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Hillel Summit 2008  
“Imagining a More Civil Society”  
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I come to you from outside your tradition with the utmost respect for it, and with great appreciation for the admirable role Hillel has played, is now playing, and can play in the future, not only “imagining,” but also actively promoting a more civil society, and a more humane one. I want to commend and thank you for that.

My task today is to offer a few thoughts to help send you on your way. Closing sessions are always risky. You worry that everyone will already have left, that everything will already have been said, that everyone who is still here will be exhausted from too many inputs and distracted by the pull of reality back home, or itching for a last fight. You worry that you have a responsibility (a tough one) to try to send participants back to their campuses clearer about what it is that they take with them as they go.

With a program this rich, there’s not much question that you will return with more than you had when you arrived. The danger is that you will go back so filled, with new ideas, new connections, new contacts, new resolutions, new causes and obligations, that you will quite literally be overflowing.

That’s a particular danger because, ironically, the very feeling of passionate engagement can be a barrier to engaging *one another* in the kinds of dialogues on which the work of fostering a more civil society fundamentally depends. Those engagements are variously referred to as democratic discourse, difficult dialogues, civil exchange, circles of trust ... forms of deliberation robust enough to hold the tensions between passionate commitment and compassionate tolerance, two bedrock and yet conflicting values in American society that civility, and civility alone, can bridge.<sup>i</sup>

### **Civil Discourse for a Civil Society**

Civility does this bridging through very specific kinds of interactions that are structured to enable participants to take the heat generated by their differences and channel it into new and creative insights that draw on, and synthesize, and advance the collective knowledge of the group.<sup>ii</sup>

And in the many descriptions of these kinds of encounters, a constant is an energy, a power, a presence, and a depth that require an investment of time and a state of receptivity, equanimity, patience. Civil discourse, when it’s truly meaningful and gets to the heart of real things, begins and ends with deep and open listening, to each other, and to ourselves. It begins and ends in presence.<sup>iii</sup>

And that presence implies an effortlessness that, paradoxically, comes only after significant effort – building relationships, examining one’s own biases and prejudices,

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learning how to listen and how to ask questions that are open and non-invasive, learning to open our minds and hearts to one another, developing enough confidence in our own provisional commitments to be able to risk opening them to serious scrutiny.

People who practice and describe this quality of dialogue essential to civil society emphasize discipline, focus, and time – a “certain kind of peace,” as Toni Morrison wrote in an essay called “The Dancing Mind,” a peace “that is not merely the absence of war [but is] the dance of an open mind when it engages another equally open one.”<sup>iv</sup>

But achieving that kind of peace is not so easy in our contentious and polarized world – a world which pushes us all toward over-commitment, hyper-vigilance, and a sense of urgency that I’m guessing may have been heightened during your time here together.

So ... the first, and possibly the most important, suggestion I can make as you prepare to depart is to give yourself permission to lighten up a bit, to cut yourselves some slack and remember that life is long and that change takes time, persistence, resilience, patience – lessons that are very much embedded in the Jewish tradition but that, nevertheless, can always use reinforcement. And what I want to insist is that you will be *more* effective – not less so – when you protect time to guard your own spirit even as you seek to do your part in addressing the urgent problems we face.

At the same time (and this stands in tension with the call for patience), I also want to underscore two more general points about why and how I see this work you have been doing here at this Summit as so important – and so urgent. The first relates to the work of the world at this moment in history, the second to the work of the academy.

### **The Work of the World**

First, I believe this Summit is tapping into a social movement, one that I hope is gaining momentum. That movement has many manifestations and points of focus. We can call it (with a touch of grandiosity) a movement to create the conditions for the human race to engage in vital “conversations before the end of time,” the title of a book a friend sent me a few years ago.<sup>v</sup>

“The darkness around us is deep,” William Stafford ended his evocative poem, “A Ritual to Read to Each Other,” a poem that begins with these lines:

If you don’t know the kind of person I am  
and I don’t know the kind of person you are  
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world  
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

Surely we ought to know what god we are following home if we are to come to terms, as a species on this planet, with the many problems you have been confronting here: global warming, Israel’s plight, the genocide in Darfur, jihad, and the many manifestations of the appalling gap between rich and poor, in our own country and around the world. I’ve heard much heartfelt agony at these proceedings about that gap, and the undeclared but brutal war being waged against the poor.

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We need to find a way to recognize and grapple honestly with our contradictions. We need to keep seeking more of the truth about ourselves, to stop fooling ourselves and one another about what we know to be true. We know more of the roots of these problems than we are ready to admit. We are radically interdependent now in ways that have no historical precedent – economically, geopolitically, environmentally, culturally – and yet we are worlds away from the social wisdom we need to live in harmony.<sup>vi</sup>

I think it can be said that at least part of what you have been discovering at this Summit are the tools you will need to forge this non-violent path in your microcosms of the world, which is all any of us has: our own piece of the puzzle. So that's the first reason I've been honored and inspired to be here with you.

### **The Work of the Academy**

The second is that I believe a vital aspect of what you are doing is calling the academy back to its highest purposes. That came across powerfully last night in the presidents' panel. I spent fourteen years leading Wellesley College and emerge from that experience with a keen awareness of the promise of higher education in America and the mounting pressures on our colleges and universities.

There are the time pressures on all of us – the relentless distractions and diversions -- and there are confusing pressures from the explosion of knowledge, together with disputes over the legitimacy of alternative claims about knowledge and truth.

We had a number of struggles on the Wellesley campus while I was president, struggles that are part of the reason I was invited to speak to you. They were complex and had multiple causes. There were differences of opinion about the trustworthiness of information sources. There was segmentation and fragmentation of the academy, the country, and the world into self-contained identity enclaves whose members listen only to themselves and to others who reinforce their beliefs. There were tendencies exacerbated by the World Wide Web to look for the quickest answer and to value direct, personal connections with information, especially information that reinforces one's own preconceptions.

We worry that students arrive at college – and leave – (as Derek Bok wrote) as “naive relativists who think that different people have different views and that there is no valid basis for judging the opinions of others.”<sup>vii</sup> We worry that the intellectual fragmentation in students' college experiences may be leaving a vacuum in which their craving for coherence can be “manipulated by radical theologies and militant ideologies ... that practice hatred and intolerance while proclaiming superiority and exclusivity.”<sup>viii</sup>

There are profound intellectual questions the academy needs to be taking up at the heart of the conversation you are having here, and profound institutional questions as well: Who our students can be if we attend more closely to their true intellectual needs. How our work lives can be, if we attend to one another, our aspirations and our struggles. What our institutions can be, if we attend to the whole enterprise as a shared responsibility.

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And the world we could create, if we could learn to engage each other fruitfully across the differences and the silences that are polarizing and disempowering us and undermining our ability to govern ourselves responsibly. How do we take some risks and break down some of the barriers that perpetuate the over-commitment, overwork, accelerated pace, the isolation, polarization, suspicion and mistrust that are, I believe, the arch-enemies of effective civic discourse and, with it, deep and integrated learning.

### **The Wellesley Story and the Role of Hillel**

As we heard last evening from the five presidents, each institution's story is both general and particular. All are affected by the large secular sweep of changes in the wider culture. All are working through transitions that are generational, institutional, and that reflect national and global realities. Wellesley College is a secular institution founded in 1875 by evangelical Protestants. By the time I arrived as president in 1993, the college had become very diverse and was making a concerted effort to open itself in new ways to a multiplicity of perspectives, not least, multiple faith traditions. No one had any way of knowing ahead of time where that commitment would actually lead.

The year before I arrived, Wellesley decided to establish an innovative "multifaith religious and spiritual life program." You may have heard that story from Peter Laurence who spoke yesterday. What I want to emphasize now is how important Hillel was from the start in supporting that new model and making it possible.

First of all, the new multifaith program, which now encompasses more than 13 separate faith traditions, was self-consciously drawing on the successful model of Hillel from the start. And the real breakthrough -- when the dream of the new program became a practical possibility -- was an act of visionary and selfless leadership by Wellesley Hillel, whose board voted to support the new, untested religious life structure, and to fold its successful fundraising program into the collaborative effort to fund all the religious groups.<sup>ix</sup>

During this early period, the chair of the Jewish Studies department at Wellesley sat on the search committee for the new dean who would move the vision forward. Many members of Hillel and the Jewish community, including two successive Board chairs and a vice chair, the dean of the college, and many others, invested time and political and social capital into the exploration of new possibilities for inter-faith encounter.

They created support systems for the fledgling program; they ran interference with members of the faculty and alumnae who saw it as a threat; they helped faculty in the religion department understand that the program wouldn't encroach on their territory or overstep its bounds; and they were there to help students make sense of controversies when they arose, which they inevitably did.

I think there were at least two aspects of the Hillel experience and the Hillel philosophy that made it so valuable in the formation of this broader vision for religious and spiritual life at Wellesley, two ways in which Hillel was a model and microcosm of what we wanted to do.

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First, Hillel clearly saw and reinforced the connection between religious life and the educational mission of the college; a focus on student learning and academic achievement were bedrock for Hillel.

Second, Hillel had already made its own commitment to pluralism: pluralism *within* the Jewish community. Wellesley Hillel was all about creating a space on campus where Jews of different backgrounds, ethnicities and religious beliefs could come together and learn from their differences. It wasn't such a huge leap from this intra-faith pluralistic sensibility to the multi-faith model we were trying to imagine.

At Wellesley I saw Hillel repeatedly show a willingness to risk moving beyond a singular focus on sustaining Jewish life on campus (not abandoning that mission by any means, but building on and beyond it) to be a catalyst for dialogue across faith traditions. Never did they shy away from controversy, but neither did they become mired in it.

I witnessed some wonderful moments. I stopped in at the Hillel brunch at reunion every June and heard from successive generations of alumnae their gratification to see that Jewish life on campus was flourishing now in ways that would have been inconceivable when they were students. I sat with the Hillel students in their Sukkah every fall as Jewish students welcomed their friends from many traditions and told them stories about Jewish life. I took a turn on the chapel steps every spring on Yom Hashoah, reading names of Holocaust victims, and their ages -- so many whole families, grandparents, parents, children on those pages and pages of names, such a powerful experience to stand there and read them into a microphone that echoed across the campus.

I witnessed many experiences of connection and community. The Jewish and Muslim students decided that on Yom Kippur and Ramadan they would break bread together. The Jewish students, while planning to dedicate a new prayer book decided to invite the student presidents of the college's Muslim, Hindu and Catholic organizations to play a liturgical role in the service, which they did. I have many such memories.

I also witnessed and participated in some excruciatingly painful incidents. And so part of what I bring to this discussion is an acute awareness of how messy this work is when you're in the middle of it. It just is that hard. And we shouldn't try to make it sound easy. All sorts of shadows are operating when you are doing this difficult work of bridging differences. Parker Palmer, a friend who writes about these matters, describes leaders "standing in the tragic gap" when their organizations' values are in conflict.<sup>x</sup> It often felt very much like I was straddling a yawning gap. But the payoff was an unparalleled opportunity to learn.

### **Some Lessons I Learned**

First, there is a learning curve; with experience you can become more effective. Over time we became better able to respond quickly and with confidence. We had more solid connections among community members (faculty, staff, students, alumnae) from the different constituencies. They built up reservoirs of trust and could check in with one another when a controversy began to erupt. We worked hard to build and sustain those alliances. We all learned our roles better; we had a clearer division of labor, and all of us learned safer ways to have people set up conversations at times of conflict.

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We learned to speak out forcefully against hateful speech – to censure it but not censor it and to avoid (as someone counseled me in the first months of my presidency) “making a third-rate bigot into a First Amendment martyr.” That’s a real trap.

We learned to speak out quickly and to get our message out broadly in the heat of the moment, to take action and to take it fast because situations like this escalate rapidly in this era of electronic communication.

We learned to calibrate whether the hateful speech required a message from the president or whether it could come from a dean or someone else in authority. If we overused the president’s voice then everyone would expect the president to weigh in on every insult and the impact of the voice would be diluted. We made a point of explaining *why* we believed we needed to be responding in the way we were.

We learned (sometimes from our mistakes) that if we spoke out soon enough and forcefully enough – and specifically enough – then the outside pressure that was greatly complicating the situation would abate. And then we could get on with the work of taking up the conflict where it belonged, within our community, and often within the faculty.

As long as we were in the public eye there were people on the campus who were playing to those outside audiences – pursuing their own personal and political agendas, widening the polarization, escalating the conflict, provoking their colleagues to take up cudgels in the dispute, generally making it impossible for anyone to be learning anything meaningful from the differences that had triggered the dispute. Getting out of the national spotlight enabled us to create spaces in which people of good will could do their good work, learning with and from one another, challenging competing truth claims on the basis of evidence and with a sincere desire to know.

We had martyrs on multiple sides: faculty and others who became invested in keeping the battle raging because of the psychic and other payoffs (lectures, books, attention, media celebrity) that attended their roles as lonesome and unappreciated warriors. They became more and more set in their positions, more and more resolute in the truth of the accusations they were hurling at one another, less and less able to participate in exploring viewpoints other than their own.

I learned that the most important thing I could do in these situations was to model in every way possible my fundamental belief that everyone at Wellesley – including the president – was there to learn. There were always new opportunities for me, and others, to face our own blind spots and prejudices. I did a lot of listening when the temperature rose. I did a lot of writing (only some for public consumption) and a lot of talking to trusted colleagues on campus and beyond. At the first hint of a new controversy I went full-bore into inquiry mode.

We learned to stand against hate mongering by investing our energy into making peace. We learned that if we allowed ourselves to be drawn into opposing the haters – as tempting as that was -- then we were empowering them to set the terms of engagement and to ratchet up endless and tedious cycle of blaming and name-calling with no forward movement.

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But none of this learning came easily for me or for others. Sometimes it was really horribly hard. It's not pleasant to be confronted with the awareness of how imperfect our understanding is of where others are coming from, others we thought we knew. Disillusionment is painful. And it's awful to have to sit with ourselves and face our own failures and ignorance and powerlessness.

It's excruciating sometimes to swallow our anger and righteous indignation and instead to work for civility and peace. People say you've sold out. They call you names if you don't join their fight on their terms – anti-Semite, racist, coward, incompetent, naïf. That hurts.

The only way to rise above that fray, I discovered, is by holding fast to higher values – to the obligations we have to each other, to our educational mission, and to the wider world. If we want to continue to enjoy the rare freedoms we have in our country and on our campuses (imperfect though they will always be, imperfect though we all are), we will have to work together to preserve the values of cooperation, consensus, egalitarianism, justice, and a conception of freedom rooted in concern for the good of all. We cannot take these values for granted. We have to defend them and we have to live them, as best we can.

There will always be people intent on bringing their despair to destroy this dream. Every system has its suicide bombers, symbolic or real, people so attached to negativity that they can imagine only sabotage and mayhem. There will always be people so committed to separatism that their singular goal will be to ratchet up cycles of violence. And they will become especially desperate at exactly those moments when others are beginning to resolve their differences and find common ground. The common ground is a threat to the worldview of the confirmed separatists.

The verbal bomb throwers will represent themselves as the only truth speakers, as the realists who refuse to be placated by what they will call hollow and soft rhetoric. They will be sanctimonious and they will be very sure. They will have absolutely fixed positions and they will not be moved. And they will do all they can to incite fear in others of everything they see as alien to their narrow worldview. They will try to make you afraid.

Every microcosm – no matter how safe and secure – will have a small-scale analogue of this larger pattern. We saw it on the Wellesley campus, a bucolic and sincerely caring place, dedicated to knowledge and learning and growth. And we worked hard to master the lessons it had to teach.

Perhaps the most important lesson I learned along the way is that we do not have to be afraid. We can have our fears, we all do; we would not be human without them, and we need them for discernment. But we do not have to allow our fears to drive and define us. We do not have to allow our fears to consume us, as they do consume those who are intent on dwelling in their ancient wounds and hiding out in their contempt. We have that choice to make, every single day.

So this will be your special obligation, this organization focused on this generation from whom we need such wisdom, courage and skill. It will fall to you to do all you can to

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transform these hostile worlds from the inside out. I perceived deep faith in the coming generations being expressed and enacted at this conference.

And your first and most sacred responsibility will be to transform yourselves – as you have been doing here at this Summit, and doing back home on your campuses -- not once and for all, but over and over again. It's a lifelong project (I'm here to tell you) and I commend you for taking it up, with intelligence and with courage and with the knowledge from Jewish tradition, as Ruth Messenger said yesterday, that you are not required to complete the task, but you are expected to work at it. I wish you satisfaction and success in that work, and I thank you, again, for who you are, and for all you bring.

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