

My Message to the World

Prof. Michael L. Perlin
Director, International Mental Disability Law Reform Project
Director, Online Mental Disability Law Program
New York Law School

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It is such an honor to have been asked to make this presentation today. This will be the first time that I have not connected in person with so many of you since about 2006 (I believe that was my first year with this group), and it will leave such a hole in my heart that world events have made it impossible. But, to be able to do this short talk allows for a continuation of that connection.

It has been a year like no other, that we all know. Ironically, there were joyous events in our family: our son Alex (and his wife Liz) welcomed their son, Sam, in July, and our daughter Julie (and her husband Ben) welcomed their daughter, Sophie, in October. (Yes, pictures are available!). This would be a joy under any set of circumstances, but coming at a time of such sadness in the world, it made us realize how fortunate we truly are.

Of course, we have weathered the most destructive political forces in American history, and I hope – I pray – that this part of the national nightmare will truly be over in five weeks. I am, as you who know me know, a perpetually positive and optimistic guy, in spite of whatever is in front of me, so I am hoping that the transition to President Biden is, in the end, a smooth one (or as smooth as it can be), and that we can hit “reset” on the game clocks on January 21, and return to being a nation that can serve around the world as a model for pluralistic democracy. I hope.

This will be the first year in at least a decade that I am not doing one of my short 7-minute “takes” on a topic on which I am working that connects to humiliation and to dignity, but that does not mean that I am not thinking of these issues. In recent years, I’ve spoken often about therapeutic jurisprudence, about the relationship between the law, shame and humiliation, about how persons with autism are treated in the legal system, about how juveniles are treated in the legal system, about trauma, humiliation and the legal system, about the ways that seclusion and restraint policies in psychiatric hospitals humiliate and shame those at risk, about how the legalization of marijuana would help alleviate some of the law’s humiliating focus, and about how persons with mental disabilities are treated in police encounters.

Had this been a “normal” year, I most likely would have talked about one of my current research focuses: how persons with traumatic brain injury are treated in the legal system, and how we can bring dignity to that cohort of individuals. And the “takeaway” of my message here

would have been this: that our failure to understand how this population *is* regularly shamed and humiliated in the legal system robs them of the dignity to which they are entitled under law and under good practices.

Some of you might be thinking: why he is talking about *this* at the time of Covid? Not an unreasonable question, but one to which I have an answer. We *will emerge* from this horror of horrors (and it has had a special resonance for me, as my paternal grandfather died in 1919 of what was then called the Spanish flu), and when that happens we will do, as I noted before, a “reset” on how we live our lives – our goals, our values, our perspectives. My message to the world is that, when this happens, we need think carefully – more carefully than ever – about those who are marginalized who have been cast aside by society.

I end with – this will surprise no one – the first verse of Bob Dylan’s epic song, *Chimes of Freedom* (played, not coincidentally by Bob at President Clinton’s inauguration several lifetimes ago):

Far between sundown's finish
An' midnights broken toll
We ducked inside the doorway, thunder crashing
As majestic bells of bolts
Struck shadows in the sound
Seeming to be the chimes of freedom flashing
Flashing for the warriors whose strength is not to fight
Flashing for the refugees on the unarmed road of flight
An' for each an' every underdog soldier in the night
An' we gazed upon the chimes of freedom flashing

This is my message to the world. May the chimes of freedom flash.

Thank you, Evelin and Linda, for all that you do, and for this opportunity.

Michael Perlin