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The Huffington Post:

Dehumanization Is Our Weapon of Mass Destruction

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*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness (The Declaration of Independence, 1776).*

These words are some of the most familiar and beloved in the English language, as they offer a moral vision for humanity and a standard to which the United States of America should continually strive.

While such expressions of freedom should indeed be cherished, we often forget the harsh reality that many contributors to the Declaration of Independence were also active and unapologetic participants in the brutal act of slavery. As the English abolitionist Thomas Day wrote in 1776: “If there be an object truly ridiculous in nature, it is an American patriot, signing resolutions of independency with the one hand, and with the other brandishing a whip over his affrighted slaves.”

In addition to racial inequality, while Abigail Adams reminded her husband John to “remember the ladies” during the Constitutional Convention of 1787, her warnings were mostly disregarded, women were continually marginalized, and they were relegated as dependents of men, without the power to own property, make contracts, or vote. The reply of John Adams to Abigail’s challenge was far from considerate: “As to your extraordinary code of laws, I cannot but laugh...”

How do we explain the flaws and inconsistencies of our national founders? How could such leaders “sign resolutions of independence” with one hand and “brandish a whip” with the other? How could they possibly support such clear forms of oppression while also seeking to promote freedom?

While some might blame a combination of economic expediency, ignorance, and personal hypocrisy, perhaps the primary means to justify such exploitation was to deem others as *less than human*. Whereas *human beings* were indeed seen to be created with certain unalienable rights, it appears that slaves, women, and others were viewed not as human, but rather, *sub-human*. As a result, the so-called sub-humans could be systematically humiliated, exploited, and if needed, eliminated through the will of the powerful, who in turn could rationalize it all with a free and clear conscious. This phenomenon, perhaps our original weapon of mass destruction, is often called *dehumanization*.

According to David Livingstone Smith, in his text “[Less than Human](http://www.amazon.com/Less-Than-Human-Enslave-Exterminate/dp/1250003830)“:

*Dehumanization isn’t a way of talking. It’s a way of thinking - a way of thinking that - sadly, comes all too easy to us. Dehumanization is a scourge, and has been so for millennia. It acts as a psychological lubricant, dissolving our inhibitions and inflaming our destructive passions. As such, it empowers us to perform acts that would, under other circumstances, be unthinkable.*

Dehumanization is not merely an epidemic of a regrettable past, as it takes place each day, here in the present, sometimes profound and oftentimes quite subtle. While many would recognize slavery and genocide as tangible forms of dehumanization, we often fail to observe the everyday actions and thoughts that result from viewing others as less human than ourselves. When we discriminate, prejudge, and/or take advantage of others for personal profit, we frequently rank and regard others as sub-human, and in doing so justify our depraved behavior, for we value our own hopes, dreams, and aspirations as more important - or more human - than those of others. In what can be described as truly alarming, such dehumanization is increasingly commonplace (and accepted) during the current presidential campaigns, thus one can except to witness a surge in “acts that would, under other circumstances, be unthinkable.”

In addition to serving as perpetrators and enablers of dehumanization, we are also frequent victims, oftentimes in ways we refuse to recognize. When corporate leaders judge employees as mere mechanical objects of production and consumption (while also arguing that corporations are people), we see dehumanization in our midst. When media outlets affirm stereotypes and/or racial profiling for the sake of selling fear (and subscriptions), we see dehumanization in our midst. When a [leading presidential candidate](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/01/28/upshot/donald-trump-twitter-insults.html) employs insults as a strategic means to win votes (and it proves successful), we see dehumanization in our midst. The examples could continue, as dehumanization is fully and fearfully present in our midst. We experience it each day, as some are treated more humane than others, and at any given time we might be perpetrators, victims, or most likely, a combination of both. The terrorizing result is a mass destruction of our shared dignity as human beings.

In response to this growing and gross epidemic, the theological understanding of *Imago Dei*, or “Image of God”, is an affirmation that reaches far beyond historical governmental declarations, for it recognizes that all people - regardless of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, political affiliation, and religious affirmation - are created, loved, and affirmed by the same God who creates and sustains life as we know it. As stated by [Thomas Albert Howard](http://www.amazon.com/Imago-Dei-Dignity-Ecumenical-Perspective/dp/0813221439), conceptions of the *Imago Dei* have contributed a great deal to promoting notions of shared human dignity, especially during the soul-searching years following World War II. From the Nazi Holocaust and Nuremberg trials, to the struggle for U.S. Civil Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the post-1945 moral-political landscape was - and continues to be - powered by appeals to human dignity, many of which can be traced to *Imago Dei*. In light of the current and disturbing rise in mass dehumanization ([which some compare to the social-political context that led to World War II](http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/27/politics/anne-frank-donald-trump-adolf-hitler/)), such attention to *Imago Dei* is critically important. As Mark Twain is often credited with stating, “History doesn’t repeat itself but it often rhymes”.

The most dangerous weapon of mass destruction in our world is not to be found in the dark corners of some distant country, but it is discovered in the hidden and harsh depths of our own misguided and manipulated hearts, as we do possess “*a psychological lubricant, dissolving our inhibitions and inflaming our destructive passions*.” We must affirm that there is no such thing as sub-human, for all human beings are created with the sacred identity offered by the God who brought all of life into being. We are not defined by the various labels that others place upon us, thus we should resist the temptation to deny the human dignity and rights of others. We can build and preserve civil conversations and equitable relationships through the understanding that all are loved by God, and despite what the pundits may push, with God “all” does indeed means *all*.

The unalienable rights of Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness are grounded in the affirmation of our collective Humanness. We need others to be human in order to be fully human ourselves. When we hold such truth as self-evident, then we might experience what it really means to be free.