



**Sehdev
Kumar**



Dr. Sehdev Kumar, Professor Emeritus, lectures in the School of Continuing Studies at the University of Toronto. Author of recently published, 'Matters of Life & Death: Reflections on Bioethics, Law and the Human Destiny', his forthcoming book is entitled '7000 Million Degrees of Freedom'.

Email: sehdev.kumar@utoronto.ca

www.sehdevkumar.com

“ Thomas Jefferson is one of the great figures in American history; his eloquence and liberal republican spirit is evident in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are born equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

As one of the Founding Fathers of America, Jefferson is hailed as the finest example of the Age of Enlightenment. But now Jefferson's unquestioned greatness seems much too self-righteous. We now learn that though he called slavery an 'abominable crime', and a 'moral depravity', he owned hundreds of slaves, and held strong views on the racial inferiority of Africans.

As well, all through his presidency, Jefferson - a young widower at the age of 37 -- had an intimate relationship with his slave Sally Hemings, and had six children by her, none of whom ever bore his name.

Was Jefferson only 'human' after all? Was he - and many other great men and women - without flaws? He was not 'perfect' in every way, was he?

In our times, writers and journalists take great pride in discovering the imperfections of one and all; they write salaciously about Mahatma Gandhi and Albert Einstein, Pablo Picasso and Martin Luther King.

Do we derive some cynical pleasure in exposing the nakedness of the emperor? Once, not long ago, all over the world, the great men of stature - in politics, arts, science, religion - were deemed to be beyond any frailties, and without any blemishes. Now, in our post-modern age, we delight in exposing the frailties of one and all, and in proving that no person is so great as not to have feet of clay.

Is everyone flawed in some ways?

Take Isaac Newton: he strides across the 17th century as a god-like figure of extraordinary insights into the

We Are Only Human After All



functioning of nature. Indeed, English poet Alexander Pope immortalized his accomplishments in the famous epitaph:

*Nature and nature's laws lay hid in night;
God said "Let Newton be" and all was light.*

Yet Newton is now exposed to have been steeped in pettiness and jealousies; as President of the Royal Society, he fabricated letters and documents against his opponents. As Master of the Mint, he sent many counterfeiters to the gallows.

As a religious zealot, he wrote more on Biblical hermeneutics and occult studies than he did on science and mathematics; his alchemical experiments may even have led to his death by mercury poisoning. Above all, he was dour, sullen and profoundly paranoid.

In his own judgment though he was an eternal seeker of truth: "I do not know," he wrote in a later memoir, "what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the sea-shore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me."

In 1970, a very remarkable Italian film, Investigation of a Citizen above Suspicion, presented an expose of political corruption - all too familiar to people all over the world -- but with a twist: here a police inspector, after having murdered his mistress, plants numerous incriminating clues everywhere that would lead any probing officer to the inspector himself.

But either out of fear of authority, or out of immense trust in the infallibility of authority, even in the face of the most obvious evidence, every probing eye shut itself out, turned around, and looked somewhere else. The inspector

was a 'citizen above suspicion', or one might say, above law.

In 2010, it happened in Canada. Colonel Russel Williams was a decorated and much admired senior army officer at Trenton, Ontario. For all intents and purposes, he was a 'citizen above suspicion'. But underneath his calm and confident exterior lurked another dark and shadowy world of rape, violence and humiliations. He frolicked like a ghost between the two worlds, apparently confident that the two would remain forever distant and unknown to each other.

The radical principle of legal egalitarianism - that everyone is equal before law - has made it possible to reveal, indeed expose, the seedy side of lives of those who had the wherewithal to hide their acts from the eyes of law, and of everyone else.

Whether it is President Bill Clinton or Emperor Leopold of Belgium who unleashed terror in Africa, or the former President of Israel, Moshe Katsav, or the Managing Director of International Monetary Fund, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, their misdemeanors can no longer escape the probing eye of law or the media.

Abuses of children by the clergy have been exposed in many parts of the world, particularly where people feel bold enough to challenge the authority of clergy and politicians.

It is apparent thus there has been a seismic shift in the moral fibers of the world. It is not to everyone's liking, nor can it possibly be. Those who were above the law because of their political clout, social status, cultural trust, or wealth, can hardly feel very happy to face a jury of the ordinary common folks.

We are now discovering that evil - destructive thoughts, gestures and acts against others - is not confined to any one particular group of people; it lurks in all of us. None of us can claim to be a 'citizen above suspicion'.

Once we believed our own 'conscience', or the all-seeing and all-knowing eye of God, to be the real probing eye of our thoughts and actions. But for many that eye has shut itself off, and we wallow in our own guilt and uncertainties.

All we know is that all of us are all too 'human', somewhat heroic or frail sometimes, but invariably with feet of clay.

Justice Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd in Victorian England pleaded to "fill the seats of justice with good men, not so absolute in goodness as to forget what human frailty is."

When we have an itch for perfection, we tend not to make room for human frailties.

Such frailties, however, are an integral part of our humanity. Leonard Cohen famously wrote in one of his poems:

*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.*

After 400 years, why do words of Sir Francis Bacon ring so true: "There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion"?