



Spirituality and Justice Award 2008

Homily of Paul Farmer, M.D., Ph.D.

All Saints Parish, Brookline, Massachusetts



I am very grateful for this award and for the chance to speak to you, and I'm grateful to my friends Don Foxworthy and Sharon Siwec for suggesting that I be invited to speak here at All Saints. It's somewhat conventional to open remarks, whenever awards are concerned, with disclaimers. Here are mine: I'm pretty sure I don't deserve an award for spirituality and justice, and for several reasons: as a physician, one person in a huge team seeking to promote basic rights for those living in poverty, I should not be singled out in such a manner. No one can promote justice on his own, and the Partners In Health team, thousands strong, promotes justice by making pragmatic interventions designed to bring health care, education, and clean water to the poorest. It's this collective work that Sharon and Don and many others here support. There are other reasons that lead me to worry about the quality of my own spirituality: as an American in the time of water-boarding and war and Guantanamo, I find that my faith, both in humanity and in God, is shaken every day.

As an anthropologist, I was trained to look at religions, rituals, and spiritualities of all sorts in sociological terms as universally encountered "belief systems" or cosmologies. As a reader, my favorite book on spirituality is a novel about a cloistered Catholic nun whose spiritual life is completely arid until she starts having blinding migraines and becomes, in a short space of time, a celebrated poet of spirituality: she is later found to have a brain tumor and then must ask questions of causality about the origins of her newfound faith (to my delight, this beautiful novella, *Lying Awake*, was written by a good Jewish boy). As someone who has long worked in Haiti, I've lost two friends in recent years: one of them, the human-rights activist Lovinsky Pierre-Antoine, is still officially "missing," and yet I have little faith that he is still alive. All these experiences make it hard to say, blandly and without qualifications, that the world is run by a triple complex of justice, power and love.

And, often enough, I find it hard to disagree with Albert Einstein, who famously referred to himself as "a deeply religious nonbeliever." But he also wrote this:

I have never imputed to Nature a purpose or a goal, or anything that could be understood as anthropomorphic. What I see in Nature is a magnificent structure that we can comprehend only very imperfectly, and that must fill a thinking person with a feeling of humility. This is a genuinely religious feeling that has nothing to do with mysticism.¹

Richard Dawkins has been blisteringly critical of people who "cherry-pick" quotations from Einstein to support arguments regarding the existence of God.² To draw on popular parlance, I won't go there. Instead, I would like to say that I, like Einstein, see in "Nature" a magnificent structure. This spirituality, if that's what it is, I can draw on always: when seeing the sick human body recover quickly with modern medicine, or, more conventionally, when contemplating the awe-inspiring view from the volcanic mountains of northern Rwanda, or a towering redwood in California, or the astounding wildlife in Maasailand, or the beauty of koi in a garden which, though made by human hands, is surely a genuflection to nature.

¹Cited in Dawkins, 2006, p. 15.

²Dawkins, 2006, p. 15.

The example of a garden leads me to speak of another spirituality, encountered in some of the most unlovely places in the world. Now I will paraphrase Einstein and, I'd guess, part ways with him: what I sometimes see in *humanity* is a magnificent structure we can comprehend only imperfectly, and although it has nothing to do with mysticism, observing this structure fills me with a sense of humility and wonder and renewed faith.

I'll give an example from an unlovely place: the inside of Rwanda's largest prison. Not the first place you might go for a big dose of spirituality or justice, but there you have it: in prisons you can learn not only about crime and cruel punishment, but also about atonement, forgiveness, and – if you're lucky – about the humane treatment of people who have done terrible things.

Just three weeks ago, I was within the high, orange-bricked walls of Nsinda prison. Of course I was there to see patients. The first time I went into this blighted place, in 2005, there were 13,000 men and a few hundred women crammed into a very small space. Although there were no juveniles in prison, infants were born there every few days. Of the adults, over 70% had been arrested on genocide-related charges. The place was so crowded, with prisoners stacked in makeshift bunks under huge, mildewed, and dilapidated tents, that it looked like a Hieronymus Bosch painting of Hell. The smells were unpleasant. And I knew, as any doctor would, that epidemics of tuberculosis, cholera, hepatitis, and other problems were sure to follow such overcrowding in the absence of modern sanitation.

Today, there are less than half as many in the prison, although it remains Rwanda's largest. To be precise, as the prison director is, there were, on April 3, 2008, 6334 prisoners. Of course, less crowding makes his work and ours much easier, but how, after a genocide, do you halve the population of a prison without promoting impunity? As noted, the majority of the detainees were there on genocide-related charges. There had to be a lot of guilty parties in this crime. Best estimates are that, in the 100 days following April 6, 1994, a million Rwandans were killed upon government orders. It is thought that some 14-17% of the adult male Hutu population followed orders to kill all those identified as Tutsis and also Hutus considered "soft," that is, sympathetic to the plight of those targeted for death.

After a genocide, the task of a successor government is to restore not only order but also a sense of justice. If we do the math, it's easy to see that even with 200,000 in prison, as was true before the amnesties, many of the guilty must have been walking free. This was Rwanda's dilemma: to warehouse the guilty is expensive and, from the point of view of an infectious-disease physician, dangerous. To allow them to walk free, to leave them in impunity, is an offense to justice, to the memories of the victims and the feelings of their surviving kin.

How to resolve this dilemma? Many people in my circles praise what is loosely termed the "truth and reconciliation process," but the process that occurred in South Africa, for example, required courtrooms with electricity, lawyers with access to books and computers, and a legal system that, although deeply tainted by apartheid, could claim at least a few independent judges. No such resources existed in Rwanda after the genocide and very few exist today. Nsinda prison, even with 13,000 detainees, had not a single doctor on staff and only one nurse. Food procurement alone was a challenge that would, I'm sure, overwhelm any of us.

One of the ways that the Rwandan government has confronted this challenge – what to do with the guilty – has been to revive the notion of the *gacaca* courts. The name means "grassy justice" because aggrieved parties are supposed to meet with village elders and air their problems publicly, sitting in a circle on the ground. In post-genocide Rwanda, almost anyone in good standing who wished to go through a training course could become a *gacaca* judge (I know a cook, an auxiliary nurse, and a peasant farmer who are judges) and some say up to 250,000 people have gone through this training. These *al fresco* courts do not handle the gravest of genocide-related crimes, but do handle the great majority of them. In the practice of these courts, public atonement for

misdeeds is the surest way to avoid or shorten prison sentences and end up doing community service instead. Such avowals are the best way for prisoners to get out of prison, too. Public involvement is close to mandatory, and a few of Rwanda's 30 districts have already completed the *gacaca* process (I know this because in one of the places we work, we've been given the tribunal building and are transforming it into a hospital). Tuesday is *gacaca* day in Rwinkwavu, the place I've spent most of my time, and many activities slow to a crawl when the court is meeting.

But how do the accused reach, physically, the places in which they killed? The places in which their victims and the relatives of their victims live? How do the accused avoid becoming the victims of assaults and revenge killings on the way to put in their appearance? It's the job of the prison system to escort prisoners between the prisons and the *gacaca* courts. Sometimes, when the prisoners must face their victims or their kin in an area far from where they are detained, they stay in guarded facilities on the way back to these towns and villages. One of my co-workers, Naomi Rosenberg, was visiting Rwanda for the first time this past month and was in the prison when I last saw patients there. She asked the soft-spoken warden if any of the prisoners had been harmed during this transfer process. "Not a single one since I've been here," replied the director of Rwanda's largest prison, who'd been working in the system for years. Others from outside the system admit that the entire process has been largely non-violent, in spite of expert predictions, many of them from "the international human-rights community," that the *gacaca* process was doomed to fail.

That same day, I saw a couple of patients, both suffering from AIDS and tuberculosis and complications of therapy. I've worked for well over a decade in prisons in Siberia, Haiti, and Rwanda, and it has never been my practice to ask prisoners about their crimes or alleged misdeeds even though the duration of our therapies – many months for TB and a lifetime for AIDS – does require me to ask about the duration of their sentences. On that day, I did so in both instances. One of the patient-prisoners was a man I'd met before his arrest. I'd seen him a couple of times in the hospital and in the clinic in Rwinkwavu. He'd been sentenced to 15 years, but his case, he told me, was on appeal. I asked how long it would be before his appeal would be heard. "Maybe a couple of months," he replied. I thought of some of the prisoners I'd seen in the States, where appeals take many years, or in Haiti, where the vast majority of prisoners have never even been tried and sentenced: they're simply detainees. (A moment ago, I mentioned my missing friend Lovinsky: he was one of those seeking to improve the execrable conditions of Haitian prisons).

The other man I saw that day had been in prison since the genocide and so had served, he said, almost 14 of the 19 years to which he had been sentenced. I didn't have to ask anything more – I only asked about his sentence because he had AIDS and was now slated to receive what's called a "retreatment" regimen for TB, which was longer and also required us to alter his AIDS regimen.

But I had, of course, my own private and unspoken questions.

Later that day, we shared a meal with the prison director and two of the nurses – although we are still the only doctors who go into the prison, there are now four nurses. I wanted to make sure our recommendations would be followed, and so part of our meal was spent discussing the problem of seeing that the more "complicated" prescriptions were followed to the letter. The director knew the older man pretty well, which is surprising given the sheer numbers inside the prison. "He's one of the few who refuses to admit that he did anything wrong," the warden said. "That's why he's likely to serve out his sentence."

I thought just then about Lovinsky, who has tried so hard to support, in Haiti, a legal system that rejects impunity and favors human rights. Lovinsky believed, believes, in this vision so much that he was almost certainly willing to give his life for it – and I say this in praying that he did not.

I said already that Lovinsky's fate, whatever it may be, has led me to question my own faith. But a few days later, as I continued to contemplate my Haitian friend's fate from the middle of rural Rwanda, I found myself in a jeep between a town called Butaro, where we are building, along with others, a hospital in a large region that has none, and Rwinkwavu, where we've rebuilt a hospital abandoned since the genocide. At the wheel was a young man named Thierry and I was the only passenger. He'd been born in exile in neighboring Burundi and returned after the genocide. Conversations about such matters cannot be expected to flow except in private, and even then not always. But sometimes, in long drives like this one, there comes a torrent of feeling and a story, almost always about 1994. I felt honored that Thierry had shared his with me. On that ride, I learned that all four of his grandparents were killed during the genocide, as were most of his uncles and aunts and cousins and as was, most painfully to Thierry, his older brother, away at school in Rwanda in 1994. Almost his entire family was wiped out in less than a month.

I didn't say much while Thierry spoke, asking only a few questions. Among the astounding things this young man told me were the following: that during the *gacaca* process in Butare, where his brother died, he decided to go and speak to the man who had killed him. "You decided to go to the prison?" I asked. To the prison. "Why?" To see if he could forgive this man face-to-face: "I found that when I tried to pray, I had not forgiven the man who killed my brother. I hadn't forgiven any of them. And I started to ask myself how I could speak to God through prayer if I was unable to forgive. I prayed about it a lot and decided to go to the prison and speak to him." Thierry had been no more than 19 at the time.

Of course I asked Thierry what the man said. "He said he was sorry. Very sorry. And that the government had made him do it."

Thierry says he forgave the man right then and there.

It has been my great good fortune to meet, again and again over the past 25 years, so many people who restore my tattered faith. In a world in which a war in Iraq can be launched on the basis of lies missed by the watchdog agencies and by the journalists who are supposed to expose the lies of politicians, I have met people like Thierry and the gentle prison director at Nsinda. In a world in which very powerful nations, including mine, can conspire to overturn popular democracy in Haiti, I get to meet people like Lovinsky Pierre-Antoine.

In a world in which complex medical services are deemed "not cost-effective" for the poor, I get to meet nurses and surgeons from the Brigham and Women's Hospital who perform, as they did last month, free open-heart surgery in Rwanda. In a world in which the public good is undermined by policies wishing to see wholesale privatization and commodification of what should be considered basic services to which all humans should have rights, I get to work with people who believe that a public clinic or hospital in rural Africa should have beautiful grounds (and even koi ponds) and clean spaces as well as supplies and trained personnel. I work with people who understand the recent food riots in Haiti as the predictable response of families who believe it is their right to have enough to eat in a world with ever-deepening inequalities. I work with genocide survivors willing to help rebuild clinics inside a prison full of those who perpetrated the mass killings in which their families were killed. I work with people like Lovinsky, who believed – who believes still, if he is alive – that justice can prevail in even the most unjust circumstances.

There: I am back to a spirituality that draws on the world around us, with all its fragile and threatened beauty, and not on the worst that we humans can do to each but rather the best. Instead of vengeance, cruelty, and indifference, the spirituality of justice leads us to a different path. What can we do to restore, to rebuild, a broken world? What can we do to promote peace and beauty in a world in which the poor, especially, are exposed to violence and ugliness?

These are rhetorical questions, of course, but they are as spiritual as they are pragmatic.

I will close by noting that they are, fundamentally, questions of justice. I confess that I have long been more comfortable with questions of justice than with the topic of spirituality. That is because I have seen notions of faith and spirituality perverted in our affluent and often imperial country, a country in which unjust wars are waged and even called "Crusades." I have felt alienated from faith as it is portrayed in our country. In fact, I was stumped as to how best to close this sermon when I wrote it *en route* back from Rwanda to the United States. But just last week, upon returning, I received a book sent to me by Jim Wallis, an evangelical preacher who terms himself a progressive. I read his book, *The Great Awakening*, over the past few days, and it helped me to reconcile my doubts about our right to invoke faith and spirituality in a world of great injustice. "The Religious Right is over," writes Wallis with what I hope is warranted confidence, "but the revival may be just beginning – a revival of justice."³ His theology eased my angst: "Two of the great hungers in our world today are the hunger for spirituality and the hunger for social justice. The connection between the two is the one the world is waiting for, especially the new generation. And the first hunger will empower the second."⁴

Unless we link our spirituality to justice, and to the good works we know to be necessary in a world in which a billion people go without adequate food, clean water, health care, and a modicum of justice, we will have, as was noted two thousand years ago, nothing but dead faith.

I share your optimism about the sea change now before us and about the possibility of a spirituality of justice and equality, and am honored to be here today.

Thank you.

Brookline, April 27, 2008

³p. 25.

⁴p. 12.