there was a bigger world outside, one that they may not see on a day to day basis but would surely effect how they lived their lives in the future.

He even arranged for us to go down to Chicago and have youth exchanges with children in African American churches and Hispanic churches. We discussed civil rights and other controversial issues and one of the highlights of my early teenage years was being taken by that minister along with members of our youth group to hear Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speak in Chicago. He was constantly challenging us and telling us that we had to stretch, that if we were going to be Christians we had to understand what that meant in the fullest possible meaning. I certainly remember clearly the challenges that I faced in trying to put that into action. And as I thought about the voices that you are talking about here in the symposium I thought about voices that I heard in my growing up and now in my adult years, voices literally from all over the world, speaking different languages, coming from different faith experiences, but all struggling to try to find a vocabulary, a language for the end of the twentieth century that would legitimize their faith, place it in the midst of the pressures and stresses of the global economy and the increasing technological developments that affect our world and make it possible for those voices, even if they weren't magnified across the oceans but were quiet and in silent very very secret places to be heard.

You have been doing that here through your work. When you work at New Haven's hospices and hospitals and social services. When you organize this weekend's Silent AIDS March you are helping voices to be heard that would not otherwise be heard. You are helping to create in John Wesley words "the world as my parish".

What a perfect time to make that commitment because we are going through a period of change and transition. We're not quite sure where we will end up on the other side of it, but it is clear that this is a moment in history to be seized for those of us who believe that faith is important and who want all voices not only to be heard but respected.

It is also appropriate that you would have this symposium during this year of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights--when the world finally acknowledged a common standard by which we should judge our actions. The document puts it directly, "All people are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Now the last fifty years have seen some progress toward fulfilling that declaration but it has also seen backsliding and just

plain obstruction.

Yet we know that part of what we must continue to strive for is to expand the circle of human dignity until it includes everyone. We certainly can look back in American history and see how we have worked for now more than 222 years to make good on our own stated values and ideals, yet we know we have much unfinished business. We also are willing to recognize finally that one of the greatest changes that has occurred in the last hundred years and with greater acceleration in the last 50 years is the increasing respect for women's voices and that change, that social change, may well be along with technological change one of the two most important developments in human history that we have seen in a very long time. Yet like any great and sweeping changes, it causes reaction, it causes internal division, it causes all kinds of difficulties that have to be addressed honestly. I want to applaud YDS for working to give women a stronger voice in our religious institutions. We have made progress in the number of women ordained, the number of women seeking positions within religious institutions, the number of women attending divinity school and shifting attitudes but again as with every area of society our work is far from done.

I have seen first hand what it means when women's voices are listened to, and when women are encouraged to break their silence to be heard. At the Beijing conference, women from all over the world came together to declare that a nation's progress depends on the progress of its women. That the strength of political systems depends on the inclusion of women. That the vibrancy of economies depend on the full contributions of women. That the richness of a civil society depends on the participation of women. That human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights.

I remember being on a Voice of America call-in program shortly after I made that statement in Beijing and I received a call from a man overseas who wanted to know very earnestly what I had meant by that statement. I am amazed how often I am asked this question. I told the caller to shut his eyes and imagine the rights men had and apply them to women: the right to be valued as a human being, as a member of a family, to be protected from violence and exploitation, to be assured equal access to the tools of opportunity -- such as health care, education, legal rights, political participation, economic empowerment.

All over the world I have seen the debate that started years and years ago begin to take on an even greater force. We are truly seeing a revolution sweeping across the world about the roles and voices of women.

I have seen it in Santiago, Chile where I visited a microcredit enterprise that is funded by a religious institution and listened as a woman told me that when she got her small loan to buy a new high speed sewing machine she felt like a caged bird set free. I have seen it in the faces and activities of women at a housing project outside Cape Town, South Africa. Women who had lived in shanties and shacks as homeless squatters who decided they would take a stand for their own futures, their dignity, and build their own houses and again with the help of a religious institution bought some very scruffy land and began to build.

When I first visited them in 1997 they had 18 homes built and a lot of dreams. But I asked the group of women before me how many thought they would eventually have their own home and every hand was raised. When I took my husband back on our recent trip to Africa there were 140 homes and they had bought the property across the railroad tracks to build 400 more. They had a community center, a day care center and a store and they were letting their voices be heard.

The most important investment any nation can make today is in the education of girls and women. It is not just to acquire knowledge but it is to imbue with self confidence women who for generations have been told they don't amount to much, they don't mean anything, they are expendable. That is why I have been pleased to see the new emphasis being placed on girls education around the world.

In Uganda, for example, President Museebanie??? has promised universal primary education for boys and girls and I found myself in classrooms that would be any teachers nightmare, in anywhere else but Uganda, with 85 third graders and with the teacher proudly telling me there are more girls than boys here now.

In Bangladesh, I have met with government officials who are providing incentives, food and money, to families so they will keep their girls in school. And outside primary school for girls in Pakistan, with no electricity sitting under some trees in a dusty square, I had one mother tell me she was the mother of ten children, five boys and five girls. And her girls she had all sent to the primary school but now they couldn't go any further because there were no secondary schools. And she wanted me to tell her government to build a secondary school for her girls.

In Senegal, I met in 1997 with women and men who were learning about democracy and the role that one's voice plays in democracy. And I went out to a village and sat and talked with these, primarily women but with some supportive men, about what they were doing with their new found sense of empowerment. And they told me they were creating health services for their families, and they were trying to get a closer school so their children could attend more easily and cheaply. And they told me also, that they were concerned about the ancient practice known as female genital mutilation or female circumcision. Although it effects less than 20% of the women in Senegal, in many villages it was considered a right of passage.

During the year since I was in Africa the first time I began getting correspondence from women in some of the villages who were talking to me about what they could do about this ancient practice. And I remember telling them, and writing them, that they should think of it as a health issue, that it would damage, and they knew it would, their daughter's lives, perhaps even kill them.

And so when I went back this time, again with my husband, to Senegal I learned that one village had actually voted, with women's voices leading the way, to end the practice. And that men who had supported the women in the village, who were freer to travel than the women, had traveled from village to village. Among the things they took was a letter I had written them on White House stationary commending them for their study of this issue and they went from

village to village and they performed skits and they talked about why they should stop this practice. So that by the end of 1997 there were about 13 villages that had voted to stop the practice and in February the President of Senegal said he would advocate a law banning it.

When I went back I met with women from the village where it had all started. They showed me a skit they had used to educate their religious leaders, their neighbors, and their husbands. And one 66 year old man who had been one of those who traveled from place to place proudly stood up and said he had studied the Koran and there was nothing in it about this practice. And he felt very empowered to go from village to village telling them they had to stop it in order to save the lives and the futures of their girls.

In every corner of the earth that I have visited, I have met with women, usually in very small rooms like this, or in community gatherings and I have listened to their voices and they have told me the stories of their transition from being someone who did not believe she had worth to being someone who understood the contribution she could make to her own life, her family, and even her community.

We are seeing that happening in Northern Ireland, where Catholic and Protestant women are working side by side to address the root causes of Sectarian violence. I met with the two women leaders of the Women's Party in Northern Ireland that actually won a place at the table for the peace negotiations. And they recited to me chapter and verse the extraordinary abuse they were subjected to. They had no right to be there as women, they had no contribution to make and yet day after day they showed up and they held their ground and they talked about the issues that were on the minds of women and I remembered very well that when I first went to Belfast meeting with women who told me how they were crossing those Sectarian lines, because they were tired of seeing their husbands, and their fathers, and their sons and their nephews gunned down. And as one woman memorably said, "You cannot fry flags in a pan". And to her that meant all of this violence, all of this prejudice and discrimination was standing in the way of a better life, for her and her family.

So we should celebrate these voices but we also should challenge ourselves, even here in our own country there are women and men who feel they do not have any voices, who feel they do not have the legitimacy for their voices to be heard.

I remember in New Delhi, a college student giving me a poem that she had written, and it was one of the most moving descriptions of what we mean when we talk about women's voices. This is just an excerpt from it.

"Too many women in too many countries speak the same language of silence. There must be freedom if we are to speak and there must be power if we are to be heard. Those of us who have freedom and power must give voice to those who cannot speak, for as long as women are valued less, fed last, over worked, under paid, not schooled, subjected to violence, the potential of all of us to be God's children, to contribute to a peaceful and prosperous world will not be realized."

So for women and men. We must raise our voices, those of us who are blessed with the capacity to do so. We also in our country must realize that the issues that women are concerned about are not marginal issues, they are issues about how we live together and what kind of society we will build.

I remember during the 1996 election when there was much talk about issues like education for children, and early childhood development, and the family and Medical Leave Act and the like. Even issues like curfews to get children off the streets and uniforms to make them safer and more productive at school. Some political commentators derided these issues as the feminization of politics. Well I found that a very inapt because for me it was the humanization of politics. Don't fathers worry about finding a safe place to leave their children while they are at work? Don't sons want to insure that their elderly parents have adequate health care in their later stages of life?

And yet I could understand the confusion that these issues and women's voices were creating as we were breaking through old stereotypes and creating new ways of thinking about politics, about society, about our country. I'm well acquainted through my years of study with the concept of real politick among nations, the balance of power that one has to strike if one is to try to keep an even keel as we navigate the waters of an often dangerous world.

But what I think women are saying loudly today and some men who understand what they saying are chiming in as well is that national and international politics are no longer just about real politick, they are also about real life politics. They are about how we do live together, how we educate our children, how we treat one another. And because it is about real life politicks, it is about creating a balance, not only that balance that used to be in the balance of power among nations, but the balance of power among men and women, the balance of power among institutions in our society so we are engaged in a new enterprise.

And in the next century we will have to face the consequences of many of these changes. And I hope that we will be better prepared to do so than we have in the past. Because we will have to ask ourselves, will we work to ensure that every country understands how important it is to treat their women with respect and dignity? Will public and private institutions help empower women with the tools they need to expand their choices, and take responsibility for their lives. Will recognize the joint responsibility men and women have for the nurturing of the next generation? And will that mean that businesses as the public sector will do more to make their workplaces family friendly, to understand how important it is to help parents be both effective at work and at home in fulfilling their responsibilities to their children?

Will financial institutions provide more credit for low income borrowers, particularly women who are looking for ways to enhance their incomes and their futures? Will the mass media think harder about the messages they are sending our daughters? Messages that tell them to value their dress size more than the size of their dreams. Will men respect the women in their lives because no fight for women's rights or to hear women's voices will ever be won without our brothers, and fathers, our husbands, and sons recognizing why it is so important to our joint

future. Will we stop pigeon holing women for the choices they make? Will we work to support one another?

These are all questions that certainly have social and economic and political implications, but I would argue they also have implications of faith. Because it is difficult to imagine how if we can start from a position of believing that we are all created equal, we are all God's children, that we could have gone off in such disparate directions. So we have to not only reaffirm that fundamental commitment of faith, but we also have to think of how we are called to explain it and live it in our different ways.

Many of you will enter the lay or ordained ministry and some of you will be educators, others will work in social services, or on behalf of social justice. I hope some of you consider the marketplace and bring your values to bare there. And I hope others of you do consider the political and public realm because they are desperately in need of your understanding.

We have to finally, work to open up our own hearts and minds. Everyone quotes Alexis de Tocqueville, and I think for good cause. But my favorite phrase is the one that was made famous some years later by Belle and others, who talked about the habits of the heart. And in talking about the habits of the heart, we are really trying to understand what it is that sustains a democracy. How do we pass on our values, our beliefs, to those who come after? How do we understand our responsibility as human beings and as citizens? These are big questions that will probably never be answered fully by anyone, they will continue to bedevil us and they will probably challenge generations to come.

But we have to make a good faith start. On finding how to describe and articulate the answers to the questions we face today. And to imbue the debate about who we are as a people, with the values and ideals of faith. It is our children of course who will decide whether or not we have approached life's challenges with the recusant humor and humility. And whether our voices, become a chorus that can be heard wide and far. A chorus that fills our souls and serves our communities. A chorus that gives voice to the voiceless, and expands the circle of dignity and rights to all human beings.

I like the words in Isaiah 58. I always think of Isaiah shouting at the top of his lungs everything he said, and that must of left a lot of days of sore throat, because he said so much (Laughter) But when he said "Shout out! Do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet!" I think of all the women and men I have seen throughout our country and around the world, who have never had anyone tell them they had anything worth saying or worth hearing. They need to be told they can be part of an orchestra. They may not be the trumpet. They may be just the triangle, but they have a role in making the music and filling the air with what we need to hear in the years to come. Thank-you very much.