Professor Davidson's introduction to Nobel Peace Laureate Shirin Ebadi at the Third Annual James Parks Morton Interfaith Awards Dinner

New York City, 2004

Dear Friends,

It is a great honor for me to say a few words about our dear guest and honoree, Shirin Ebadi, in this Third Annual James Parks Morton Interfaith Awards Dinner. One of the major concerns, if not the overriding concern of the Interfaith Center, is to contribute towards making New York City, and the world, a safer and a culturally richer place by providing for people of different origins and religions avenue and an opportunity to learn about each other, and exchange experiences and mutual concerns. In the past few weeks, I have been fortunate enough to be in Shirin Ebadi's company on a number of occasions, both formal and informal, and realize more than ever before, how enriching and illuminating such encounters and dialogues between people of different regions and religions can be.

I find in the very recital of her personal story a source of hope and optimism in today's world - and here in New York City.

For this city, with its own recent tragic loss of lives and traumatic shock of destruction, its own sense of fragility and resilience, and its own moments of tragic despair and grim defiance, is emblematic of the world as a whole, a world where we find ourselves at times transfixed by a progression of atrocities, communal frenzy, and mindless carnage. It is about my reasons for hope as refracted in the career of Shirin Ebadi and against this backdrop of fear and foreboding that I want to say a few words.

Shirin was born in 1947 and studied at Tehran University and chose law as her profession. She made her mark quickly and was one of the very first female judges in Iran in the years preceding the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Her achievements, therefore, straddle both sides of this major landmark in Iranian history.

Revolutions can be distorting mirrors. The end of the monarchy had been welcomed by the majority of the Iranians. There had been too much oppression, too much corruption, and too many rigged elections. The regime appeared too obliging to the West and too oblivious of the ethos of its own people. The seemingly perfect match between consumerism and political apathy that had made the country "an Island of Stability" to some foreign observers suddenly appeared tawdry and inadequate. The supposedly rapid modernization and reform from the top did bring some enlightened legislation regarding the rights of women but it also foisted on a bewildered public a pre-fabricated one party system and a new unfamiliar official calendar. The early days of the revolution promised instead a new era of participation in decision-making and communal co-operation. Millions marched in the streets. From the onset of the revolution, the powerful impact of Islam as a religion on the shaping of the events was clear to all and welcomed by many. What was not clear to most people, both inside and outside the country, was how the new regime which claimed its legitimacy on moral grounds, would interpret religious laws and traditions. It soon became palpably clear that as far as human rights were concerned, including those of women and minorities, the revolution had not been an unalloyed success, and not even a mixed blessing according to some of the disenchanted early supporters. Many left the country and felt betrayed by the turn of events, many more remained behind and sank back into gloom and apathy.

Shirin Ebadi was forced to resign as a judge but she remained in Iran and she did not abandon her sense of social responsibility. Nor did she, like many other intellectuals, abandon her own personal understanding and innate love for her religion and beliefs as a knee-jerk reaction against the absurd or even monstrous decisions being adopted supposedly in line with religious laws by those who were by then firmly in power. She would remain in Iran and remain a defense lawyer and she would defend her own interpretation of laws, and she would denounce bad laws or other acts of injustice against the dignity of her compatriots, regardless of their ethnic origins, sex, or religion, and at considerable risk to her own safety. She would face defamatory articles in the press and be challenged from different sides; she would go to prison, and her life and safety would be at risk at times.

I mentioned before that revolutions are distorting mirrors. Viewed from outside the country, the distortions are even more grotesque. Passage of time and manipulative sources of propaganda can induce memories to become increasingly selective and partisan. It is so easy to see the ancient regime as positively angelic and to demonize the post-revolution society, lock stock and barrel. It is easy to forget about an entire nation, young and old, male and female, and their everyday aspirations and demands and reduce everything to a simplistic comic strip cast of benevolent if slightly muddled monarchs and crafty but mad mullahs. And then there were the violent events of the early 1980s, the Hostage Taking and the merciless blood-letting between those in power and their opponents, and, the most traumatic and tragic of all: the long war foisted upon Iran by Saddam's army and air force with tacit approval by the very people who later shouted the loudest for his own removal by force. And throughout these long years there was the loss of so many thousands and thousands of lives, young volunteers at the front and old villagers and townspeople in their own homes.

Shirin Ebadi lived through all this and remained true to her sense of individual responsibility and mission. She did not go underground and advocate violence nor did she emigrate abroad and pine for a regime change. She remained at home, taught, and wrote on law and society. She watched the events closely and spoke out and mobilized public opinion against specific injustices and glaring instances of inhumanity, hoping to show again and again how individual tragic events have their roots in hastily drawn laws and warped visions based on crude interpretations of religious scriptures. Again and again she has managed to mobilize public opinion and, by highlighting single instances of blatant injustice, she has drawn attention to wider implications for the betterment of the society. She has proved that with patience and determination, bad laws can be changed, even if it takes half a decade to do so. She has demonstrated how the rise in standards of education, particularly for women, and their increasing awareness of their potential strength and responsibility within the society, can be put to good effect in manifold ways: from the reform of custody laws to instilling peaceful democratic methods for solving problems. Having lived through decades of violence and bloodshed, she can speak with authority on her abhorrence and horror at the very notion that wars and brute force can be used as tools to chaperone us into a better world. The dignity of human beings can never be reconciled with acts of violence and terror. But I do not want to give the impression of a career of unmitigated success against the forces of dogmatism and intolerance. Shirin Ebadi herself would never forgive me if I did. As she has pointed out repeatedly in her speeches and interviews, a great deal of the courageous work carried out by her and her colleagues in defense of political prisoners has met with impenetrable barriers. Political prisoners still languish in jails on trumped up charges. Nor does the threat to human rights only originate from those elements in governments who feel threatened by the enlargement of personal liberties and the greater participation of people in formulating policies. The threat also comes in more insidious and universal ways: in the manipulation of news and in the creation of a new global moral vocabulary based on a variety of motives and assumptions.

And I want to end my brief introduction with a few words about this in the context of Shirin Ebadi's current visit to the United States. One of the hallmarks of those who devote their life to the struggle for human rights and respect for individual choices and views, is that while they spend much energy on single issues, they never lose sight of the broader canvass. For Shirin Ebadi, the rights of children and their safety, the protection of political prisoners and the welfare of their families, the rights of entire communities, ethnic or religious, to safeguards against physical or verbal abuse, are all part of a continuing struggle. As a lawyer and as an Iranian much indebted to her rich cultural heritage and as a Moslem able to rely on her own innermost moral convictions and deep faith in these trying times, Shirin Ebadi saw it as her duty to speak out against injustices in her own country and among people who shared her faith, her language and her culture.

Now, as the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, she has become aware of an even wider responsibility. The aims and the means have not changed: She has always stressed her belief in universal values common to all: Respect for human dignity is not a monopoly of any particular creed or culture, secular or religious. But these general concerns take local colors. In this visit to the United States, Shirin Ebadi has spoken out against acts of injustice and intolerance not only in her own country and backyard, but here in the United States and elsewhere. Intolerance is a many-headed hydra: it can appear in our silent acceptance of injustices and brutalities inflicted in our name and celebrated in jingoistic headlines or even accepted as allegedly crucial to our security, and it can appear in a pernicious choice of eye-catching hybrid slogans such as "Islamic terrorism" or "Islamic terrorists" - as if there are verifiable Islamic ingredients in an act of terrorism which set them apart from those inflicted by terrorists of other faiths and creeds throughout the world, past and present. She has spoken in support of strengthening the powers and the influence of the United Nations and internationally agreed conventions for the protection of human rights at a time when we have seen again how an initial cavalier disregard for them can create spaces and opportunities for grotesque abusive acts that may well induce further cycles of revenge and recrimination.

Our guest has been traveling tirelessly across our country in the past few weeks. Wherever she has been, she has brought with her the courage, the patience, and the good humor with which she has fought so consistently and for so long in her own country. These are vital ingredients for constructing a better future for all of us, East or West, religious or not, and I would like to greet her as a most welcomed guest of a Center which shares with her, above all else, an overriding respect for human dignity and human life.