

Tape Transcription

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President Hennesy, Dean McLennan, Provost Etchemendy, leaders of the Stanford Association of Religion, faculty and administration and staff of the University, members of the Stanford Class of 2003, parents, relatives and friends of the graduates, let me express at the outset my appreciation for the honor and privilege of being part of this wonderful ceremony, and my expression of congratulations to the graduates and their parents and relatives who have come with them. I have had the privilege of lecturing at Stanford several times over the last twenty years, but this event is surely unique in its significance and meaning.

As you might see from the topic on the program, I have a large topic but I'll put you at rest. I have a very short time. Whether I will achieve the assignment is open to question, but I will abide by the time limit, and that is a matter of relief for you ahead of time.

With a large topic – "Building the Peace" – the peace we seek as a nation and a world, that topic, large and capacious as it is, requires our reflection, particularly at this time in our history. With a short time, I reduced the topic this way. I have five propositions and will spend approximately two minutes of each of them. It will not be what one would call "a rounded address," but it will try to speak to the topic within the time frame that is possible.

My five propositions are the following. First, peace is both a divine gift and a human work. Secondly, peace is hard. Thirdly, the world is dangerous. Fourthly, the United States is crucial. Fifthly, individuals are decisive.

Peace is both a divine gift and a human work. The meaning of that proposition is that peace is the work of God and ourselves, that it is appropriate both to pray for peace and to do the work of peace. That proposition in this setting is probably self-evident, but in fact it is not a shared premise. Many who have contributed mightily, and do contribute mightily, do not share the first part of the premise, that peace is in some sense a gift of God, even though they work with great ingenuity and dedication at the human work of peace. We who gather here this morning should commit ourselves to both propositions, be convinced of the validity of both, because what it means is that the large sometimes elusive gift of peace is something that we strive for continuously and seldom achieve completely. And it is possible to yield to frustration and despair when peace is overcome by violence or injustice. We need to have a sense that we are

not alone in this task, that the gift is given to us to be achieved, and that the work we do is done in collaboration with a larger, broader, wider force in the universe, that we call under different names the God who is creator and sustains the world.

Secondly, peace is hard. What I mean by that proposition is two things. First, peace is hard to accomplish. Secondly, peace is not a softheaded idea. Everyone recognizes that war is hard. It requires courage, bravery, risk, and sacrifice. This year perhaps more so than at other times, we are conscious of that. There are large differences in our country about the policy that brought war within the past year, but I suspect there are not large differences about the admiration and gratitude we express towards those young men and women who combine dedication, skill, courage and bravery as they served their country in the military. War is hard. Peace is hard also. It takes the same quality of courage, bravery, risk and sacrifice to accomplish peace. War has a beginning and usually a definitive end. There are victories, treaties, settlements. Peace is an ongoing effort. We achieve it, then we have to solidify it. Then it comes under new threats and it takes new efforts. Today, we talk about "preventive diplomacy," the kind of effort we can make to make the likelihood of war less significant in our lives. We talk about "peace building," the ability to build and construct through the protection of human rights the achievement of human justice, the work of nongovernmental organizations, the ability to build the peace. War and peace are both hard. To be in search of peace is not something soft-minded or simple to do.

Thirdly, the world is dangerous. The search for peace, the work of peace cannot be based on the easy assumption that peace in human affairs is normal, natural, or simple. When I say the world is dangerous, there is compacted in that adjective several things. First, the world is a world of conflicting ideas and conflicting interests. We do not always see things the same way, nor do we necessarily strive for things in the same way. Not only is the peace conflicted, the world is complicated. The best will in the world sometimes does not yield insight into the central issues that are necessary to bring peace. Moreover, the world is also a mix of good and evil. The stuff of human nature is not unidimensional. Whether we think of great thinkers like Hobbes and Kant who had such different views of what we are as human beings, or in this setting, whether we think of the great religious traditions and their attempt to plumb the meaning of what it means to be human, what our potential is to live in community, what our potential is to do evil – all of this stands behind the kind of world we seek to shape in the direction of peace. Universities teach us that it is probably better to begin with a premise of complexity rather than simplicity. A university education yields the conviction that the world in fact is complicated, peace is not simple, the world is dangerous, but danger and complexity can yield to human reason, to human effort, and we believe in this service danger and complexity can also yield to the divine gift and grace of the power of God that is a collaborative power to what we seek to do.

Fourth, the United States is crucial. This statement is open I think to two misinterpretations. First, we may fail to grasp the impact this nation has daily on the

rest of the world. In a sense, we are not an ordinary nation at this point in time. The power we possess, the position we hold makes us not "an ordinary nation." On the other hand, we can fail in this statement by understanding the case in too expansive a sense. To say the U.S. is crucial is not to give license to the notion that we should address the world in imperial fashion, determining what is acceptable and not acceptable simply by our own standards or our own vision. There is no question that the position the United States holds yields specific, direct, far-reaching responsibilities, that go beyond the range of what an ordinary nation might face. But who defines what those responsibilities are? And even more importantly, how we carry them out requires a sense that the religious traditions would call "humility," a sense that while we are not ordinary, we are not to be masters. We are to pursue with others what is necessary to do to build the peace. This yields both a political and a moral conclusion. The moral conclusion is for the most powerful nation in the world, that we remember that power is not self-justifying. Power is to be measured, at times restrained, always focused and it is to be judged by ourselves and others, and it is not an insult to us to have others make judgments on how we exercise power. Secondly, vast power does not instantaneously yield success. We need a sense of the interests and the ideas of others, what I have called earlier, "the complexity of the world." So whether we seek to be either virtuous or even simply to be successful, there needs to be a sense that while we are not ordinary, we should not be imperial.

Finally, individuals are decisive. The sense of a weekend like this is not a time that one has to repeat what I find students in an institution like this already know. From Harvard in the East Coast to Stanford on the West Coast, anyone who has had the experience of this kind of education knows that they have a privileged status. I find students do not have to be reminded of that fact. What is important is that people who leave an institution like this carry that conviction with them – a privileged status, meaning by that a sense of responsibility for others because of what one has been given by others. No one comes through an institution like this without a great deal of effort and work, and their lives need to be honored and congratulated. But the gift of this kind of institution is to think of one's life in larger terms than one's own interests, one's own perspective. Some of you will leave here and be directly involved in the building of peace. That has been a Stanford tradition. Others will be citizens of this land, doing other things directly but never losing the possibility of the citizenry of this country to recognize that we are not ordinary in our position today, that our impact can be for great good or great harm, and how the citizenry thinks of what we ought to be as a nation has decisive possibilities.

That is where the meaning of faith comes in. How we think, how we decide will make a great difference in policy, but faith is about how we see things. The larger sense of vision in which we place all our knowledge, how we see things at this time in history in the building of peace will have enormous implications for ourselves, for others.

Let me close with one anecdote. At the end of World War II, at a time when the world also was uncertain, a group of Dominican priests in Paris invited Albert Camus, the Noble Prize winning voice of the French Resistance, to come and speak to them, and Camus said he would come and speak as an agnostic about how he dealt with the problem of evil in life, and he closed the address basically this way: He said it may not be possible for us to create a world in which no innocent children suffer, but it is possible to create a world in which fewer innocent children suffer, and as we look to the believers in this effort, if we don't find help, where else will we go? Individuals are decisive.

Thank you.