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The Life of Honor

by K. Anthony Appiah

It's a great honor to be here tonight to receive the McGovern Award. And, indeed, honor is especially apropos, since that is what I want to talk to you about tonight; and I want to begin with brisk accounts of three very different historical episodes in which honor played a part. I'm going to tell these stories because to understand honor you need to know both how it works in particular places and times, and that, despite the range of its manifestations, there is something important in common across the amazing diversity of cases. Once the stories are told, I will turn to drawing some conclusions about honor for us now.

The modern European duel, which develops at the end of the Middle Ages, grows out of what were called judicial duels. In those, a legal dispute between two men of sufficient standing – technically they had to be of the rank of squire or above – could be settled by a prince who, as people said, “gave them the field.” The survivor of combat was deemed to have won the legal case. The modern duel is different. It enters the life of the English aristocracy, in particular, in the sixteenth century, governed by codes that originated in Italy, like much of English Renaissance elite culture. In the new scheme, the right to combat over affairs of honor was claimed as a privilege of the nobility, with no need for a prince to grant the field.

The judicial duel had been anathematized by the church as early as the ninth century and the Council of Trent took the trouble, in 1563, at the end of the Reformation, to condemn “the detestable custom of dueling, introduced by the contrivance of the devil, that by the bloody death of the body, he may accomplish the ruin of the soul” The modern duel inherited these religious objections: to engage in dueling was to place honor above Christian duty. Nor was this a topic that divided Catholics from Protestants. As the great Evangelical campaigner William Wilberforce observed in 1797, the duel's “essential guilt” consists in this, “that it is a deliberate preference of the favour of man, before the favour and approbation of God, . . . wherein we run the risk of rushing into the presence of our Maker in the very act of offending him.”

Once the duel had passed from judicial combat, which required the king's permission, to a private and technically illegal act, claimed as an aristocratic privilege, it challenged the king's authority. So among the great enemies of the duel are men like Sir Francis Bacon and his younger French contemporary Cardinal Richelieu, who were engaged in extending the king's power; in part by subordinating the nobility, with its independent claim to honor. As the aristocracy lost influence, it insisted all the more fervently on this symbol of its autonomy.

So the duel was un-Christian, immoral, and illegal. It was also, as Enlightenment critics insisted, irrational. The rational problem is easy to state: a duel is about an offence by A against B's honor, but its outcome depends in no way on whether A or B was in the wrong.

The first lesson of the duel is thus that the demands of honor may run against religion and state, morality and reason . . . and triumph over them all. When Voltaire remarked – in an aside

in the *Philosophical Dictionary* – that dueling is “forbidden by reason, by religion, and by all the laws,” he was reporting a truism.

Yet despite this panoply of objections, the duel was for centuries one of the practices of British gentleman, as it was in Europe more generally. The codes set what should prompt a duel, who could engage in it, and how it should be conducted. The duel defined a class of gentlemen who were required to respond to a proper challenge by agreeing to duel. A challenge from someone who was not a gentleman was to be ignored.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, dueling became commoner, because this was an extended period of warfare. Some half a million Britons served in Anglo-French warfare between the French Revolution and the Battle of Waterloo. Their officers brought back from Europe the military’s culture of honor. And yet, by the mid-nineteenth century, the duel ceased to be part of the repertory of the English gentleman. What brought about this moral revolution?

One powerful suggestion – made in the work of V. G. Kiernan – is that the class whose norm it was was gradually losing its central place in British public life. The ruling aristocracy was being superseded in the early nineteenth century by a new class, men whose family fortunes had been made in what the aristocrats disparaged as “trade.” New state bureaucracies were developing, run by a growing and increasingly professionalized cadre of officials. Businessmen believe in being businesslike; and bureaucrats famously prefer things orderly, too. Many in these new classes supported parliamentary reform: they wanted to deny the landed aristocracy their traditional rights to allocate seats in the Commons, to stop vote buying, and to extend the franchise. Dueling was yet another of the pretensions of the old aristocracy that they wished to see brought to an end. That – along with the increasing spread of a Protestant Evangelical movement, which saw the duel as un-Godly – was enough to motivate large parts of the political class against dueling.

Perhaps nothing displays the changing meaning of the word “gentleman” more sharply than the fact that the English Catholic Cardinal Newman could say in 1852: “It is almost a definition of a gentleman to say he is one who never inflicts pain.” If that is what a gentleman is, nothing could be more ungentlemanly than the duel. After three centuries, the ethos of the Christian bourgeois had triumphed over that of an old warrior nobility.

Sir Francis Bacon anticipated a second reason for the duel’s demise, when the modern duel was just beginning. He published his “Charge Touching Duels” in 1614. The Charge included part of his argument for the prosecution in a case he brought, as the new Attorney General, before the Star Chamber. The publication, like the case, was part of a campaign against dueling, which had become distressingly common around the court of James I. This outburst of what someone called “private quarrels among great men” led the king to issue an ordinance against dueling. Bacon told the judges:

I should think (my Lords) that men of birth and quality will leave the practice, when it begins to ... come so low as to barbers surgeons and butchers, and such base mechanical persons.

Towards the beginning of the modern duel, Bacon here anticipated the outcome. A duel was an affair of honor. It depended on the existence of a powerful class who could establish their status by engaging in a practice contrary to law that was limited to them. It was a further sign of the diminishing status of that class, that in the first decades of the nineteenth century duels began

to take place more frequently between people who, if they were gentlemen at all, were so by virtue of their membership in the professions or their success in trade. Once “base mechanical” persons could contemplate engaging in it, the duel’s capacity to distinguish and bring distinction was exhausted.

Bacon’s is the view looking forward, as the duel is beginning its rise towards its eighteenth-century highest point. For a backwards view, listen to Richard Cobden, the great Liberal parliamentarian, in a speech in 1859, recalling when dueling was a regular “mode of meeting a certain description of insult.”

Cobden says:

Well, I remember that some linen drapers’ assistants took it into their heads to go down one Sunday morning ... and they began fighting duels; and that as soon as the linen drapers’ assistants took to dueling, it became very infamous in the eyes of the upper classes. ... now nothing would be so ridiculous as any nobleman or gentleman thinking of resenting an insult by going out and fighting a duel about it.

Cobden claimed that Bacon’s prediction had been confirmed, however belatedly: the adoption of dueling by “base men” had led to its relinquishment by the aristocracy. And his mocking tone reminds us that in an increasingly democratic age, the duel was an unloved symbol of aristocratic privilege.

Perhaps the last time one gentleman shot at another on the field of honor in England was in 1852 when the two members of parliament for Canterbury met over an election dispute in what is often said to be the last duel in England. It was, Kiernan tells us, “an appropriately burlesque event,” with the two parliamentarians and their seconds having to share the only taxi from the station to the dueling field. As one contemporary observed: “The incident was dealt with in a witty article in the Times, and so ridicule at last did more than morality to kill dueling. *Solvuntur risu tabulae.*” He is quoting the line from Horace’s Satires: The case is dismissed with laughter. What better tool than mockery to turn against honor, whose whole aim is to be worthy of respect?

A very different moral revolution involving honor occurred at the turn of the twentieth century, with the abandonment of foot binding by the Chinese literati, the mandarins. Here, as with dueling, we have a practice that was understood to be problematic long before it came to an end. Foot binding began some time around the turn of the first millennium. As a result it did not have the most profound support that a practice could have among the mandarins, because it was unknown to Confucius. Furthermore the Manchus, who overthrew the Ming dynasty in 1644 and established the last of the imperial dynasties, were opposed to foot binding, and they tried from time to time to eradicate it.

Everyone understood not only that foot binding could limit movement and help keep women subject to their families and to men, but also that it was extremely painful. Almost as soon as it began, there were literati who opposed it. Within a couple of centuries of its onset, a Song dynasty intellectual wrote: “Children not yet four or five years old, innocent and without crime, are caused to suffer limitless pain.” And a traditional Chinese proverb runs: “One pair of tiny feet, but two wells full of tears.” As with dueling, what brought foot binding to an end

cannot have been the discovery of arguments against it. The arguments were widely known from the earliest days of the practice.

To understand the end of foot binding, you need to enter into the world of the Chinese literati at the end of the nineteenth century, as they tried to understand what had happened to their country. For half a century, since the Opium Wars of the early 1840s, they had seen their armies defeated time and again and on their own soil by foreigners from the West and from Japan, and they had been subjected to humiliating treaties that had forced them to accept the presence in China of large numbers of Christian missionaries. These missions began the first campaigns against the practice, organizing the first anti-foot-binding associations in China; they were followed by organizations led by the wives of the Western business elite.

But soon anti-foot-binding associations began to be organized by members of the literati, as well, like a certain Kang Yu Wei, who saw some degree of Westernization as necessary if China was to find its place in the modern world. The focus of the literati was on the good of China: if ending foot binding was good for women, so much the better, no doubt. They insisted, for example, that the havoc wrought in military invasions from abroad was made worse by the fact that so many women were literally unable to run away; and they argued that the physical vigor of women who could engage in sports because their feet were free would make them mothers of healthier children.

But they also insisted very often that foot binding needed to end because it was a source of national shame. In an appeal to the throne against foot binding in the 1890s, Kang Yu Wei made this central to his argument. Indeed, the memorial starts with the claim that it is “a shame for China to have such a barbarous custom, which makes it a laughingstock in the eyes of foreigners,” and ends with this closing peroration:

speaking of the law of the country, it is a most unjustifiable penalty; speaking of the maintenance of harmony in the family, it harms the love of parents for their children; speaking of the strengthening of the army, it leaves generation after generation of weak descendants; and finally, speaking of beauty and customs, it becomes a subject of ridicule to foreigners. It is therefore intolerable.

Kang appeal begins and ends, then, with the nation’s honor – or rather with his country’s shame.

The Japanese scholar, Gotō Asaro, writing in 1939, summarized the situation succinctly: the campaign against foot binding, he said, had been aimed at “saving China’s ‘National Face.’”

Let me give a third, shorter, sketch, of a great moral revolution. Consider the rising opposition of the British working class to slavery in the mid-nineteenth century. By the time of the American Civil War, British commercial interests were largely allied with the American South whose plantations provided cotton for the mills of the North of England. If elite opinion in parliament had prevailed, Britain might well have supported the South in the War. Had they done so, it is not clear that Abraham Lincoln would have won, and the end of slavery in the United States would have been a much more long drawn out affair. And the reason they didn’t support the South is that there was by the mid-nineteenth century a significant body of working class opinion that joined with the opposition of bourgeois evangelicals who opposed slavery. British parliaments by the mid-century had a much more extensive franchise than they had in 1806,

when the slave trade was outlawed, and they had to listen for the first time to a self-conscious working class.

What motivated the working men of England against slavery? Many things, no doubt. But one of them was their growing sense of the dignity of labor. Slavery in the United States and the West Indies involved the symbolic identification of labor with a dishonored class of dark-skinned people. Pride in one's identity as a workingman – a sense of the honor of working people – as incompatible with accepting that labor meant dishonor. So a concern for their own honor turned them against slavery: it was their own honor they were defending not the dignity of the slave.

These stories are interesting, you might say, but haven't we learned better? Honor was mobilized in each of these cases in a good cause. But we can support good causes without honor. One reason that honor went out of fashion as the subject of serious analysis was the democratic idea that honor requires hereditary hierarchies. It died, like the duel, with aristocratic privilege. In fact, honor had always been subjected to skeptical scrutiny in Christian culture: to care for one's honor seems too close to cultivating an un-Christian vanity. In response to skepticism of this kind, the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume was adamant that, "a desire of fame, reputation, or a character with others is so far from being blameworthy that it seems inseparable from virtue, genius, capacity, and a generous disposition." Hume's point here is that it is hard to sustain virtue without the support its practice gains from honor. I believe he was right.

There are a few human beings who care little about how others regard them: the sociopath, say, who does not care being caught out in a lie; perhaps, also, the genuinely unself-regarding saint. But most of us are neither Bernie Madoff nor Mother Teresa; we respond to respect and contempt because we cannot help it. As John Locke put it concisely, "Contempt, or want of due respect, discovered either in looks, words, or gesture . . . from whomsoever it comes, brings always uneasiness with it; for nobody can contentedly bear being slighted." The first reason we should not do without honor is that we cannot. And if this is right, then the serious question about honor isn't whether we mobilize it in the service of moral – or other kinds of – virtue, but when.

So let us return to honor, as it was conceived among the British upper classes in the early nineteenth century. That system of honor depended on the assumption of a standard against which people could be assessed. It was a standard that required certain forms of behavior – duty to king and country, courtesy to ladies, and so on. But the standard had regard to mere facts of birth as well as to norms of behavior: you got points by being, as the phrase was, well born.

The struggle to break this tight connection between honor and birth is nearly as old as the connection itself. Recall Horace – son of a freed slave – addressing Maecenas, the richest and noblest of the private patrons of the arts in the reign of Augustus Caesar, two thousand years ago. Maecenas "says it's no matter who your parents are, so long as you're worthy" but Horace complains that most Romans don't agree. Anyone who offers himself for public office, the poet grumbles, gets asked: From what father he may be descended, whether he is base because of the obscurity of his mother.

This is the feature of the old system of honor that we have rightly rejected. But in meritocratic societies, social status can reflect not arbitrary status but reasonable standards of evaluation. What is wrong in honoring a Nobel Laureate? Surely an economy of esteem organized around codes that are defensible can support motives that we should want to support.

And since the psychological mechanisms that underlie esteem will operate whether we wish them to or not, organizing them, to the extent that we can, to align with ends we can endorse is the only sensible policy. Honor isn't morality, as I have insisted; but the psychology honor mobilizes can unquestionably be put, as we saw in my case studies, in the service of the right and the good.

I am not assuming that we have easy control over the habits of feeling that sustain the practices of honor. We cannot choose whether we feel pained by the disrespect or elated by the respect of others; we do not choose which codes we find compelling. We do not decide to respond with respect to virtue and contempt to vice; these reactions are just part of human nature. But we can choose to create social practices that take these inevitable responses and point them in the right direction. When we see shame's power, we can choose to mobilize it: in the simplest case by publishing the names of offenders. And, likewise, once we reflect that respect motivates, we can publish the names and celebrate the lives of the worthy. As we learn more about developmental psychology, we may find other ways to shape and channel honor and, thus, its effects.

The philosopher Steven Darwall has made a distinction between two kinds of respect. Appraisal respect (as he calls the first of them) involves judging a person positively according to a standard. In this sense, we might respect Rafael Nadal for his tennis skills or Meryl Streep for her acting.

But there is another kind of respect – he calls it “recognition respect” – that involves (to put it rather abstractly) treating people in ways that give appropriate weight to some fact about them. When we respect powerful people – a judge in court, say, or a police officer, when we're out driving – we treat them warily because they have the capacity to compel us to do things. Our respect recognizes the fact of that power. But we can also respect a sensitive person, by speaking to him gently, or a disabled person, by assisting her when she asks for help. Respecting people in this sense, in other words, doesn't require you to rate them especially highly.

One way to understand what has happened to the word “dignity” is to say that it has come to refer to a right to respect that people have simply in virtue of their humanity, independent, that is, of gender or social status or ethnicity. Here are a few of the facts about people that we give proper weight to in acknowledging human dignity: that human beings have the capacity for creating lives of significance; that we can suffer, love, create; that we need food, shelter, and recognition by others. And these facts, which we might call the grounds of dignity, make it appropriate to respond to people in ways that respect such fundamental human needs and capacities. For many people in the Abrahamic religions one of the grounds of our dignity is that we are all created “in God's image.”

Much of the time, I have been discussing the forms of respect – which we can call esteem – that come from positive appraisal. Dignity, in its modern sense, has become a right to recognition respect, where we simply give appropriate weight to crucial moral facts about people. What is democratic about our current culture, then, is that we now presuppose all normal human beings, not just those who are especially elevated, to be entitled to respect. But granting everyone recognition respect is perfectly consistent with granting greater appraisal respect – greater esteem – to some than to others, because these are different forms of respect. So now we can say: Honoring some especially is consistent with recognizing the dignity of everyone else. Such dignity does not require the comparative forms of appraisal that go with more competitive forms of honor.

It's not something you earn, and the appropriate response to your dignity is not pride but self-respect; after all, if your humanity entitles you to respect, then it entitles you to respect even from yourself!

The role of esteem in shaping behavior depends on our own commitment to the standards by which we are evaluated. As a result, the power of honor derives from the fact that the standard by which I am found wanting when I am regarded with contempt is my standard, too. In understanding collective honor – the honor of classes and nations – this point is crucial. It explains why the moral arguments that I insisted were present in each case before the moral revolution were not irrelevant. Honor requires a standard, a code by which you can be appraised; and sometimes the standard is moral. Kang Yu Wei, my favorite anti-foot-binding campaigner, worried about Chinese honor because he believed in the system of values by which his country was being judged. He worried about the contempt of the West, because he thought, like Westerners, that in binding the feet of their daughters the Chinese – his people – were doing something that was pointlessly cruel. He wasn't worried simply about the consequences for China and the Chinese of having a poor reputation; he was seeing himself through the eyes of others, and not liking what he saw. The claim to honor requires us, in the Scottish poet Robert Burns's fine phrase, to "see ourselves as others see us," because our own opinion of ourselves is too likely to be a self-delusion.

People respond to us not just as individuals but also as members of social groups. They may respect us when we belong to respectable social groups and do the opposite if we belong to disreputable ones. And I believe we can defend some of these attitudes by making this elementary observation: many of the groups to which we belong do things collectively. Sometimes it makes sense to say that the nation acts. When the United States imposes a trade embargo or sends humanitarian aid or supports a resolution in the Security Council, this is something that we Americans do, not individually, but together. The act is done in our name, but it is often our act in deeper ways than this. The individuals who act in our name are shaped by a culture we Americans create together, under the authority of a Congress and a President we elected; they are responding to values transmitted and sustained by an American civil society that is made up of American men and women, in short of people like us. When it makes sense to speak of American aims and the picture of the world that guides the pursuit of them, it makes sense, too, to speak of our country's acts as something we Americans do together.

In his recent novel, *A Diary of a Bad Year*, the Nobel literature laureate John Coetzee, the South African protagonist, writes of his response to the evidence, in the *New Yorker* magazine, that the U.S. administration sanctions torture and subverts conventions proscribing torture.

If we grant the truth of what the *New Yorker* claims, then the issue for individual Americans becomes a moral one: how, in the face of this shame to which I am subjected, do I behave? How do I save my honor?

Here is a reminder of why the sentiment of national honor may be worth preserving. Like individual honor, it can motivate us together to see if we can do together what is right. The issue of torture is moral, of course: but what engages each patriotic American is not just morality but also our honor.

Appeals to national honor of this sort are working around the world today. Let's go back to China. In 2010 the Nobel committee in Oslo gave the Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo. This is a crucial moment in China's history, as the Nobel Committee clearly understands. Liu rightly wants to underline how far his country has to go to secure the basic democratic freedoms of

speech and association. But we need also to remember how far China has come. In the 60's and 70's, during the Cultural Revolution, a whole generation of intellectuals was uprooted. Millions were displaced, millions died. The situation today is very different in ways both heartening and discouraging. Now we can identify some scores of writers and bloggers whom the Chinese state has imprisoned simply for peacefully speaking their mind. Of course the numbers of those incarcerated represent a tiny fraction of those silenced by their example. A vast apparatus of government censorship – the “Great Fire Wall” – remains in place. We have to work to support those in the regime who can already see that this is not only wrong, but also counter-productive. Human rights are everybody's business. And we can't have the productive dialogue with China that it wants – and the world needs – if its government is abusing its own people. We outside need to hear all of China's voices, just as the Chinese do.

The dialogue between insiders and outsiders in nineteenth century China worked, I believe, because the critics took the trouble to understand China's traditions and to show that their concern for China grew not out contempt for her civilization but out of a profound and informed respect.

In our work at the PEN American Center – whose President I have the honor for the moment of being – in support of Liu Xiaobo we are guided at every step by our colleagues in the Independent Chinese PEN Center, insiders who are working, as he has done, to serve the cause of freedom in their country. With their guidance, we are able to participate, from outside China, in shaping its development. We can do so, in part, because the Chinese, like all people, want to be respected in the community of nations. Such full-hearted respect is denied them when the regime denies the rights of its own people; and that forces government officials to deal with the fact that they are denying themselves the respect they need. I talked last year here in Washington to a Chinese exile who told me that what she feels when she reads about the abuses of people like Liu is shame. We have to work with China's human rights community to lift that burden of shame, so that the Chinese can have the respect of all of us because they have done what it takes to deserve it. Honor and shame are powerful motivators. Honoring Liu Xiaobo supports him in his work. But the shame of what the government of China is doing to him is driving many of his fellow citizens to line up alongside him.

I want to end by acknowledging that honor is still being mobilized to do harm. In many places in our world, a woman can be killed by men in her own family, because she has had sex outside marriage. Honor can still be mobilized in the service of evil. I want, in closing, to explain why I do not believe that even this horrendous reality shows that we should abandon honor.¹

Now most of us here, like most people everywhere, cannot make sense of someone who

¹Aspects of the code that governs these so-called “honor killings” are, of course, recognizable to most people around the world. Even in the industrialized West, in the United States and in Europe, it has taken an enormous amount of work to persuade women and men that rape should not be treated as a source of shame for the victim. It's not, of course, that women who have been raped believe deep down that they was “asking for it,” or that it was, somehow, their fault. They know that isn't so. The shame that many victims of sexual assault feel has, instead, to do with the powerlessness of being a victim; it is not guilt—the thought that they have done something wrong—that haunts them, it is the reminder of their humiliation. And that humiliation makes it likely she will lose the respect of those who know she was raped; indeed, it may undermine her respect for herself. The assumption that because a person cannot resist the physical imposition of another, she (or he) has been shown to be inferior in some more general way, is very widespread (and not just in connection with sexual assault). Within this system of attitudes and feelings is the trace of the idea that women who have been raped, like men who have been defeated in an assault, have lost their honor. Weakness is a source of shame.

thinks the right response to an unmarried daughter who chooses to have sex is to kill her; and we are simply baffled by someone who kills a daughter or sister who has been raped. And yet, according to an estimate in a U.N. report in 2000, “perhaps as many as 5,000 women and girls a year are murdered by members of their own families. . . .” And, of course, for every woman that is killed there must be many thousands who are terrified into conforming to the codes by the realistic threat of murder.

I have argued that we must keep a place for honor, but that it needs careful management. The honor that sustains honor killing requires, to put it mildly, a substantial revision of its codes. One strategy to achieve this would be to attempt to dismantle this kind of honor altogether. After all, the whole system seems aimed at the subordination of women by men. Shouldn’t we just try to work out how to achieve its abolition?

My three very different case studies suggest a different approach. They show how changes in honor codes can reshape honor, mobilizing it in the service of the good. With the duel, the revisions in notions of gentlemanly honor in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century, produced a new culture in which the central threat to gentlemanly honor – the possibility of loss of respect and shame – turned from being a reason to duel to being a consideration against dueling. *Solvuntur risu tabulae*. The case is dismissed with laughter. In China at the turn of the last century, the honor of women of the Chinese cultural elite required their families to bind their feet. Yet changes in the perception of the nation’s honor among the literati led to the mobilization of one kind of honor – national honor – against the old system of aristocratic honor whose codes demanded foot-binding. Intellectuals who wanted their country to find its place in the modern world, reshaped the culture of honor, so that in a generation, bound feet came to be a source not of honor but of embarrassment, even of shame. In the late nineteenth century a family of the Han Chinese elite would have had great difficulty finding a suitable husband for a girl with natural feet; by the 1930s, in most places, the opposite was true. And in finding their own honor as working people, the English working classes in the mid-nineteenth century allied themselves against the culture of slavery, which associated freedom (and whiteness) with honor and slavery (and blackness) with dishonor.

The lesson I draw is that it may be better to reshape honor towards the emancipation of women, reordering honor codes like the ones that sustain honor murder in Pakistan, or that lead to murders and suicides of girls among the Kurds of Turkey; better, that is, than simply raising the standard of morality or of human rights against it. For, as I pointed out, religion and morality, and sometimes even the law, were already against the evils of dueling, foot binding, and slavery. And that was not enough. It was changes within the codes of honor that brought these evils to an end and we can hope that similar changes can achieve the same ends in the case of honor killing.

Already women in Pakistan ask the question, “How can a man claim to be honorable who kills a woman of his own family?” Already modernizing intellectuals ask the question about honor killing that Kang Yu Wei asked about foot binding: “How can we be respected in the world if we do this terrible thing?” And they ask this question not just because their honor world has expanded to include the rest of humanity but also because they want their nation to be worthy – in their own eyes, too – of respect. Their great slogan is a great truth: there is no honor in honor killing.

These are the places I believe we must push against the murderous side of honor. Not by insisting on what everyone already knows: that Islam is against it or that it involves a moral offense against the human rights of its victims. We must turn honor against honor killing as it

was turned against dueling, against foot binding, against slavery. We need honor, I believe, if we are to end honor killing. Far from being part of the case for abandoning honor, honor killing is central to the case for retaining it.

Aspects of the code that governs these so-called “honor killings” are, of course, recognizable to most people around the world. Even in the industrialized West, in the United States, and in Europe, it has taken an enormous amount of work to persuade women and men that rape should not be treated as a source of shame for the victim. It’s not, of course, that women who have been raped believe deep down that they was “asking for it,” or that it was, somehow, their fault. They know that isn’t so. The shame that many victims of sexual assault feel has, instead, to do with the powerlessness of being a victim; it is not guilt – the thought that they have done something wrong – that haunts them, it is the reminder of their humiliation. And that humiliation makes it likely she will lose the respect of those who know she was raped; indeed, it may undermine her respect for herself. The assumption that because a person cannot resist the physical imposition of another, she (or he) has been shown to be inferior in some more general way, is very widespread (and not just in connection with sexual assault). Within this system of attitudes and feelings is the trace of the idea that women who have been raped, like men who have been defeated in an assault, have lost their honor. Weakness is a source of shame.