

ASK NOTHING OF GOD:  
THE GOOD SOCIETY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Keynote Speech by Dele Olojede at the NLNG Grand Award Night, Lagos, Oct. 8, 2005

An Honor System

Recently I went home to Modakeke to visit with my father, who is 91 years old. He had given us quite a scare a couple of weeks earlier, when he seemed suddenly to have lost his memory and power of cognition, as well as his sight. But he quickly recovered and by the time I visited, he was strong enough of mind and of spirit to be able to share his favorite scotch with me on a pleasant afternoon. He said, only half in jest, that he was now ready to go meet his ancestors, and if I promised to bring his granddaughters to visit before year's end, why, he would even hang around for them.

As my father slips deeper into the autumn of his life, and he prepares to welcome the gathering darkness with his customary good cheer, I think more and more of the lives that he and his friends—the people of his generation—lived.

When one considers the state of our country today, my father's generation has to be thankful that they at least led a purposeful life, where honor mattered, where a real effort in the service of others was routine, and where it was still a matter of course that one's life was constructed around the simple notion that you shall do nothing to bring the family name into disrepute.

My father and his friends built a community for us to grow up in, where it mattered little if you came from a different clan or belonged to a different faith. Their town needed a high school, so they simply built one. They needed a lawyer, so they pooled money together to send a bright youngster to study the law in England, come back home and hang up a shingle: Attorney-At-Law. They were men of faith but they did not wear their religion on their sleeves. If a neighbor's crop failed, they found a way to keep his children in school. They worked together to do their best for their community, because in their eyes all that mattered was the common good, from which all goodness flowed. It was by no means an idyll, but at least they had honor, and it was an article of faith that if you had no honor left, then what had you?

This is a story, I would wager, that is familiar in at least its broad outlines to most of you here tonight, my father's people. And of course, our inquiry would not begin to gather momentum unless I could somehow find a golf analogy to explain its contours.

As avid golfers know, golf is constructed around an honor system. There are no referees, no supervision, no scorekeeper. The game relies entirely on the players' integrity, to penalize themselves when their balls sail out of bounds; to not improve an unfavorable lie even though no one is looking; to declare their score though they are the only ones who know what that score is. In short, golf is played according to a set of rules fully understood and subscribed to by the players, who then are trusted to police themselves and do the right thing.

The environment constructed by my parents and their peers, in which we grew up, was founded substantially on such an honor system. You do what must be done in the way that reflects well

on you and your family. You pay for produce stacked by the roadside even if the seller is nowhere in sight. You kept an eye on the neighbor's child as diligently as on your own. And if you strayed, you accepted the penalty for your transgressions. That was the natural order of things.

Trust is the lifeblood of any society. The lack thereof manifests itself quickly in the simple exchanges of our everyday lives. If you can't persuade your bank to lend you anything other than an ultra-short-term facility, it's because the bank does not trust you to take your repayment obligations seriously. The landlord who demands two years' rent in advance is acting out of the fear that there may be no tomorrow, and that you cannot be trusted to pay your rent diligently once you occupy the premises.

And so we must ask: What constitutes the good society? Your answer may include words such as democracy, prosperity, equality, community, education, justice, law and order, ambition, liberty, honesty, values, prosperity, diversity, selflessness. In some societies this has been boiled down in their constitution—their social contract—in the ringing tones of the French Revolution: “liberte, equalite, fraternite.” Or the Americans later on, as they tried to set an ambitious agenda for their emerging nation: “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Probably most of us in this hall, and most people outside, will have no disagreement with these words and phrases, even if some would emphasize one over another.

Then we may ask also, is Nigeria such a country? And if not, how can it be made into such a country?

This, ladies and gentlemen, is the nature of our inquiry tonight.

The Challenge of Facts:

A debilitating lack of self-confidence, I think, characterizes today's Nigerian, having seen his country go down the tubes whilst in the custody of rapacious rulers, and with his own active connivance or apathy. This condition sometimes manifests itself in a prickly defensiveness. I often have friends of mine lapse into such grand statements as, “that's because you don't live here,” as an all-purpose dismissal of an argument whose uncomfortable truths they cannot logically avoid. It is manifested in the irrational xenophobia exhibited by many against, for example, South Africans doing business successfully in Nigeria.

But this defensiveness cannot conceal the facts of Nigeria's condition today. By all objective measures, the country is far poorer-- \$350 billion in oil revenues later—than it was 40 years ago. Its moral foundations have cracked wide open, a society whose core values matter far less today than they did four decades ago. Its schools and hospitals 40 years ago were far superior to its schools and hospitals today. Its bureaucracy was more meritorious and far more efficient than it is today. Its elite was far more self-sacrificing, certainly, than today's elite, whose behavioral patterns bear striking resemblance, if I may be direct, to a swarm of locusts. Nigeria in 1960, as we all know by now, was ahead on the development curve than Singapore or Malaysia or the Philippines or South Korea. Nigeria's life expectancy has fallen—FALLEN!!— a full decade since the early 1970s, to just 43 years, according to the latest edition of the United Nations Human Development Index, which measures these things. What this means is that I have already

lived longer at my age than the average citizen of this nation can fairly be expected to live. The average Nigerian now lives only half as long as the average Chinese or Japanese. We have become a poster child worldwide for fraud and corruption. We are clearly traveling down an escalator that is going up.

The road to recovery is paved with these uncomfortable facts. Confronting them, rather than avoidance and obfuscation, is a necessary condition for our renewal.

### A Hobbesian Jungle

I was at a seminar on leadership recently in the South African bush, and in preparing for it I was obliged to read Hobbes' Leviathan again. A wiser and older friend remarked to me once that philosophy is lost on youth. Re-reading Hobbes after so many years, and with the advantage of thinning hair and the wisdom acquired from the slings and arrows of middle age, made me realize that my friend was indeed a good and wise man.

You cannot read Leviathan and not feel that Hobbes, who wrote in the 17th century, was in fact writing about Nigerian society today. We live in a Hobbesian jungle, where everyman is for himself and the concept of the common good has become totally alien. We blatantly expropriate public property for private use, so long as it is possible to get away with it, and it often is. This applies equally to the elite who divide up public parks among themselves to build private monstrosities behind 10-foot walls, and the very poor who take over highway medians and overpasses to make building blocks or set up trading kiosks or tap directly into street lamps for their electricity.

In such a state, there is no law that anyone is willing to obey. The state itself is considered illegitimate. Force and fraud are the two driving forces. Individuals arrange for their own security, their own electricity, their own water; every home is like a private local government. What we need we take, in complete disregard of any rules. Hobbes calls this chaotic free-for-all a state of war, the very heart of our darkness. It is an entirely unpredictable place, and everyone plans only for the short term.

Let us listen to Hobbes: "In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and the danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."

Now the language of the 17th Century transplanted to today may sound a tad melodramatic. But I think that, in its essentials, it offers a useful way of understanding the underlying forces that have made Nigeria such a chaotic society, to wit: a virtual absence of a legitimate authority that governs the country's affairs primarily for the common good, as opposed to catering to the wretched excess of the elite and its elaborate rituals of pompous self-importance.

### The Good Society

Earlier we touched briefly on the words that might represent for most of us the idea of a good society, such as liberty, equality, justice, morality, modesty, self-sacrifice, honesty, and so forth.

I think it is quite clear that any attempt to construct a good society must of necessity start with the citizens coming together to determine for themselves their rules of engagement. What kind of a country do we, the people, want to have? How shall we be governed? How do we collect and allocate revenue? How do we educate our children?

I don't think anyone can reasonably claim that our current arrangement works—or is even seen to be legitimate by most citizens. Without legitimacy, a state cannot serve as the pillar of the good society. The legitimate state is one where the individual components have willingly surrendered their natural rights—from the primitive state of every man for himself—in exchange for the more orderly and more efficient system of managing the common affairs, including security, laws in respect of property, and dispute resolution.

We are not called upon to reinvent the wheel; simply to recognize, as Rousseau does in “The Social Contract,” that “each man, in giving himself to all, gives himself to nobody,” and enjoys the same rights and privileges as do others in society. And if the citizen should breach this covenant, it is clear that the state has legitimate coercive powers that it can be reasonably expected to deploy.

Law and order in a legitimate state is predicated on the sovereign having the authority, within a system of checks and balances, to enforce the agreed rules of engagement. The punishment must always be greater than the reward that the lawbreaker expects from breaking the law. There also must be a high likelihood that a transgressor will be caught and punished. It's no use having laws imposing fines for running the red light at an intersection, when a potential transgressor knows that the state has no capacity to impose punishment.

The necessity of creating a true Commonwealth in our country cannot be overstated. And its legitimacy is conditional on the citizens having come together to devise the rules of engagement. We can already see one of the most appalling consequences of an imposed constitution, one that places a class of politicians above the law of the land and basically grants them blanket immunity, even when they brazenly steal the family silver. To place anyone above the law is to debase the law itself, and invite the creation of a locust culture, where the swarm of the political elite is engaged only in plundering as much as possible, as quickly as possible, and for as long as possible.

This is why, though a prophet I am not, I would take a bet that we will eventually get around to instituting a genuine national conference, one whose members are not substantially appointed by the current governments at federal and state levels, to chart a new way forward.

The illegitimacy of the current state is at the heart of our more egregious problems. The culture of impunity—a total lack of accountability that is prevalent at all levels of society—can be traced directly to it. So can corruption, election rigging, law breaking, even widespread poverty.

Between Memory and Forgetting

In our headlong rush into a future we have not planned for, we have mastered the dangerous art of willful forgetfulness. If a people have no memory, how can they measure progress? If memory is deliberately erased, what is the evidence that they ever existed? Can there be justice without memory? Can we seriously pursue a more equal, more just, more prosperous, more moral society that we seek? Milan Kundera, the Czech author, goes so far as to say that freedom itself is unattainable without the aid of memory, that “the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.”

And so today we are expected to forget the heinous crimes of some of our past dictators, including state-sponsored murder, institutionalized corruption, the abortion of our democratic experiment, and our eventual delivery into the claws of Sani Abacha. So total is our memory failure that some of our close friends have even wondered aloud, on occasion, whether things were not better under Abacha than they are now.

Need I say more about the danger of forgetting?

Almost 40 years ago our nation underwent a violent convulsion. The image of the grotesquely malnourished child, with distended stomach, spindly legs, large head and unseeing eyes became the lasting imagery of the Biafra War. One million of our children, our mothers and fathers, our fellow citizens, perished in the war. Many thousands of women were raped and villages and towns pillaged.

I often raise this issue with my wife, whose family was trapped in the inferno for a while before they were all evacuated to England. Now and then, some forbidden story from the extended family will surface—an aunt who was raped, a man who disappeared, the constant struggle by many to find food, the acts of heroism and cowardice and depredation, of fetching tenderness and extreme coarseness.

All this has been erased from the national memory, though it no doubt continues to exist in the interior lives of many. No monuments mark the war's high points or low. No register of names of those who died fighting on both sides exists anywhere that I know. No acknowledgement of loss and pain and suffering. Nothing at all as we race headlong into our opaque future, afraid of a backward glance lest we be turned, like Lot, into pillars of salt.

The case of the forgotten war illustrates for me very vividly the unreality of the Nigerian state. We have apparently decided that we are a people without a past, and it stands to reason that we should be darting this way and that in confusion, not at all sure what direction we should be heading.

### The Challenge of Leadership

One of our most glaring failures has been in the area of leadership. By and large we operate on the insane principle that it is not necessary to put our best foot forward. This accounts for the fact that those who rise to leadership positions in all spheres of our national life include a large number of gangsters, shady businessmen, hustlers—even accused murders and ex-convicts. It is not an accident that, since independence, Nigeria has not managed to have a single president with a university education. Ten heads of state and counting, and not one has a college degree!

Now one cannot sensibly claim that a college degree is a guarantee of efficient and inspired leadership. But surely it should be no disqualification either.

In other societies, inspired leadership has galvanized the population toward positive change and modernization. Lee Kwan Yu, Singapore's founding father, willed an island backwater into perhaps the world's most efficient and best-educated state—and also one of the most prosperous—in the short span of 30 years. On our own continent we have the awe-inspiring example of Nelson Mandela, the very personification of the self-sacrificial leader, who, at his moment of triumph, decided that wisdom was just as important as righteousness, and that his own time on the national stage should be brief, so that a new generation of leaders could be allowed to take the country into the 21st Century. Unlike the disappointing Robert Mugabe, Mandela did not believe in the infallibility of iconic leaders. Julius Nyerere, no matter the failure of his economic policies, was nevertheless a deeply honorable and modest leader, who shunned personal gratification and worked tirelessly at trying to uplift his poor country.

What did these men have in common? They believed in certain fundamental values—service, sacrifice, honor, freedom, human progress—on which they anchored their lifelong labors. Which brings us to this central point:

Leadership, values-based leadership, is indispensable if we are to successfully tackle the daunting problems that confront us.

So far, our national conversation exists mainly at the level of the cave man, not a society trying to deal with the myriad challenges posed by a 21st Century world. Various ethnic groups are clamoring for the next president (or the next governor, or local government chairman) to come from their area. As far as we are concerned geography is destiny. It matters little if the next president is a scoundrel, an incompetent or a fool, so long as he comes from the right “geopolitical zone,” to borrow from the tendentious language of our national politics. Thus the argument right now is whether the “north-north” must produce the next president, or the “south-south” or some other such ridiculous contraption.

From the foregoing we can see that the quality of our national conversation is of an abysmal standard.

We are stuck firmly in the era of Big Man politics, a politics founded entirely on personality. We have done this for 50 years already, and even a child, having burned her finger by the flickering flame of the candle, quickly realizes that a repeat misadventure is easily avoided.

Karl Popper, the Viennese philosopher, argues that a society's best bet is to create institutions of state, properly balanced in their authority and scope, as a more profitable way of insuring good governance, rather than the moon shot of hoping for a wise and decent leader.

“... it is not at all easy to get a government on whose goodness and wisdom one can implicitly rely,” Popper argues. “If that is granted, then we must ask whether political thought should not face from the beginning the possibility of bad government; whether we should not prepare for the worst leaders, and hope for the best.”

In other words, the focus should not be on getting the next Wise Chief, the benevolent Big Man who shall solve our problems—they almost never do, at least in Nigeria's experience. Rather, Popper says, "how can we so organize political institutions that bad and incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?"

I would agree with Popper that leaders of the quality of Mandela, or Gandhi, or Lee, or Lincoln, are exceptionally rare; that "rulers have rarely been above average, either morally or intellectually, and often below it." It is far more likely that a country, particularly a country like Nigeria, will get a below average leader, so that "it is reasonable to adopt, in politics, the principle of preparing for the worst, as well as we can, though we should, of course, at the same time try to obtain the best."

In this vein, it stands to reason that we must adhere strictly to term limits, even at the risk of getting a less competent or even less honorable leader. The value of predictable transitions far outweighs the faint hope that an extended tenure for any particular leader will yield the benefits of that good society that we seek.

#### Of Pets and Men

In addition to focus on leadership, we must understand that our best efforts will be defeated if we do not create the conditions for a more equal society, and that begins first and foremost with fighting poverty. I will not bore you with the numbers, except to keep in mind just one: about 70 percent of our population—that's right, 70 percent—subsists on less than one dollar a day. This extreme poverty in the world's sixth-largest oil producer is a stain on our national conscience, though it's still debatable if we have any conscience at all.

The evidence is all around us: the destitute fill the streets of our cities. Rather than being in school, thousands of children beg for food from the highway median, their noses pressed to the windows of our limousines while we pretend to busily read the newspaper. We avert our eyes and we do nothing, condemning a large proportion of our fellow citizens to lives of serfdom. We build high walls to keep them out, but they will not be denied. We withdraw behind 10-foot gates in Ikoyi and Victoria Island but they set up roadside stalls as vulcanizers and guguu sellers in our residential neighborhoods. We retreat to gated communities on the Lekki Peninsula but they clog our roads and turn the sidewalks into brick making factories and auto spare part shacks.

The inescapable fact is that we cannot build a modern state, in which we have the rule of law and enjoy the fruits of liberty, in the face of such overwhelming poverty. Starvation and dignity—or starvation and democracy, for that matter—do not mix. Arthur Okun, the economist, arguing for a mitigation of the excesses of the free market, says we must avoid a system that allows "the big winners to feed their pets better than the losers can feed their children."

Again, we need not reinvent the wheel. The most profound lessons are already around us, often embedded deep in our culture. Ubuntu, umuntu, agamutu, say the people of South Africa. People are people through other people. Or, in plain English: I am my brother's keeper. What is good for the community is good for me. When the Alsatians and the Dobermans of the elite receive better medical care than the children of the poor, it's time to change direction.

### Those Who Walk Away from Omelas

If you are a member of this privileged elite, as many of you in this hall tonight are, one must acknowledge that it is not easy to surrender a perceived advantage, to fold your cards when you know you have aces and kings. But experience teaches us that there is no better time to surrender the mere pursuit of personal gratification, to walk away from Omelas, as in the title of the magnificent moral dilemma written by Ursula K. le Guin.

The writer introduces us to the blissful surroundings of Omelas, a small town where everyone is happy and prosperous; the sheer physical beauty of it; the view of the bay and the mountains, the scent of jasmine and the blaze of chrysanthemums and the bloom of crabapple. Even the sex enjoyed by the residents appeals to our most wonderful fantasies, for orgies are permitted unselfconsciously. A drug, called drooz, provides euphoria without aftereffects or the pain of addiction. What could be more perfect?

There is only one cost: for the community to exist in this paradiseland, its members must accept the abominable suffering of a single child locked up in a basement.

Most try very hard to avert their gaze from the suffering child, because they feel they are having a lot of fun living in their idyllic town of Omelas. Those who walk away are few and far between. They have moral integrity and a troublesome conscience. But their passage is a lonely one.

Life in Omelas could roughly be compared to the hedonism of the Nigerian super-elite, which lives in overwhelming abundance and even blithe excess. The super-elite announces funeral arrangements on billboards. They drive in Hummers with tinted and bullet-proof windows, albeit over flooded and garbage-strewn streets. The cost of their wretched excess is not limited to the “abominable suffering” of one child, though, but of the rest of the population.

To say that we fight for, and not merely talk about, a just society is not to be against seeking a good life for ourselves. The tension between egalitarianism and personal gratification can be reasonably balanced. Right now, it seems there is room only for unlimited personal gratification. If we do not do a course correction, we are doomed to remain at the bottom of the well.

### False Prophets

The fastest growing industry in Nigeria today—faster growing than even the telecom sector, and perhaps just as profitable, is the faith industry, which feeds off the misery of the people and appeals to their worst instincts and propensity to superstition, illogic and unreason. The mushroom churches are particularly in love, it would seem from the billboards around our benighted city, with words such as fire and damnation, as well as promises of wealth—a kind of money-doubler trickery. Thus you have billboards proclaiming a “mountain of fire,” and the like.

We do not necessarily have to agree with Marx that religion is the “opium of the people” to recognize the destructive power of mindless faith, which eschews self help and sacrifice and instead asks you to trust in God, who will magically provide everything for you.

This unquestioning faith has adopted and perverted one of the tools of modern management, which is the concept of outsourcing non-core competencies to others. In this case, our prophets simply ask us to outsource everything to God. Of course, the prophets live spectacularly well off the backs of the foolish multitudes. I was looking at one of these glossy magazines that are established for the purpose of singing the praise of our moneyed class. It featured one of the most popular prophets in the land, showing off his collection of six or seven luxury cars, all in his favorite color black, with the clear implication that anyone who follows him will of course be similarly blessed!

I do not by this mean to single out Christians at all; I think the same is largely true, even more so, in the other major religions. But our country right now is in a desperate state, a time that calls for clear thinking and rationality, not magical solutions and a reliance on divine intervention. Life is grim and hard, and it should not be obscured by the sentimental philosophy of the pulpit, where everything is outsourced to God and people are encouraged to believe that the just and the good will somehow result from some deity reaching down through the clouds to sweep all our sorrows away. To quote the rationalist William Graham Sumner, to do so “is to spread an easy optimism, under the influence of which people spare themselves labor and trouble, reflection and forethought, pains and caution—all of which are hard things, and to admit the necessity for which would be to admit that the world is not all made smooth and easy, for us to pass through it surrounded by love, music, and flowers.”

The good society of which we speak will be built, as it has been built elsewhere, by men and women who act, who take it upon themselves to sacrifice a little bit of their individual pursuits for the common good. The new society will be built by teachers who teach, doctors who actually treat, lawyers who fight for justice and the rule of law, bureaucrats who manage efficiently the commonwealth all the while resisting the lure of the easy money, leaders who actually lead, and do not expect that a criminal is worthy of being protected from the law by some perverted notion of executive immunity. And yes, this good society will in large part be built by citizens who understand and accept the responsibilities of citizenship.

### We. The People

As we speak of the challenge of leadership as a catalyst for transformation, so must we examine the nature of today’s Nigerian, whose deep and self-destructive cynicism, as we have seen, is perhaps the greatest obstacle to change.

Many Nigerians today continue to deny the obvious—that a potentially wide-ranging transformation is under way, needing only their buy-in for the process to gain momentum. Perhaps because the process is at the moment uneven, that the fight against corruption might even sometimes appear to be a selective one, and that the fruits of a generally sound macro-economic environment are not as yet readily apparent, many of our fellow citizens still look upon the current situation with suspicion, if not outright cynicism or hostility.

After years of corrosive military dictatorships and their attendant caprice, as well as the general dissolution and greed of a thieving political class, the Nigerian today feels so battered and bruised that he appears to have lost all sense of how to be a citizen. I have been following with some interest a simple but important exercise by the Ministry of Finance, which

uncharacteristically for a Nigerian government agency actually is promoting transparency. The ministry periodically publishes in the newspapers a complete list of revenues allotted from the federation account to every single state and local government throughout the country. So if you live in, say, Isukwato-Okigwe local government area of Abia State, you can tell from the newspapers that your local government received 500 million naira last month for the administration of its affairs.

The question that faces us is, how many residents actually take the trouble to demand that their councilors account for how the money was spent? Did it go toward fixing the broken windows in local schools? Or paving the rutted neighborhood roads? Or reactivating a long dormant waterworks? Or purchasing supplies for the local health dispensary? My guess is that many citizens do not bother, thus signaling their leaders that they do not have to be accountable at all.

The same is true in virtually every important respect. Most parents do not get involved in their children's schools or hold teachers and school administrators accountable for the proper education of their children. They ask not why our highways are death traps. They witness fellow citizens illegally expropriating public property for private use and they consider it normal, or at least acceptable. They appear to believe, in fact, that rulers have an entirely free hand to do anything whatever, including commit grievous crimes and recognize no difference between public funds and their private spending. The rulers—we must of necessity avoid the term leader, which connotes purpose and service—have naturally taken as much liberty as the citizens are willing to give them, and then some.

The citizen has become praise singer and court jester, obsequious, slavish, bowing only to wealth and position. We have become Fela's parody of the "government chicken boy." Our praise singing culture has reached new depths of perversion, with music extolling the supremacy of anyone with money no matter how accumulated, with newspapers and magazines dedicated only to the chronicling of the comings and goings of the elite, with chieftaincy titles bestowed with such feverish abandon that one of our big men apparently has more than 600 of them! The age of Simply Mr., which The Guardian newspaper so valiantly sought to champion more than 20 years ago, has passed into oblivion.

We are ruled no longer by poorly educated men with guns, but the Nigerian remains wary of his freedom. To paraphrase Rousseau, freedom is like a lovely meal of pounded yam and edikai-ekong, but very difficult to digest. That the citizen in Nigeria today lives in relative freedom does not mean he knows what to do with it. In fact, one often gets the impression that many Nigerians would rather not be free, scared as they are of freedom's responsibilities. They grumble and complain about the flagrant inequities and outright robbery that unfold daily in full view, and they shrug and hope for some divine intervention, and fail to act to shape their own destiny.

I have been looking out of the window in hopes of catching sight of this divine intervention, but perhaps my sight is poor. There is no cavalry out there riding to our rescue, ladies and gentlemen. We must face the cold hard fact that the world owes us nothing, and those who are not prepared to function in it will fall farther behind and become slaves to other races of men. It is neither fair nor unfair; it is just the way it is. As the line goes in the Merchant of Venice, "I

hold the world but as the world, Gratiano..."

The task before us, then, is not only simply to reform our political system, but fundamentally to learn how to be citizens all over again. Simon Bolivar, el libertador, said the main task facing the leaders of the newly freed Spanish colonies of South America, early in the 19th century, was nothing less than the creation of a new kind of citizen. The new political leaders, he said, "have to reform men perverted by the illusions of error and unhealthy desire."

We must recognize that it is not necessarily a sure thing that citizens will do the right thing when given the chance. As in the allegory of the chained men in a cave in Plato's Republic, people do not necessarily want to see the light. The sunlight is bright and can be momentarily blinding, though it soon opens up the vista to our imagination. Freedom tastes great, though it is hard to digest.

The Americans have this wonderful preamble to their constitution, a statement of their ambitions as a nation. Its phrasing is elegant and soaring. It rallies the citizens around a common purpose. "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union..." That's right, a more perfect union, a recognition that the task of improvement is never concluded, that a society must constantly strive towards the goal of insuring the common good.

Are we the people here gathered, and those beyond these walls, pledged to end the culture of greed and avarice that we have allowed to grow, like cancer, on our nation's soul?

Are we the people here assembled ready to take charge of our own destiny, set our shoulders against that boulder, and start the hard tasking of rolling it uphill?

We the people, are we pledged to forsake purely personal advantage and hedonism, and seek ye first the common good?

We the people, are we prepared work tirelessly for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?

Are we, the people, willing to set ourselves high standards, rather than constantly seeking the lowest common denominator? Are we willing to create the republic of ambition?

Let us close our exploration tonight by turning for inspiration to Anna Akhmatova, perhaps the greatest of the 20th-Century Russian poets, whose exhortations to sacrifice speak loudly to us today:

"Your heart must have no earthly consolation.

"You must not cling to either wife or home.

"Take the bread out of your own child's mouth  
and give it to a man you do not know.

"You must be the most humble servant  
of the man who was your desperate enemy  
and call the forest beast your brother.

"Above all, never ask God for anything."

