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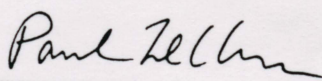
MICHI WEGLYN

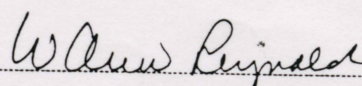
The Honorary Degree of

DOCTOR OF LETTERS

*With all the rights, privileges, and honors
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President LeClerc, Distinguished Fellow Honoree, Members of the Faculty,
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18587
In accepting this rare distinction with which you have honored me, my gratitude goes deeper than mere words can convey. You have bestowed upon me a treasure which shall be cherished also as an homage to my many, many accomplished fellow Asian-Americans. And especially to our forebears of enormous fortitude and courage, many of whose lifelong struggles and achievements far surpass my own.

It is said that success might be defined as achieving something truly valued by one's culture--as a college education is exceedingly prized within our own. But that singular quest, to obtain a college degree, was one which proved for me a dismal and embarrassing failure.

For those were the years spent in one TB sanatorium after another, as a college "dropout" of a sort, reduced to a state of abject hopelessness for the future--the most devastating time of my life. So again, how deeply aware I am of the high, redeeming honor you have accorded me, lifting me to heights which my then impoverished, hard-working, self-sacrificing parents would not have dreamed of!

I would be remiss, therefore, if I, who have known the depths of humiliation, bigotry, social ostracism and failure, did not use this moment as a pinnacle from which I might speak as an Asian-American deeply troubled by the grievous inequities that gave rise to the recent events in Los Angeles: the despair of the dispossessed bursting into violent nihilism and rage, in the wake of the Rodney King verdict.

As appalling as the ensuing carnage was in Los Angeles, the riot that erupted among the abandoned inner city "expendables" of our society served to illuminate ^h a racism and class-ism too long institutionalized, as in Third World nations, where the poor, huddled masses really don't count. Where a tiny minority controls the wealth. ^h

It brought into sharper focus the vulnerability of a once confident nation's leadership so busy building up and asserting its military might and will upon others that it hardly noticed the cataclysmic split dividing the "haves" and the "have-nots" of our urban wastelands, and the explosive social tensions that could bring down the leadership, and the nation with it.

There is an old black spiritual which goes: "God's gonna set the world on fire, one of these days...". Or, as one witness to the whirlwind of violence raging around him explained to a Los Angeles Times reporter: "If you've been oppressed and suppressed for so long, crying out for change and not being heard, you take the matter into your own hands." Here again, as during the Watts riot, it was a "DO SOMETHING!" wake-up cry of inner city pariahs, a call for revolution, a revolt, to focus attention on a long simmering, powderkeg situation: widespread discrimination, police brutality, squalid housing conditions, joblessness, substandard education, guns and drugs everywhere, and a health care system in shambles.

This alienation, this feeling of frustration of even the general public with traditional politics is tellingly expressed by my good friend, editor Ed Moran, whom I quote:

"... looting is evil only when 'minorities' burn down buildings, not when members of the establishment loot the savings and loans. . . . Violence is evil only when 'minorities' mug people in dark alleys, not when the federal government abandons the nation's cities and sends message after message that the disenfranchised are not worth including in the national agenda. If money can be found to bomb Iraq into submission, why cannot money be found to make our own nation expansive enough for everyone to share?"¹

The grisly TV images of the Rodney King beatings--played and replayed ad nauseam--and the murderous rampage which followed the Simi Valley verdict were a disquieting reminder for those among America's minorities mindful of the undergirding of racism upon which our nation was built. It brought back bitter memories of their own group's rough encounters with those who vented their racist rage by playing judge, jury and often executioner-on-the-spot. It reminded them of how they too had suffered the fire of arsonists; the brutality of enforcers of law; and of how loaded the justice system continues to be against anyone of color. Especially if he is poor and powerless.

In the face of the media's search for the sensational, which serves only to exacerbate an already volatile situation, how deep and seemingly intractable are the problems which confront us in our ever more pluralistic and factionalized society. Stereotypic treatment of individuals or entire ethnic groups, whether based on racial, cultural or national background,

have hurt us all and have circumscribed our abilities to reach out to others.

In the case of Korean-Americans involved in the Los Angeles riot, Asian-Americans have more than a little interest in making sure that ignorance, misinformation and reflexive, simplistic thinking are not allowed to run rampant.

Though the devastation suffered by Koreans has been estimated to be more than that of any one group, their anger is leveled less on rioters and looters than on what they perceive to be the racist indifference of law enforcers who allowed the lawlessness to proceed unchecked. When desperate appeals for help went unheeded, terrified merchants were left with no choice but to arm themselves or to watch their livelihood go up in flames. The Secretary General of the Korean Chamber of Commerce of Southern California angrily charged: "The United States acts like the policeman of the world; but there were no police in the Korean community when we needed them!"²

Korean-Americans have expressed outrage at the mainstream media's distortion of the riot as a Black-Korean conflict, as though Korean merchants had been purposely singled out for attack. Rioters, even hoodlum elements among jobless Anglos, Hispanics and Asians, caught up in the frenzied vandalism and looting free-for-all, indiscriminately hit merchants in the south-central area, including numerous Black and Latino-owned businesses, some Japanese-American establishments, and whatever else stood in their way. Annie Cho of the Korean American Grocers Association faults the media for blowing up "misconceptions," insisting that "it so happens that many Koreans had businesses in the area, not that they were targeted."³

Absent were reports of black customers trying vainly to save Korean-owned stores from going up in flames.

The new media's stereotypic assumption of Korean-Americans as being tough, hardworking and highly successful is also resented by Korean-Americans, at a time when many of the businesses based in the inner city areas had been hard hit by the economic downturn, with some barely able to eke out a living.

I was personally appalled and saddened to read in The Korean Times of Los Angeles, some time ago, of two young Korean sisters' shocking double suicide. They had left a note stating that this was their way of helping to fulfill their parents' dream of sending their brother to college.

Lamenting the failure of the Los Angeles Police Department to charge in immediately to protect shopkeepers when the rioting began, Professor Elaine Kim of the University of California, Berkeley, claims that Korean-Americans were being used as human shields to protect the real source of rage. The repeated replay of armed Korean merchants juxtaposed with wild-eyed, gun-toting mobs-in-action amounted to "visual media racism," according to Professor Kim. In her view, it sends a coded message that Koreans and Blacks come from cultures more violent and racist than that of White America. "They also diverted attention away from a long tradition of racial violence that was not created by African-Americans or Korean-Americans," charges Professor Kim.

She goes on to explain:

"The tensions among people of color are rooted in racial violence woven into United States history for the past 500 years. . . . The roots lie not in the Korean immigrant-owned corner store situated in a community ravaged by poverty and police violence, but stretch far back to the corridors of corporate and government offices. . . . Without an understanding of our histories, Korean-Americans and African-Americans, it seems, are ready to engage in . . . a war in which the advancement of one group means deterioration for the other."⁴

The breakdown of law and order in Los Angeles casts a harsh new light on America's way of forgetting quickly what we wish to forget. Years and years of misinformation, indifference to, and ignorance of, the lifestyles, culture, mores and aspirations of other peoples have left us in an information vacuum.

And so it made it easier for us to invade and subjugate the Philippines and Hawaii in the late nineteenth century and to use napalm to incinerate Vietnamese, then Cambodians, some seven decades later.

And to deny safe haven to Haitian refugees today, as we did to Jews fleeing from Nazi terror in 1939.

Nor should we be allowed to forget the looting, torching, the mob violence inflicted on powerless minorities in our greed-driven, land-grabbing conquest of America's vast frontier. The untold depredations, the overwhelming immoralities inflicted on Chinese immigrants during the late nineteenth century, which eventually led to their exclusion from America

for some sixty years, should sensitize us to the realization that Blacks and Hispanics have no monopoly on murder, looting and mayhem, notwithstanding media emphasis to the contrary. To help keep alive our historical memory, I cite here a few of the cruelties endured by the early Chinese in our country:

- (1) Rock Springs, Wyoming, 1885. White miners go on rampage, burning the homes of hundreds of Chinese laborers, murdering twenty-eight of them, following decline in mining employment and the rise of anti-Chinese "cheap labor" hysteria.⁵
- (2) Los Angeles, California, 1871. Lynching of fifteen Chinese and the shooting deaths of two others follow riot in Los Angeles's Chinese quarters.⁶
- (3) Tacoma, Washington, 1885. All Chinese in Tacoma are jammed into boxcars and banished to Portland, Oregon. Following the overnight uprooting and mass expulsion, city of Tacoma's Chinatown burned to the ground.⁷

In the shocking treatment of the Chinese we have seen once again the utter betrayal of the right to protection of life, liberty and property by those supposedly charged with upholding it.

The unspeakable cruelty with which the Chinese and others were recklessly swept aside during the expansionist forging of America as a nation has been codified with candor and passion by master historian Hubert Barcroft, who wrote in the 1880's that in all Pacific Coast history ". . . there is no fouler blot than the outrages perpetrated . . . upon Indians, Mexicans and Chinese. . . . As a progressive people, we reveal a race prejudice intolerable to civilization; as Christians we are made

to blush beside the heathen Asiatic; as just and humane men we slaughter the innocent and vie with redhanded savages in deeds of atrocity."⁸

Even as historian Bancroft was writing about the atrocities inflicted on Native Americans, Mexicans and the Chinese, a systematic recording of the lynching of Blacks was just beginning. Between 1889 and 1918, some 3,000 cases involving men and women, some of whom were burned alive, had been recorded.⁹ Imagine how the numbers must have escalated by December 4, 1933, when the newly elected President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, received the following plea sent by Samuel F. Holman, President of the Harlem Registration League:

"Rights and Justice in the South and the Far West have been obliterated by mob law and condoned by governors and other state and county officials. I think the time has now arrived, Mr. President, that you should invoke the power invested in you as the chief magistrate of this great nation of ours and stamp out lynching and mob law forever."¹⁰

As one of those sent into wartime detention in early 1942 (via the most arbitrary of executive decrees) on the flimsy pretext that the incarceration was necessary for our own protection ("protective custody" they called it), the irony of the President's inaction in the face of such lawlessness, as lynchings of powerless blacks certainly were, was not lost on me.

And justice in America is mocked when lynchings, which should have been wiped out generations ago, are showing a disquieting reappearance, according to a recent mailing of the Southern Poverty Law Center in Alabama. Could it

be related in part to the impact of those infamous "Willie Horton" TV ads during 1988, which shabbily exploited the worst fears about African-Americans?

Which leads me now to address another immediate threat and fear: the possible turning of Japan, the economic superpower now challenging America's cherished preeminence, into the "Willie Horton" of 1992,¹¹ exacerbating an already ominous "open season" mentality towards Asian-Americans. Judging from the "tough guy" rhetoric of opportunistic politicians and corporate leaders, the bashing and beating up on the Japanese is already serving to appease the fury of those mired in joblessness, while it avoids confronting unpalatable realities: that industry prefers exporting jobs abroad to making investments at home; and that placing the blame solely on Japan only helps to obfuscate the fault of United States corporations which have preferred to disregard long term investments in favor of short term profits.

The United States Commission on Civil Rights, on February 28, 1992, issued a major report¹² after a two-year study, which strongly condemns "Japan bashing" as contributing to bias-related violence directed against all Asian-Americans, because many in this country associate Asians with Japan, regardless of their national origin.

Numerous incidents of bigotry and violence leveled against Asian-Americans are cited, including the bias-related massacre of Southeast Asian school children in Stockton, California, and the vicious baseball bat bashing-to-death of young Vincent Chin by two unemployed Detroit auto workers who mistook him for a Japanese.

The need for moral and political leadership from all sectors of society is stressed by the Commission. It calls on political party leaders

to refrain from "race-baiting" tactics in the upcoming election.

The report contains no reference to the more recent escalation in violence which followed the Pearl Harbor semicentennial media-hype, the dredging up and replaying of wartime propaganda films, which served to reinforce perceptions of Asians as being sneaky subhumans who were not to be trusted. All these excesses led to a frightening rise in hate mail, death threats, sidewalk attacks, shootings, and racial graffiti and vandalism which desecrated not only Japanese-American but other Asian cultural and business establishments and places of worship as well.

In closing, let me take you back fifty years to a sun-scorched, dust-whipped desert prison camp called Gila, where we Japanese-Americans--some 14,000 of us--shared space with the Pima Indians on their Arizona reservation. That is where a cluster of hastily thrown together, empty barracks served as our high school--one without tables or chairs in the beginning. No books either. No blackboards. No lab equipment. No tax dollars were to be wasted on us.

It was bad enough that the heat was merciless, ranging from 110 to 120 degrees when we first arrived there in July 1942. It was more like 130 degrees for my father, who worked under the blistering desert sun as a field hand for sixteen dollars a month.

Considering these conditions, we students could understand why it was nearly impossible to recruit teachers from the outside. Many would come, take one look or teach for a month or so, then pack up and leave.

But those of us attending the highschool in Gila had been singularly blessed in finding there a teacher of extraordinary commitment who cared for us as human beings. Our "Miss Sheldon," as we then called her, is

forever enshrined in the collective memory of students who came under her influence. The war had forced Miss Sheldon to leave behind in India her life mission of educating, thus uplifting both economically and socially, the poorest of the poor, her beloved Untouchables.

Recognizing the outcast status of Blacks in America, Miss Sheldon had come to us in Arizona, following a few months' stopover at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama¹³ to better evaluate the ways in which she could eventually help to move her Untouchables in India out of their lowest caste status.

There, in the worst possible environment imaginable, Miss Sheldon worked tirelessly, not only to obtain books and to build a library with whatever was discarded by West Coast school systems, but she brought to us an appreciation of the English language, especially English literature, which she taught with such passion and unforgettable emotion that characters from the classics came to life, as though they were there in the room with us, speaking to us.

Miss Sheldon spoke constantly of those she had left behind in India and of what it was truly like to be despised and disadvantaged; she fired in some of us a burning urge to make our way to India someday to help those unfortunates.

Miraculously, we who were then America's pariahs, with little hope for the future, suddenly experienced a sense of purpose in our wartime banishment which transcended the barbed wire that had once shackled us with despair.

Miss Sheldon sent our spirits soaring. Indeed, she liberated us with a vision for the future--a mission, which she required us to fulfill with this mandate:

"Go forth into the world as Ambassadors of Good Will!"

Miss Sheldon's life of service and self-sacrifice to help the down-trodden, her gentle dignity, is reminiscent of one whom the world today lauds as the ultimate role model for our time: Nobel Laureate Mother Theresa.

It is thus fitting for those of us gathered together today that I now close by reading a letter which Mother Theresa wrote to co-workers in 1971,¹⁴ which reads in part:

When I was hungry, you gave me to eat.
When I was thirsty, you gave me to drink.

When I was homeless, you opened your doors.
When I was naked you gave me your coat.

When I was little, you taught me to read.
When I was lonely, you gave me your love.

When in a prison, you came to my cell.
When on a sick bed, you cared for my needs.

In a strange country, you made me at home.
Seeking employment, you found me a job.

Hurt in a battle, you bound up my wounds.
Searching for kindness, you held out your hand.

When I was Negro, or Chinese, or white, and
Mocked and insulted, you carried my cross.

When I was aged, you bothered to smile.
When I was restless, you listened and cared.

You saw me covered with spittle and blood,
You knew my features, though grimy with sweat.

When I was laughed at, you stood by my side.
When I was happy, you shared in my joy.

Graduates! Go forward with courage, hand in hand, and let us all live this life!

NOTES

1. Edward Moran, "Rainbow Reflections," The New York Nichibei, May 14, 1992.
2. Takeshi Nakayama, "A Devastated Los Angeles Community Asks 'Why'," Rafu Shimpo, May 7, 1992.
3. Ibid.
4. Elaine H. Kim, "They Armed in Self-Defense," Newsweek, May 18, 1992.
5. Paul Jacobs, Saul Landau and Eve Pell, To Serve the Devil (vol.II) (New York: Vintage Books, 1971).
6. John Kuo Wei Tchen, Genthe's Photographs of San Francisco's Old Chinatown (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1984).
7. Ibid.
8. Bancroft Works (vol. XXV) (San Francisco: The History Co., 1882-1890).
9. Pictorial History of the Black American by Editors of New Front (New York: 1969).
10. Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library.
11. Jesse Jackson address at California State University, Los Angeles, February 19, 1992.
12. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights report, "Civil Rights Issues Facing Asian Americans in the 1990's," February 28, 1992.
13. Mary A. Hulse, Mud to Gold, Ward Printing, 1989.
14. Letter from Mother Theresa to Co-Workers, December 1971. Taken from The Love of Christ, ed. Georges Gorree and Jean Barbier (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982).