

2006 Golden Pen of Freedom Acceptance Speech by Akbar Ganji

Ladies and gentlemen:

In the presence of representatives from the world media gathered here, let me begin by thanking the World Association of Newspapers for giving me the Golden Pen Award. I am humbled by the honor. I think the prize should in fact go to all Iranian dissidents and freedom-fighters.

And in this category, more than anyone the prize should go to those who fought for freedom and human rights and were as punishment slaughtered during what came to be known as "Serial Murders." The prize should go to the prisoners who in 1987 were executed while serving their sentences in prisons across Iran. The prize should go to all of those who were tortured and paralyzed only because they worked in journalism, and contributed to defending free thought in the country. The prize should go to all the dissidents who were deprived of their social rights, and imprisoned. The prize should go to all those who have been forced into exile only because they dared to think and live differently, and continue to be deprived of their right to return to their country and have been left with no choice but to live in exile.

The prize should go to all the Iranian intellectuals who worked hard in the last two decades to inform Iranians about freedom and liberty. Here I stand on behalf of all of these groups and accept this prize in their name and in order to show appreciation for their glorious struggle.

What will follow are the views of only one Iranian dissident about the current world conditions. They are no more than an effort to "think out loud," an attempt to offer problems for a dialogue, for an exchange of views and finally for critical but reasoned discussion. What I offer here is a synopsis of a lengthier piece whose text has been made available in both Persian and English.

Our ideal is the creation of a humane world, but in fact we live in a world steeped in reckless and widespread violence, a world of genocides and civil wars, of ethnic cleansing and gross violations of citizens' rights in many corners of the globe. These instances of moral depravity have deprived all of us of the chance to live in a secure world of enduring peace. But in our world today, there are also bright lights of hope. Today, more than ever in human history, thanks to improved means of communication, people, free from their ethnic, racial, and religious identities-or more specifically, free from any secondary identity-simply as human beings, are concerned about the fate of other human beings.

Today we are witnessing the birth of a new moral concept in the world: Global citizenship. Today vast numbers of people no longer consider themselves merely the citizen of a state, no longer feel compassion only for their compatriots, but rather consider themselves also citizens of the world. They feel compassion with other global citizens. Our gathering here today is the best example of solidarity among citizens of the world. But we must accept that we are only at the beginning of the road. There are still too many calamities around us, calamities like terrorism, coercion, dictatorship, discrimination, and war.

These are indications that we need to still find ways to expand this solidarity, and give reality to the concept of world citizenship. In my mind, Kant is the philosopher who can be most helpful to us on this path. According to Kant, humans have rights by the mere fact of their humanity, and in that sense, humans are all equal, and laws are just only if they treat everyone without exception, equally, and they can safeguard the liberty of all. Kant invites us to be humble and benevolent. Such benevolence and humility require us to always put ourselves in the place of the other, and do unto others as we do unto ourselves.

Only in this way can human solidarity be strengthened. Only through this perspective will we consider our gifts and privileges, as well as our needs, things we must share with others. According to Kant, humans are ends in themselves, and must never be used as means to other ends. An authentic life is one wherein every individual has the right to pursue his or her own goals, and is not deemed merely a tool to be used by others to achieve their goals. If we can create equality for everyone, then this authentic life can become a reality, and people can, in cooperation and competition with one another, pursue their goals successfully, and have a chance to offer their values for scrutiny and discussion in the public domain.

Today we need to help create and strengthen a truly viable, clever, and vital public domain, and we ourselves must move in that arena, and use it to control and curtail power and criticize those politicians who have turned human beings into tools and means. Only through such a public sphere can we stand up to ideological and intellectual totalitarianism that wishes to impose its vision of a perfect world forcefully on everyone. As Kant has written, the principle of human freedom is the foundation of a democratic state and for him, freedom is when no one can coerce me to pursue my happiness according to their vision. Everyone must be free in their pursuit of their own happiness.

Central to this idea of freedom, and democracy is that women must have equal rights with men, and must be allowed free and equal access to the public sphere. The worst kind of despotism is a patriarchal system wherein men define everyone's norms of

happiness. But we can go one step further than Kant, and declare that if we are to have a world where each individual is free to pursue his or her own goals and idea of happiness, we must cement a solidarity against violence and those who promote it.

The foundation of this solidarity can be Jesus Christ's famous aphorism, "Love Thy Neighbor." But we must have an expanded view of what neighbor means: My neighbor is not just my "brother in faith;" any human being anywhere in the world, regardless of their dress, their color, their gender, and their faith is my neighbor. I must respect their dignity. Citizens of the world under every name are my neighbors. A violent act against any citizen of the world is a violent act against all of us.

Defending the rights of these neighbors can create the kind of solidarity we need, the kind that deters violent forces from treading on the rights of even the most unknown citizen of our world. The other principle we must cultivate is the notion of publicity and transparency in politics. These characteristics were amongst Kant's ideals as well.

Every decision in the public domain, particularly every political decision, must be made publicly and transparently. It must be open to the scrutiny of everyone. We must shed the light of enquiry into the dark house of politics. Only this way can we criticize, analyze, and deconstruct the decisions that are intertwined with our fate. Only this way can we approve, improve, or reject these decisions. Today the role of the media particularly is to focus this light into these dark houses.

Our world today suffers from violence; this violence has many facets. It creates different forms of pain and suffering. Terror, oppression, imprisonment, and solitary confinement are only the more obvious facets of this violence. They are the tools of despots and dogmatists, who use them to force their ideas and ideals on the citizenry. Human rights knows no boundaries, and accepts no exceptions. The idea that this religious tenet or that local cultural norm render certain human rights obsolete or impractical must not be allowed to be used by despots to legitimize their despotism.

Today we must struggle against violence in every one of its facets. Today the kind of revolutionary violence referred to by people like Sartre, Fanon, and Marcuse are no longer legitimate. We have seen how violence only begets violence; how revolutionary violence destroys both the bad and the good. We must no longer use violence as a weapon to fight violence. Peaceful resistance, peaceful civic resistance, must replace revolutionary violence.

My slogan for fighting against oppression and violence is simple: Forgive, but never forget. Forgiveness is a virtue that overcomes even legitimate anger and hatred. Forgiveness foregoes revenge.

But forgiving injustice does not mean forgetting it. It does not mean foregoing the struggle against it. Forgiveness only implies giving up hatred and vengeance. Forgiveness leaves hatred to the hateful, ill-wishing to evildoers, and revenge to the vengeful. But forgiveness does not condone forgetting the crime. Nor does it condone our duty to resist bravely the criminal rulers or the dogmatic defenders of past crimes. We must always remember that the crime and the injustice did occur. We must always remember the conditions that led to the creation of fascism, totalitarianism, and other forms of dictatorship, that have been the source of injustice.

And we must inculcate this knowledge into our individual and collective memory, so that we can ensure that they shall never happen again. Paul Ricœur said it best when he declared that moral and committed humans hear constantly in their memory the voices of all the oppressed, from behind prison walls, concentration camps, and torture chambers. They hear these cries and never allow these voices of conscience to be drowned out. The principle of "Forgive but never forget" is the sine qua none of a democracy, free from violence. After discovering the truth, after shining the light of truth into the dark houses in which violent decisions have been made, after exposing injustice, we will forgive the despots and the criminals, so that the vicious cycle of violence does not continue. Anger, hatred, and hostility cannot create a democratic society free from the scourge of violence. That is why we need to forgive, but never forget. Forgiveness does not wash away the crime, or mangle our memories; it only does away with the need for hatred and revenge; it does not obviate struggle, but only the need for hatred. Those who forgive go on with their fight against evil with a heart filled with joy and free of hate.

War is the other scourge of our time, and our citizens of the world have as their goal an end to all wars, and the achievement of an enduring peace; the kind of enduring peace first advocated by Kant. According to Kant, enduring peace can come only if democracy spreads around the world. Democracies usually don't enter into wars with one another. Today, only citizens of the world can, through the requisite sense of responsibility that comes with such citizenship, stop the khodsar decisions of khodsar governments in fanning the flames of war.

Now that I have these few words, I can with a more deliberate consciousness accept, on behalf of all the citizens of the world, and as a humble member of this great community that fights every facet of violence, the Golden Pen Award.