

**The Hummingbird and the Forest Fire:
A Diaspora Morality Tale
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Foreword: “The Whole is Greater Than the Sum of Its Parts”

100,000 letters. 50 State Resolutions. 77 million people. We are on the move!

For many of us, the past few weeks have been pretty exciting times in Diaspora grassroots activism. We managed to launch some notable mobilization efforts to advance human rights and democracy in Ethiopia. A White House letter writing campaign attracted the enthusiastic support of individual Ethiopians and civic and political organizations throughout the world. We were also able to engage some of the prestigious American universities to focus on human rights abuses in Ethiopia.

We launched a 50-state legislative initiative to increase awareness of human rights abuses at the local level in the various states, and to add the collective voices of the American people to ours in demanding the immediate and unconditional release of the prisoners of conscience. We also aim to build wide grassroots support for H.R. 5680 or its substitute through this effort. Consistent with this objective, Assembly Joint Resolution 12¹ is currently pending in the California Legislature. This resolution sends a simple message to the President and the U.S. Congress:

“We do not want American tax dollars to be used to kill, torture, maim, imprison and persecute innocent Ethiopians, or to bankroll a repressive regime that flouts international law.”

It is encouraging to know we are not alone in our quest for human rights in Ethiopia. Many members of Congress are now asking questions of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. They have written her letters to “express [their] strong concern about the continued detention of elected parliamentarians, human rights advocates, and independent journalists in Ethiopia.” They demand the “unconditional release of political prisoners”, an “end to arbitrary arrests”, accountability for “those security personnel who killed innocent civilians” and institutional reforms so that another massacre “will not be repeated”.

So, we are on the move, and *we are ready for action on the substitute bill for H.R. 5680, the Ethiopia Freedom, Democracy and Human Rights Act.*

Along the way, we have learned a couple of lessons. Those cynics who preach the gospel of defeatism about the political will and capacity of Diaspora Ethiopians in the holy cause of human rights should reexamine their erroneous assumptions. Diaspora Ethiopians will respond decisively to demands for focused action. We have also learned that the old saying is really true: “The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.” All of us acting

¹ http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/07-08/bill/asm/ab_0001-0050/ajr_12_bill_20070222_introduced.pdf

together and individually can produce meaningful and lasting results for improved human rights conditions in Ethiopia.

I offer the following allegory in the spirit of the “whole is greater than the sum of the parts.”

The Forest on Fire...

This morality tale takes after the simple story of the hummingbird², once told by Dr. Wangari Maathai, the Kenyan environmentalist and 2004 Nobel Prize laureate for peace. She had heard the basic story line from a professor in Japan on one of her trips there. As I re-tell it here, I have taken complete poetic and creative license, but only to illustrate the challenges and opportunities Diaspora Ethiopians face in their efforts to improve the human rights situation in Ethiopia. The reader is free to make his/her own interpretation of the allegory.

Once upon a time, a reckless and evil man decided to set a great and ancient forest on fire. He declared his mission with determination: “I will clear out this forest and build a great house, and around the house a big village with big houses and buildings and wide boulevards and highways. I will have my friends join me and enjoy the bounty of my handiwork. We will be the masters of this forest forever,” he declared triumphantly.

This firestarter did not care much about the animals, great and small, that made a home in the forest.

And he set the forest on fire. At first, the fire began burning small shrubs and bushes and few animals noticed. But the fire spread quickly, and soon it was raging out of control. Flames vaulted from tree top to tree top, and the entire forest was soon engulfed in a conflagration.

The Forest Animals...

As the blazing fire spread, the forest animals began running to safety frightened by the sight of the galloping flames, billowing smoke, and the crackling sound of exploding embers.

The younger and stronger animals used their feet to quickly outrun the rampaging fire, and got to safety on the edge of the forest. The winged animals lifted themselves into the air and escaped. The burrowing animals descended to their underground holes. But

² The hummingbird is considered to be the smallest bird in the world. It is capable of sustained hovering, and has the ability to fly backwards or vertically. Hummingbirds are known for their unique ability to hover in mid-air flapping their wings up to 80 times per second, creating a humming sound.

the small, the feeble and aged animals could not outrun the fire and were left behind. They were doomed to a dreadful fate.

The animals that managed to outrun the firestorm stood on the edge of the forest stunned and horrified by the destruction of their forest home. They gazed silently at the intense fire, and stood helplessly and downcast with the certain knowledge that the fire was devouring their friends and neighbors who could not make it out of the forest. They were paralyzed from taking any action.

In an act of bravado, the elephants stepped forward and declared, “We elephants could douse out this fire if we wanted to. All we have to do is suck enough water from the river and spray it on the fire, and it will stop burning our forest home.” But they did not go to the river to fetch water. They just stood there mesmerized by the advancing fire.

“Certainly, we can do better than that. And we don’t even have to fetch water,” rejoined the lions, not to be outdone. “All we have to do is make a mighty roar, and the fire will get scared and leave the forest.” And they issued mighty roars, but the fire kept on burning.

The zebras followed. “We zebras could distract the fire with our colors. We can start running every which way, and while the fire is trying to figure out if we are white with black stripes or black with white stripes, it will be confused and stop burning. That’s how we will save our forest.” And they pranced and danced, but the relentless fire kept on devouring more of the ancient forest.

Then came the laughing hyenas, except this time they were not laughing. They appeared visibly saddened. You could even say they were shedding a few crocodile tears. “Oh, my! Oh, my! Our forest home is being destroyed. Somebody do something! We are hyenas. We are known for cowardice, not valor. Lions, elephants, tigers, somebody, do something!” But they did not stick around for long; they quickly left for their underground dens to meet and confer.

These merciless scavengers could hardly contain their delight at the sight of the burning forest. “Imagine all of the delicious morsels of carrion we get to eat once this fire is done. Think of all of the dead and dying animals that are just waiting for us to snack on,” they cheered each other grinning ear-to-ear, their mouths dripping with saliva. “This is a great day, a great day indeed for hyenas,” they congratulated each other.

The snakes that lived under rocks were not particularly concerned. “Well, this fire will soon be over, and we’ll crawl back under our rocks. We don’t really care what happens to the forest. Everybody knows fire does not burn rocks, and our homes will be safe after the fire is over,” they assured themselves in a tone of moral indifference to the plight of the other animals.

The weasels could actually see an opportunity to improve their situation after the fire. “What is the big deal about this fire? Once the forest is burned down, we will trick

the new master to let us live in his village. We will never bother him. We will never complain. We will pretend that we obey all of his rules, but we will look for our chances. Anyway, if we stay out of his way, he will let us live and prosper,” they comforted each other.

The chameleons in their usual indecisive style rose to the occasion. “Sure, fire is actually a pretty good thing. It gets rid of all the dead wood, and the weak and sick animals who do not contribute much to forest life. Then again, fire could be a bad thing. It destroys everything, good and bad. It does not differentiate. Well, this fire is better than the last fire we had. A lot more animals died back then. Now at least we can stand on the edge of the fire and save ourselves. That’s what counts. But then again, you can never predict what fire can do.” They kept on wavering from one thought to another confusing the other animals.

It was finally the tigers’ turn. They looked resigned and gloomy. They stepped forward and somberly advised everyone, “The forest is gone. Our homes are no more. There is nothing that can be done. There is no hope. We’ll never be able to go back. Let’s just go somewhere else and build a new life for ourselves.”

The Firestarter...

The firestarter saw the conflagration, and was very pleased. He said to himself, “This is all I have ever wanted to do. Destroy this forest and everything in it. I have now succeeded!!”

Of course, the firestarter did not care much if the forest animals died or lived. He couldn’t care less. He was obsessed by what he can gain for himself and his friends. But he was happy to see the ancient forest destroyed. He beat his chest triumphantly as he declared, “I have destroyed the forest. Now, I own the charred remains. It’s mine! It’s mine! It’s all mine! Forever!”

The Hummingbird...

While all of this intense conversation was going on among the big animals, a tiny humming bird was flying furiously back and forth to the river carrying droplets of water in her beak. After a while, the chattering animals noticed the hummingbird’s strange behavior.

“Hummingbird, what in the world are you doing?” they asked.

“Oh, I am just carrying water from the river to put out the fire,” replied the humming bird casually, as she continued to fly back and forth to the river scooping up droplets of water.

The whole animal colony burst out in laughter.

“Hummingbird, do you know how foolish you look trying to put out this great fire with the tiny droplets of water you carry in your beak,” the animals inquired. The

hummingbird continued to shuttle droplets of water from the river, unfazed by the laughter and ridicule.

“You may think I am foolish, but I am doing all that I can do,” replied the humming bird.

“But humming bird, surely you must know that your droplets of water will do nothing to put out this fire. Why are you wasting your time?” replied the puzzled animals.

“I am doing all that I can do. And may be if we all did what we could do, instead of standing around and talking about what should, could or needs to be done, then perhaps, we may be able to put out the forest fire!” advised the tiny humming bird as she flew back and forth to carry more droplets of water from the river.

The big animals were not persuaded. “You can gather a thousand humming birds like yourself, and even all of you wouldn’t be able to put out this fire,” the animals derided the gutsy hummingbird.

The hummingbird briefly hovered to explain herself to the large animals: “You see, this forest is my home. This is where I was born. This is where grandpa and great grandma hummingbird were born. This forest has been good to all of the animals who made their homes in it. Our ancestors did a lot to make this forest a good home for all us; and many of died fighting to save this forest from many previous firestarters.”

The hummingbird continued, “Surely, you know none of the previous firestarters succeed in destroying our forest home because our ancestors were strong firefighters. They fought the fire with everything they had. And I am fighting this fire with everything I got, even though you may think I am foolish for trying to carry droplets of water in my beak,” concluded the hummingbird as she flew back once more to the river.

Call for Diaspora Fire Brigades...

This thinly veiled allegory of the forest fire may be instructive to Diaspora Ethiopians. Believe it or not, our homeland is on fire. There is a pyromaniac on the loose. A few of us, just a few, managed to escape the voracious fire. Some of us escaped because we are young, strong and resourceful. May be some of us were just lucky. Now, all of us are standing far, far away from the forest fire. We can’t really see it, only the dark and menacing smoke that rise up to the heavens.

But the smoke carries a message: Thousands of our brothers and sisters have burned in the fire, tens of thousands more are burning in the fire now, hundreds of thousands are dying from gunfire, and 77 million are on the firing line!

When your home is on fire, you don’t stand around and talk a good talk. Like the hummingbird, you get in gear and run to the river to get your droplet of water.

There are fire brigades rising up all over the Diaspora. Everyday we see courageous firefighters coming to the frontlines. They no longer want to be frightened spectators jabbering about what somebody else should do, could do or needs to do. They have decided to act, and you see them flying around carrying their droplets of water to put out the fire.

These Diaspora firefighters do not fight fire with fire; no, they fight fire with water. Like water on fire, these firefighters spray hope and optimism over the despair and misery inflicted upon our brothers and sisters; they sweep the wreckage of repression and tyranny with the broom of democracy and human rights; they plant the seeds of freedom and liberty on a land charred and ravaged by political violence, corruption, savagery and lawlessness.

These firefighters have a single mission: help build a new society guided by a national vision which embraces the indivisible unity of the Ethiopian people and rejects the bankrupt ideas of those who claim that Ethiopia is no more than an incoherent agglomeration of competing and antagonistic ethnic, linguistic and regional groups.

But there are many, far too many, who do not want to join the fire brigades. Like the lions, they are interested only in making a fearsome roar. A mighty roar is good, but it is better to join the fire brigade and carry water to put out the fire. Like the zebras, there are some who will prance and dance creating confusing and distraction. They need to go down to the river.

Like the chameleons, there are others who change colors with the prevailing winds -- once with the firefighters, and then with the firestarter for the privilege of living in his village. They make their choices based on the situational advantage for themselves. But they will have to take a stand: cast their fate with the firestarter and save themselves, or join the fire brigades, go down to the river, get some water and save the forest.

Like the hyenas there are those who lament the dead and dying, and all of violence and destruction. "What a shame! So many people dying, so many going to jail. So many young people shot in cold blood. So many going into exile. What a curse has befallen Ethiopia? The country has become a metropolis for ignoramuses who foist themselves as 'leaders.'

"But is a great day for business! It's a great day to build a mansion! It is a great day to have a vacation!" It is a great day in paradise in hell!

And so if you want to know why this hummingbird hums, and hums passionately, and furiously and relentlessly, it's because this hummingbird's ancestral home is on fire. And this hummingbird can see the rise of a hummingbird fire brigade all over the Diaspora, each one working to put out the fire with a droplet of water. And if we can get a million hummingbirds in the fire brigade, there is no doubt we can put out the fire, and sanctify the desecrated forest once more.

Young Firefighters, Lead the Fire Brigades...

My favorite people in the world are young people, young Ethiopians and Ethiopian Americans. They are the most courageous, audacious, tenacious and passionate Ethiopians I know. God bless them all! They are the only ones who can fight this fire and put it out. The rest of us are water carriers.

But our young people in Ethiopia are in the fire, and on the firing line everyday. They are shot down like rabid dogs if they protest. They are jailed if they speak their minds. They are harassed if they are considered disloyal. They disappear if they are considered subversive.

Our young people in the Diaspora are not on the firing line, but they are fired up about improving human rights in their homeland.

Some older firefighters have a difficult time accepting the fact that we must make way for the younger generation of firefighters. We need to face facts. We no longer have that "fire in the belly" that we had in our youth anymore. Let's not pretend we can put out the fire on our own. All we can do is carry water for the young firefighters on the front lines. We are at our best when we chant the "call-and-response" work songs as the young fire fighters face the fire: "Fight the fire, fight the power, water the fire, stop the power." Let's help the young firefighters do their work.

Older and younger firefighterfighters need to have a conversation if we are to succeed in putting out the fire. It's time for the old firefighters to acknowledge our mistakes. We have done little to guide our young firefighters, to advise them, to share our professional and life experiences and to prepare them for leadership. We have been selfish, and guided only by our own ambitions and driven by ignoble passions.

We need to tell our young firefighters they are the towers of our power. Let's uplift their spirits. Let's assure them they can put out the fire, and we are right there behind them manning the water lines. Sure, it is not going to be easy for the young firefighters. But they must fight the fire, the power. They have choice. They must rescue the fire victims. Let's reach out to them, talk to them, inspire them and build their confidence. Because in the long run, it is their forest home -- their future -- that is on fire.

Let's educate and train our young people in the peaceful but unyielding ways of firefighting, motivate them, support them and embrace them as they face the searing flames desperately trying to save the millions of fire victims and their future. Let's assure them that in the end, like the molten steel that shines brightly having gone through the blast furnace, they will also shine and bring sunshine with them to the charred and scarred forest.

Let us never doubt that our young firefighters, though they may inherit a society devastated by decades of political repression and human rights abuse, will one day be able to build a City Upon a Hill -- a just, humane and pious society -- where no man or woman will fear his or her government, where government will dutifully respect the

rights and liberties of its citizens, where every person can stand tall and freely speak his or her mind, and where no man, woman or child will ever lose life, liberty of property without due process of just laws.

Hummingbirds Always Hum, and Tyrants and Murderers Always Fall...

The great Mahatma Ghandi once said, "When I despair, I remember that all through history, the way of truth and love has always won. There have been tyrants and murderers and for a time they seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall, think of it, always."

The tyrants and murderers may think that because we are in the Diaspora and they have the guns and canons pointed at our brothers and sisters, we must be in despair. But the facts show the opposite is true.

Tyrants oppress and murder because they are desperate, and it is curtain time for them. When you rule without the consent of the people and use brutality to enforce your will, it is a manifestation of the depths of your despair and your powerlessness. Tyrants oppress, kill and maim because they do not command the respect of their people. *They use brutality because they can not convince their people with the strength of their political or philosophical arguments, the persuasiveness of their logic or the abundance of their good will.*

In the end tyrants always lose, because though they have guns and tanks, they lack ideas and vision. They lose because they live in a world of darkness and ignorance. They are incapable of transforming themselves or their societies because they are trapped in their own cycle of repression that feeds off their ignorance and wickedness. And like Dracula, the legendary bloodsucker, they can only live on the blood -- and sweat and tears -- of their victims. They can not survive otherwise.

Ghandi is right. Even though for "a time tyrants and murderers seem invincible, in the end, they always fall." They fall because they can not withstand the force of truth. They fall because they lack power -- power that flows from the will of the people. They always slip and fall on the pile of lies, deceit and fraud they have created. They fall because in the end they will be paid the wages of their evil deeds. The wrath of God shall be visited upon them. In the words of the Scripture, "He that troubleth his own house shall inherit the wind." These tyrants and murderers shall inherit and dwell in the very hell they have built for others.

Millennium of Hope and Human Rights...

We are at the dawn of a new Millennium. It is a Millennium unlike any other. For freedom loving Ethiopians, it shall be a Millennium of hope, of dignity, of human rights, of freedom and democracy.

Tyrants and murderers shall also face their new Millennium, but their fate is shrouded in a bleak twilight of despair. Like all desperadoes, they will have their last party. And their Millennium party is shaping up to be a bacchanalian orgy of revelry, self-indulgence, debauchery, extravagance and hedonism. The wealthy fat cats and kittens will mob the

plush hotels, and expensive champagne and cognac will flow like the River Styx, which encircles Hell.

But defenders of freedom and human rights shall never be part of a Millennium that is intended to distract our eyes and divert our attention from another perpetual and never-ending orgy of killings, imprisonments, torture, persecution and abuse of human rights.

No amount of smoke and mirrors can conceal the 193 men, women and children slaughtered in 2005, the thousands who were shot like rabid dogs, the tens of thousands who are in prison today, and the suffering of the courageous prisoners of conscience.

Yes, human rights defenders will celebrate the new Millennium. But our celebration shall be a celebration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that great charter, which holds: "Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world and disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind."

We shall greet the new Millennium with the words of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: "The ideal of free human beings enjoying freedom from fear and want can only be achieved if conditions are created whereby everyone may enjoy his economic, social and cultural rights, as well as his civil and political rights."

We will usher in the New Millennium as we reaffirm the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment: "No exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether a state of war or a threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as a justification of torture."

We will stand up in the New Millennium for the rights of women and uphold the words of the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women: "Discrimination against women, denying or limiting as it does their equality of rights with men, is fundamentally unjust and constitutes an offence against human dignity."

We will uphold the Declaration of the Rights of the Child: "The child shall enjoy special protection, and shall be given opportunities and facilities, by law and by other means, to enable him to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially in a healthy and normal manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity."

There is a new wind of unity and common purpose in freedom, democracy and human rights in the New Millennium of the Diaspora. Let us together sail this wind high into the heavens, and breathe the fresh air of freedom and liberty. Let's embrace the spirit of the New Millennium.

It's Your Choice: A Hummingbird for Human Rights or a Flea Against Injustice...

The great African American lawyer and founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund said: "You just need to be a flea against injustice. Enough committed fleas biting strategically can make even the biggest dog uncomfortable and transform even the biggest nation."

In the struggle for human rights in Ethiopia, there is another choice, if you'd like. You can be a hummingbird. And you can hum all day, and hum all night. Hum for freedom. Hum for democracy, and hum for the rights and dignity of all humankind.

Just keeeeeeep on hummming!

Onward...

100,000 letters. 50 State Resolutions. 77 million people. We are on the move for human rights in Ethiopia! *If people on the move, keep moving, they make a movement.*

So, let's hold hands firemen and firewomen in the spirit of freedom, democracy and human rights. Let's begin our long walk out of the darkness of tyranny and oppression and march gloriously into the new Millennium.

Big wheels, small wheels, keep on turning! Onward Millennium Hummingbirds! Onward Millennium Fleas! Onward to the rainbow sign, like Noah after the Great Flood, and like us after the Great Fire!