

Dave Jarvis
(via e-mail)

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Truth, Damn Lies, and Execution

Dear Senator Barack Obama,

Three hundred years ago, courts of justice could be blinded by superstition. In those dark times, people in positions of power could snuff out the light from any candle of hope that the condemned still held for life. Innumerable falsely accused victims were burned at the stake, ignited by the flames of flourishing injustice, and fanned by the falsehoods spoke by their peers. Sadly, no joyous sunrise would come to end their tortured nights of captivity.

But three hundred years later, courts remain hoodwinked by dishonesty. Three hundred years later, lives are still tossed to the proverbial pit of fire. Three hundred years later, people in positions of power demonstrate that they are impossibly all-knowing, all-seeing, and all-hearing by summarily judging the actions of others and then doling out executions with omnipotent strength. And so I share with you today a reiteration that acts can be neither omniscient nor omnipotent, that we all have faults, and by extension so do our governments and judicial conditions.

In a sense, capital punishment is like writing a cheque to purchase the life of a criminal. A payment, some argue, that is cheaper than supporting lifelong imprisonment. Yet the laws of Australia, Canada, the United States of America, and numerous others guarantee the “unalienable Rights” of Life and Liberty. Our past actions liberated slaves and all but abolished slavery. Our present actions show that we believe the authority to limit the life of a human being belongs to no one. But coldheartedly, these representative cheques continue to be cashed at Banks of Justice, even though Banks of Life and Liberty would return them marked “insufficient funds”!

We must refuse to endorse Banks of Justice that continue to honour such cheques.

We refuse to believe that money can indemnify human lives, regardless of the crimes in question. These deplorable bank drafts must be nullified to redeem our courts of justice and our humanity.

Every moment that our voices remain silent widens the gap between being human and being humane. There is an urgency that cannot, must not, be ignored. Every hour of apathy lends credence to legalized vengeance. Now is the time to speak out for those lost voices smothered behind iron. Now is the time to turn our backs on barbaric States. Now is the time to tell the people in power that killing is wrong. Now is the time to teach compassion to all of our children.

Lives are lost forever by ignoring the fierce urgency of Now. The dark winter veil of cold-blooded murder will not be lifted until the springtime infusion of life is guaranteed throughout our societies. And those who believe that tomorrow will be just another day will have a rude awakening if the executions continue. There will be neither rest nor tranquility in the world until unconditional life is granted to all its citizens. The snowstorm of revolution will not end until the clear dawn of humble justice emerges.

And to the people united on the peaceful threshold of merciful justice: Do not embark in wrongful deeds. Life cannot be sanctioned by vengeful actions or riotous demonstrations. No, the Right to Life will not be chartered by outbursts of physical violence. Our actions must embody this monumental goal; we must segregate villainous force from moral force.

When light from our morality is used to judge the shadows cast by criminals, we must appraise ourselves and our laws by the same rays of ethics. To do otherwise places governments and judicial systems beyond the reach of mediated introspection, beyond the grasp of justice itself. By this beam of self-inspection, when a death sentence is dispatched we lift the offender to the moral equality of societal norms, and find ourselves standing deep inside the shadows of criminals.

We shall not walk in those shadows.

We will walk without the spectre of hypocrisy to haunt our footsteps. And as we walk, our steps bring us closer to a golden era that waits ahead.

We cannot turn back.

There are those who oppose the progression toward leniency. They raise statistics like a stoic hammer, driving the belief that executing murderers will reduce homicides. However, this interpretation does not a nail in the coffin make. Numbers are tools to add weight to debates; debates that must be continually cross-examined for applicability and accountability. Yet statistics are also the claw to the hammer's head, pulling out deterrence arguments by suggesting that legitimising murder through the death penalty actually raises the rate of homicides!

So we will not be satisfied by statistics. We can never be satisfied as long as the guiltless are slaughtered. We cannot be satisfied when fallible humans are the judge and the jury to deadly trials. We can never be satisfied while the Press pilots our opinions with sensationalized stigma. No, no, we are not satisfied and we will not be satisfied until tolerance towers like the tallest of trees and forgiveness flowers like an endless forest.

Let us be mindful that forgetfulness is not a bedfellow of forgiveness. To forget that many death row inmates committed terrible crimes would let befall a grave injustice. By

the same token, to overlook that the dead can only be exonerated posthumously defiles the memory of innocent victims. Instead of incapacitation, let criminals atone for their crimes with positive contributions to society. Instead of martyrs, make them educators. Instead of miscreants, fashion them material makers. Instead of misfits, mold them as missionaries. Instead of being slain for malevolence, give them the chance to change.

Even though we face the turmoil of retribution, we can see the tenets of redemption. Within these tenets, I, too, have a dream.

I dream of a day when no human will have the right to revoke the life from another.

I dream of a day when miscarriage of justice does not result in fresh flowers to a solitary grave, but in the freedom of an unjustly accused prisoner.

I dream of a day when even the ghosts of Salem Massachusetts, whose deaths were inconceivably shackled to “spectral evidence”, and whose memories still mock modern justice, may finally find peace.

I dream of a people who understand that no heated crime warrants a cold resolution by death; that death is unjustly everlasting when pit against both fleeting and permanent transgressions; and that humane disciplines can meet the needs of society while being a fair reproach for felonies.

I have a dream today!

I dream of a world where we can judge our justice systems as though they were individuals: not by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character. Where at the highest courts of international law we find that justice is morally, ethically, and logically consistent across all countries.

I have a dream today!

I dream of a world in which Mercy opens the Door of Knowledge to reveal that the real truth in any situation can never be known entirely. A world in which we are keenly aware that the whirlwind of motives, emotions, psyche, and actions behind a trial cannot be judged and punished with absolute conviction. A world that has cast off the rattling chains of death to embrace the foundations of life.

I dream of a world without injustice buried within injustice. A world where the poverty line does not foreshadow a flatline. A world where the accused wealthy and the convicted poor face their fates with equal outcomes and equal opportunities. A world where the concept of just justice is not an ironic fairytale, but a practical reality.

This is our dream, a dream inspired by an extraordinary man.

In the spirit of Dr Martin Luther King Jr, a man who made an enormous march for liberty, these words strive to be an extension of his ideas, a continuation to his ideals. But this time the walk is for life. And along the road to the global abolishment of capital punishment sits a world that is one small step closer to unity. It is only through this

journey will our collective conscience truly be free at last.

Sincerely,

Dave Jarvis